

# The 4 Properties of Powerful Teachers

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Advice

Even if you weren't born with some of these qualities, you can develop them



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By Rob Jenkins March 16, 2015

As a faculty member for almost 30 years, I have been inspired and motivated by all of the online chatter. It's made me think about the great teachers I've known — and I've known many, from kindergarten through graduate school and beyond. Several taught in my department when I served as chair, and I had the pleasure of observing them at work.

Those experiences have led me to conclude that, when we boil down all the metrics, we're left with four qualities that all powerful teachers possess. I'm not just talking about adequate, effective, or even good teachers. I'm talking about the ones who most move us, who have made the most difference in our lives, and whom we most wish to emulate. Perhaps we can't all be that kind of teacher, but I suspect many of us at least aspire to be.

So what makes those teachers so great?

**Personality.** Nearly all of the great teachers I've watched in action have similar personality traits. To some degree, teaching is an ability, and just like musical or athletic ability, some people seem to have more of it than others. At the

same time, just because you'll never play the Hollywood Bowl doesn't mean you can't do wedding gigs with your garage band. If you weren't born with the personality traits of a great teacher, you can still work to develop some of those traits.

Just what are those traits? Here are some I've identified, and you could probably add to this list: Great teachers tend to be good-natured and approachable, as opposed to sour or foreboding; professional without being aloof; funny (even if they're not stand-up comedians), perhaps because they don't take themselves or their subject matter too seriously; demanding without being unkind; comfortable in their own skin (without being in love with the sound of their own voices); natural (they make teaching look easy even though we all know it isn't); and tremendously creative, and always willing to entertain new ideas or try new things, sometimes even on the fly.

If none of the above describe you, and you're afraid that means you'll never be a great teacher — well, maybe you're right. Or you can work to develop some of those traits and become a much better teacher than you are now. And if you're fortunate enough to possess several of those traits already — as I suspect is the case with many who choose this profession — then you can still work hard to fine-tune those qualities.

**Presence.** What I mean by that, in part, is the unmistakable capacity some people have to "own" any room. We might call it charisma, but it's more than that. It's the ability to appear completely at ease, even in command, despite being the focal point of dozens (or even hundreds) of people. To some extent, this aspect of presence is something you're either born with or not, although I would also argue that owning the room is an ability people can develop over time.

But that isn't the only relevant meaning of the word "presence" in the context of great teaching. In his recent essay, ["Waiting for Us to Notice Them,"](#) James Lang talked about what he called "a pedagogy of presence." He argued that, just as we are sometimes disengaged in our interpersonal relationships, so, too, can we become disengaged in the classroom — simply going through the motions and barely acknowledging students at all.

Yet the best teachers, as Lang concluded, are always "present" — fully in the moment, connecting with both their subject matter and their students. That's a type of presence to which we can all aspire, whether or not we're born with great charisma. All it takes is a degree of self-awareness, a little concentration, and a fair amount of determination.

**Preparation.** Speaking of determination, something else all teachers can do, regardless of their natural gifts, is prepare meticulously. Knowing what you're talking about can compensate for a number of other deficiencies, such as wearing mismatched socks, telling lame jokes, or not having an Instagram account. Preparation occurs on three levels: long-term, medium-term, and short-term.

Most of faculty members have already accomplished the necessary long-term preparation by virtue of your advanced degrees. That preparation will serve you well, and be your primary source of authority, from your first day in the classroom until your last.

In between, you must continue your education on a regular basis — by reading extensively in your field, attending conferences and seminars, conducting and presenting your own research, and remaining a practitioner of your art or science. You must also continue to learn and grow as a teacher by exploring new advances in pedagogy and technology that can help you in the classroom.

And in the short term, to be a powerful teacher you must go into every single class meeting as prepared as you can be, given the time you have. That means more than just reviewing your notes or PowerPoint slides. It involves constantly reassessing what you do in the classroom, abandoning those strategies that haven't proved effective, or are just outdated, and trying new ones. It means being so familiar with your subject matter that you can talk about it off the cuff.

Some of that will come with time, as your level of familiarity with your subject will naturally increase the more you

teach it. Then again, just because you've been teaching a course for 15 or 20 years doesn't mean you shouldn't approach it each term as if for the first time. It's that level of preparation that allows great teachers to make it all look so easy.

**Passion.** Of all the qualities that characterize great teachers, this is the most important, by far. The Beatles famously sang, "All you need is love," and while in teaching that might not be entirely accurate, it is true that a little passion goes a long way. Or as St. Peter put it, love certainly "covers a multitude of sins."

Passion, or love, manifests itself in the classroom in two ways: love for students and love for your subject matter.

I'm always amazed, and more than a little puzzled, at how many of my colleagues don't seem to like students very much. Those faculty members are the ones who always buttonhole you in the hallway to talk about how irresponsible and disrespectful their students are; who take great delight in pointing out students' deficiencies or constantly regale you with examples of (supposedly) stupid things students have said or done; who are always tsk-tsking about "kids today."

I sometimes want to say, "If you dislike students so much, why are you in this business? Why in the world would you want to spend so much of your time with a bunch of people you find so disagreeable?"

Don't think, by the way, that students don't pick up on the disdain. They absolutely do. And my experience with evaluating faculty members over the years suggests that the teachers who are most widely disliked are the ones who most dislike students. Conversely, the faculty members who seem to love teaching and love (or at least really like) students are the ones who are the most popular and, I believe, the most effective.

You also have to love your subject matter. Students might not even like a course at first, especially if it's one they're required to take, but a teacher's passion for the subject can be extremely infectious.

Love of your field is probably a reason you became a teacher. But it may be that, after teaching the same thing year after year, you're beginning to get a little burned out. That's where preparation comes in. Perhaps becoming re-engaged with your field is just the spark your teaching needs to reignite the passion. Or maybe it's time to switch things up — bring in new reading assignments, try out some new technology, add a new in-class activity.

The point is that teaching is, in a way, like a relationship. You have to work hard sometimes to keep the passion alive, and yet it's vital that you do so. And if you don't, students pick up on that, too. If what you're covering in class every day seems to bore you, how do you expect them to be interested?

Maybe teaching just comes naturally to you. But even if it doesn't, you can still have a powerful impact on students. By learning what great teachers do and how they do it, and then applying those lessons in your own classroom, you could become one of the "greats," too. With apologies to Lady Gaga, your students will never know if you were born that way or not.

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