

# My Love/Hate Relationship With Teaching

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Teaching. So many things have been said about teaching. "Good teachers know how to bring out the best in students." "A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning." "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." Whoa. That is some heavy stuff right there. Makes being a teacher sound noble, important, and oh so awesome, does it not?

But the attitude toward teaching is not always rosy. You've heard it. "Those who cannot do, teach." Actually, it was Aristotle who said, "Those who know, do. Those who understand, teach." Um, a bit different when said like that, don't you think?

Make no mistake; everyone has an opinion about what a good teacher is. Whether you are a student, you have children who are students, or you used to be a student, everyone, and I mean EVERYONE, has something to say about teaching.

But what about teachers? What do they have to say about teaching? Teachers are usually the last ones asked for their opinions about teaching. What works in the classroom, what doesn't work, what new techniques they are trying, how they get students interested, what do the students enjoy, what could make things better - it is rare that the teachers who are in the trenches every day are asked these questions. It is common, however, for teachers to be blamed when students don't perform well. Poor test scores? The teacher isn't preparing them well. Poor writing skills? The teacher isn't assigning enough writing. Students say the course is too hard? The teacher must be making it too hard. I have actually had students ask me if I put trick questions on my exams. Um...no.

In eleven years of teaching the same college course, developing it, updating it, and getting kick ass teaching reviews, I have not once been asked by an administrator at my university what I do in my classroom that works. Not once.

So what do teachers say about teaching? Here are some things I have heard teachers say in the last several months:

"God, I still love walking into the classroom even though the students have gone from being 10 years younger to two generations younger. It is an elixir." (College professor)

"Why do I continue to go to a job every day that makes me so miserable?" (Middle school teacher)

"If they cannot keep up with the material they should find another major." (College professor)

"Teaching well should be recognized, just like doing stellar research." (College professor)

"I love teaching, and I hate teaching." (College lecturer, former high school teacher)

That last one is mine. I love teaching. And I hate teaching.

Let's start with the love. If you are a teacher in any capacity you know that feeling when one of your students has a light bulb moment. He may even say the words, "Ah, I get it now," and you feel like Super Woman. You realize, in that moment, that you helped him navigate through something unfamiliar and come out the other side with new knowledge. He might even remember this knowledge for the rest of his life! THAT feeling is why I love teaching. As a teacher I help students acquire an understanding of something new. To me, that is the whole purpose of education, of personal growth, and of being a good citizen. Learning new things, no matter the subject, is what makes us better people. Being a part of that is such an honor, a privilege, and is what I love about teaching.

So what could possibly dampen that feeling? In a nutshell, all the other bullshit that goes on in a classroom. Classrooms are not considered sacred environments of learning anymore. (If you are over 35, insert curmudgeonly "When I was a student" comment here). In my classroom, at a highly regarded research institution, I witness all manner of non-learning related activities on a daily basis, and it blows my mind. Texting, Instagramming, Facebook scrolling, YouTube video watching, movies playing on laptop screens, ear buds in ears, chit-chatting about anything BUT the topic at hand, sleeping, students giving each other neck massages, plagiarizing material off of Wikipedia DURING an in class assignment...the list goes on and on. It is distressing, demoralizing, and completely distracting. Before you judge my lack of classroom management, I teach upwards of 500-1,000 students at a time, in a huge lecture hall, and I have tried many, MANY techniques to curb the use of electronics. Everything from apps that give rewards for putting phones in lock mode during class, to banning all electronics from class and kicking out students who violate the rules. Some students comply, and some do not. But what's more important, in my opinion, is why many students seem not to associate classroom time with an opportunity to learn something new. As a teacher, that breaks my heart. As a jaded teacher, I suspect the students would blame me for not providing an interesting and entertaining enough learning experience, regardless of my efforts to do so.

Let me check my self-pity here by saying, 1) I do not think that every student in my general geology class for non-science majors is enraptured by the material I am teaching. I get that. I WAS that - an English major forced to take science my freshman year. (Guess what? I listened, learned, and liked it enough to switch my major). 2) I know we live in a different world than we did back in the 90s when I was a college student, and electronic connectivity among humans is pervasive, addictive, and here to stay. And, most importantly, 3) Not all students participate in these distracting, non-learning related activities in class, and many are genuinely interested in taking full advantage of their educational opportunities. It is those students who bring me right back around, full circle, to my love of teaching.

If the students get *something* out of my class, however trivial, I am satisfied. If some of them walk away with a deeper understanding of the world around them, I am happy. If a few decide to pursue science, even better! And when just one tells me, "Dr. Kapp, your class is the best class I have ever taken," well, that makes it all worthwhile.

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