

## **The Truth about Teaching (Well)**

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### **A Landscape View**

Whenever the political landscape shifts listlessly to the left, as it has over the past three years, or whenever the right is in restoration or feeling it coming on, the inevitable backlash or push forward includes diatribes against the sitting duck of public institutions, schools, with teaching (curriculum), teachers, and teacher educators taking the brunt of the abuse. This has happened over and again over the past 60 years and more.

In the 1950s, Arthur Bestor (*Educational Wastelands*, 1953) along with Rudolf Flesch (*Why Johnny Can't Read*, 1955) skewered progressive education and those who bought into it. Later, Hyman Rickover lamented the perceived poor state of American public schools (*Swiss Schools and Ours*, 1962), E.D. Hirsch took shots at low standards and unclear ends by proposing that certain ideas and facts should constitute the common curriculum (*Cultural Literacy*, 1987), and in the 1990s critics like Rita Kramer (*Ed School Follies*, 1991), Chester Finn (*We Must Take Charge*, 1991), and others piled on teacher education as a key source of the so-called demise of

public education. The bottom line for most of the critics? American public schools, their curriculum, administrators, teachers, and teacher educators: 1) run schools poorly; 2) have low standards; 3) can't teach; and 4) can't teach others to teach.

Recently, a rash of high profile articles on public education have appeared, most of which focus on ways that we can reclaim the "broken" state of public education (See Finn, 2010; Thomas & Wingert, 2010; Ripley, 2010). John Goodlad (2010) himself weighed in with a series of articles for the *Washington Post's* Education Blog discussing the status quo and a way forward.

But for me, most of the rhetoric, for many decades and most of it today, misses the main point, the key aspect permeating the hard yet porous surface of our tenuous but great public education system: that is that teaching matters most, and it is changing so rapidly that most of us can't see it, or recognize it if we do, let alone respond adequately in the jobs and purposes we have defined for ourselves like improving schools and teacher education in the present and for generations ahead. For me, the truth of the matter is that teaching is very difficult, and should be respected, honed, and appreciated by those who practice it and by those who critique it. Teaching, in fact — the study of it and the practice of it — should be our most focused endeavor. There are no easy answers about what or how to teach. To me, these questions are important but not the starting point. Instead, we have to struggle with who we are and who we want to be as students and teachers, together. Otherwise, we get mired in technical and bureaucratic traps without having our footing first. The powerful arts of teaching and learning can get lost in the shuffle.

Therefore, I believe we have to come to a few realizations for our work ahead. First is that the renewal of teaching, both personally and more widely professionally, will require a fundamental shift in what we think about teaching and how we teach, and especially in that regard about who we are as teachers, as educators. Second is that we have to work together, across constituencies, to nurture several main commitments for the education of teachers and the practice of teaching now and in the future. Instead of bashing teachers and

teaching, we need to renew the profession, dealing constructively to build on its many strengths and to address keen challenges. The work has to move from the inside-out. This paper, then, is rather like a celebration of teachers and teaching and students from the inside-out. Let's start on the "inside."

### **What I've Seen**

In the Spring of 2008, I planned to revisit teaching school-aged students as a volunteer substitute at our local high school. Six years earlier in the Spring of 2002, I completed a semester-long stint teaching one class of 10th grade English because the high school found itself short of staffing, having implemented a new reading program for struggling readers which left them one class short of coverage. Instead of the school having to hire a long-term sub for one class, I volunteered to teach the class gratis. After all, how hard could it be? Teaching is like riding a bike, right? Just get back in the saddle; it's no different at age 25 or 40 or 55 or 70. Right? Wrong. What a laugh. That couldn't be any further from the truth.

I wrote about what I learned about teaching from that earlier experience in an article entitled "Recognizing Joy in Teaching" (2006), and afterward felt like there was some distance from that experience, as well as some deep interest in revisiting the work of teaching school-aged students by the time spring 2008 rolled around. I felt as though teaching school-aged students would reconnect me to teaching, and re-ignite my pilot light for working with students of teaching and doctoral students in curriculum at my university. I also felt the time was right since my oldest son would start at the high school the next academic year; I didn't want to be in his way. And, I wouldn't be honest if I didn't admit that I hoped working in the high school would open doors to new partnership activities and help me support firsthand the ones already up and running there.

I had been out of the college classroom regularly for about three years by then, having taken an administrative post at my university as director of partnerships. I taught classes at Miami University, but not as regularly as a full-time faculty member would. What better way to feed my re-entry to teaching an undergraduate class on

teaching in Spring 2008 than to teach, as well as I could and with as much vigor, in multiple settings (including a school setting), all at once? I thought one would inform the other, and enrich the experience all around.

After teaching the high school class in Spring 2008, I started drafting a memoir of the semester, entitling it *My Teaching Bridge to Nowhere*. The title and the work both reflect the deep challenges I faced relating to students, getting my “sea legs” back while standing in front of them, and struggling to make the class work for them and for me. To tell you the truth, unlike the 2002 experience, which was *easy* to teach in comparison, teaching the 2008 class to high school freshman was *hard*. Really, really, *hard*... And I’m not even getting into how difficult it was to teach the undergraduate class on teaching that semester. That’s fodder for another paper!

And now, Tony Danza – the well-traveled and famous comedic actor whose 1970s comedy series *Taxi* and 1980s series *Who’s the Boss?* made him a small screen favorite over several decades at the time and subsequently through reruns – proves to us again this fall in his reality TV series *Who’s the Teacher?* shot in a Philadelphia Schools 9th grade classroom in 2009, that the truth about teaching is that it is incredibly difficult to do. Just doing it is difficult, let alone doing it well. And what does it mean to teach well anyway? Does it mean to raise students’ test scores? To have high attendance? To generate passion and interest for the material at hand? To be memorable and entertaining? To get along well with students? To create great citizens? All of these things?

I guess I don’t know, even now, any definitive answers to what it means to teach well, nor do I have definitive answers to these questions above for everyone else. But I do know what it means to teach, to fight for ground each day, to wonder at/with students and about all that they know and don’t know, and to struggle with an educational system that looks and feels wonderful at times and then at others like a washed-out, dirty old sock, putrid and stinky.

In the Spring of 2010, video trailers enticing viewers to check out Danza’s new show, and in interviews with Danza in anticipation of the fall premier, it’s easy to see that Danza learned about the hard

struggle of teaching, too. By the time this journal article appears in Fall 2010, the show will have been out for a month and you can judge for yourself how much our experiences with students resonate with yours, or connect somehow (or not!).

To me, the journey toward teaching well bumps up against some important insights about teaching and the nature of the classroom and school that may not be new news to most readers, but which emerged for me clearly as important images/notions to contend with; and I thought they would help me make sense out of my experiences and perhaps connect with readers. Danza's experience helps point the way, as does the story of a colleague and friend, Robert, who recently re-entered teaching after working in an administrative job in schools, and a not so typical development in the world of poker. Poker? Yes, high-stakes, professional poker.

So, first, to poker, then to my teacher friend re-entering full-time teaching, and then all the way back to Danza. Quickly. And after that, a last word in conclusion regarding the truth about teaching (well).

### **The Demise of the “Poker Face”**

*Time Magazine* reported in its June 2010 issue that the time is now for change in the world of high-stakes professional poker. After a meteoric rise in popularity on television, poker tournaments on-line have increased by leaps and bounds in popularity. Over the years televised games produced star personalities, whose approach to the game, typically, was careful. Reading the opponent — waiting for weaknesses to show (“the tell”) — was the hallmark of card-playing. Getting the right cards in your own hand didn't trump the keen sense of what cards your opponents may or may not have had in their hands.

But now, radical changes are taking over the card-playing world, brought on by the meshing of the two seemingly very different worlds, until now. The internet poker world, where extreme risk-taking is rewarded and mathematical probabilities are exploited, is spilling over into the tournament game world played at “real” tables face-to-face with opponents. And internet players are making the

transition better than table playing players by dominating tables at national and international events, winning large purses regularly, and pushing the dominant personalities of the game to the sidelines. Why? Because the professional card players are not adapting. As longtime poker player and (in)famous TV personality Phil Hellmuth put it, “The reason I won 11 bracelets (world championship trophies of poker) is my ability to read opponents... These new guys are focused on the math. They are changing everything” (Kadlec, 2010, p. 41).

The metaphor is apt for where many teachers, especially veterans like myself, find themselves today. The difference between my English students in high school in 2002 and the ones I taught in 2008 in terms of their internet savvy, their proficiency with technology, and their general lack of patience for anything outside their comfort zones for accessing and using knowledge (like attending to text on the printed page and working diligently/meticulously with sentences/paragraphs) made teaching for me very difficult. And I’m afraid I didn’t adapt very well. I basically fought the students, trying to hold onto past practices I thought would be successful with any student.

But I also saw some amazing differences that enhanced my work and I did make small steps with students. For instance, students in 2008 didn’t have any problem generating text. Meaning, if given a prompt to write a response about a piece of literature, or a passage, or a poem, or an idea, they could do it easily, almost effortlessly. In 2002, my students would struggle with how to start a theme, what to say, how to answer the question correctly. But this isn’t the case for most new students. They plow into writing tasks with confidence and skill, for the most part. Of course, sometimes quality becomes an issue, but the new teacher can use the fact that students are adept at producing text to enhance their work, requiring more of it, using it more for the basic lesson, and critiquing it together in a safe, learner-centered environment.

My explanation for the shift is commonsensical, and it plays out in my own household. My students and my own children spend a great deal of their time outside of school, more so than ever be-

fore in history, producing text online and on their phones. They are communicating in sophisticated ways all the time. Plugged in, they write. And read. The challenge is how to use that experience and prowess at school for the further, deeper benefits of learning and achievement for them, in ways that both they and society will benefit.

But the deeper issue, I'm afraid, is that the problem is with me. It's not a problem that change is happening; it's that I'm not changing, too. I admit that I'm guilty. I'm not a Luddite (I'm typing this paper on my computer, after all), but I'm resistant to the absence of text that I can actually feel and to using the internet for everything (though I found a lot of sources for this article online!). This is a weakness in me, I fear. Somehow, I have to separate out what I like personally, such as the feel of the newspaper in the morning or the pages of a book in bed at night, from the fact that I'm a dinosaur in that regard and that most students may have never even held a paper and don't care to (last year I had to teach my nearly teenage children how to hold a newspaper to read it!). These facts have to change how we approach teaching and teaching teachers. It's basic, but very real, and very deep.

### **Experiencing “Re-entry” for Real, and Balancing Standards with “Hands-On”**

Yes, I taught a class in a high school. But I didn't take teaching on full-time again, like my friend Robert did last year after an 11-year career in administration. Previous to his administrative experience he had taught eight years in public school classrooms. Like some teachers who try-on administration, Robert hungered for more time with students and to teach again. So he went back, and he went back full-time, in his 20th year as an educator.

But he faced difficulties, and he had to adapt. Like me, Robert had spent most of the first part of the 21st century out of the classroom. This quite possibly may be the decade of the largest change in how students get and sort information. His old teaching tricks didn't work either, and he wondered why students weren't interested in his D-Day lecture or in his re-enactment of the Surrender at Ap-

pomattox. But they weren't, he realized, so he taught differently. He gave shorter talks, and asked the students to do more of the work themselves, some of it on-line, some of it in the library stacks or in the community. The main thing was learning to engage the students again where it counts, that is in terms of what interested them, what motivated them, what concerned them. This isn't new ground. Great teachers have been doing these things for centuries. But, of course, his adapting caused problems.

The main problem was that the high-stakes standards and testing era had made it difficult – even in the social studies at the high school level, which has been less heavily tested than other areas and therefore afforded more leeway for teachers to decide what and how to teach their subject – to cover the expected material and keep students engaged. While district leadership called for a response to changing student proclivities, talents, and interests (like responding with innovative uses for technology and creating hands-on projects), they also demanded coverage of the standards and complete preparation for statewide graduation tests. The conundrum he faced, like all teachers who are aware of what's going on, is what to do about the tension. Since the easiest way to cover everything expected by the state is to lead students through the content didactically, many teachers fall into this trap and don't care that students are disengaged and not learning. Many secondary teachers whose subject areas suffer the wrath of surveillance that high-stakes testing regimes provide, simply say, "I taught all the material for the test, it's the students' responsibility to learn it and score on the test. I did my job."

But when students engage in meaningful, hands-on projects that they create and invest in, Robert found, their learning is deeper and more significant. The challenge is in mapping back to the standards to be covered. While this isn't always easy to do, he does it and finds that mapping backwards to standards from activities and projects that students do makes more sense. Students tend to invest, work, and learn more; at the same time he covers the standards with them and nurtures their growth. The transition to this position, however, wasn't easy, and it was filled with critique by other teachers



and administrators. But Robert has held his ground and is finding his pedagogical niche as he builds his curricular and teaching repertoires back into shape, post hiatus.

Robert says,

This process of returning to teaching has motivated me to think more than once, and with my colleagues, that true learning happens when students get involved in a project. But the problem is real. The state wants teachers to marry the standards. And school leaders want more hands-on activities, more engaged learners. But the standards discourage this, typically. The standards tend to constrict what most students can do. But when students do the work themselves and engage in it, they make a connection, and remember things. So this is what I'm going to do. Students aren't going to change, the teacher has to change. I used to be able to give notes for 50 minutes straight in a class. I can't do that anymore, and I don't want to either.

So coming back to teaching when students have changed so much, along with the political landscape caused by the standardization/testing movements, means that veterans have to be savvy, willing to adapt and change, and move the profession forward by helping others to figure out how to navigate the terrain. Similar challenges confront new teachers, who tend to try and replicate the ways they were taught. But they can't do this, either, since even those methods may be outdated, or so compressed by the standardization/testing regimes in place that they aren't defensible pedagogically.

For all of us, curriculum and teaching continue to shift with changes in technology and the classroom environment. But none of that poses the challenges that relating with students poses for teachers. Like Robert and I discovered, Tony Danza found out that students don't care who you are when you walk into the room. When the student and teacher enter into a new relationship in the classroom today, nothing about the teacher's past or achievements or qualifica-

tions matter to students. Maybe they never did. But students today make it very clear from the beginning: All that matters is now.

### *Who's the Boss? Or Who's the Teacher?*

Tony Danza, thinking of answering the President's call to engage in service, considered teaching. A producer friend he was discussing his life options with suggested he try teaching and chronicle the work for a reality show. Danza and A&E received permission to videotape his experiences with one sophomore English class at Northeast High School in Philadelphia in the Fall of 2009 (sound familiar?). Though not a certified teacher, Danza has a college degree in history and is reportedly working toward certification. A certified teacher remained in the classroom with Danza at all times during his stint. A&E is set to run the reality series chronicling his experiences in the classroom during Fall of 2010. One of the things Danza discovered, as he reported to NPR's Raz (2009), besides the fact of how hard teaching can be, is that the students don't know who he is, and they really don't care:

“(In teaching) there are moments of extreme joy and there are moments of extreme desperation – and self doubt and just emotional Armageddon. It's thrilling, and yet while you're working your tail off trying to make the students see some value in *Of Mice and Men*, for instance, and you look down and see somebody making origami... It kind of breaks your heart. But you've got to remember that these kids were born after *Who's the Boss?* was off the air, let alone *Taxi*. I'm not exactly Miley Cyrus, so nobody knows who I am.”

This brutal fact – that students don't care who we are as adults based on past accomplishments/achievements, skills honed and battles won and lost – creates a whole new dynamic for relating to students. Teachers with credentials, and life experiences, especially public ones, no doubt held sway as adults over children in the past in controlled environments like classrooms. But students don't care who teachers are outside of class anymore, really. They don't

care what we've done, or how many degrees we have, or how many baskets we scored when we were in high school, or how many TV shows we've been on. The teacher today has no credibility whatsoever when he or she enters the class as teacher. Preparation and certification/licensure mean nothing. Standing in front of the room means nothing. Only what you do means anything to students.

I faced this with my class in 2008 and Robert faced it when he returned. I published a welcome letter explaining who I was and what I was doing there and gave it to my students to share with their parents, but it had no impact on students except to make things worse. One student said I was showing off, just listing accomplishments as if that meant anything to him. It didn't. I had to fight for relational ground one student at a time, with careful, well-placed, and sincere attempts to connect. It took me the entire semester to earn their respect, move them along, get anywhere with my class. I didn't get there with each student, either, I'm sure of that. Thus the title of my memoir, *My Teaching Bridge to Nowhere*.

By contrast in 2002, my students followed the lead of a strong male student who wanted to earn an "A" in sophomore English in order to strengthen his attempt at admission to the Naval Academy. On the first day he said to his classmates, "Dr. Poetter's cool. He's my ticket to Annapolis. Don't ruin it for me." Can you imagine any student saying that out loud to other students in class today? After several Bs, he finally got an A. He worked hard. So did the other students. They certainly never gave me any problems.

Even deeper, I noticed in my 2008 class, as would anyone teaching again today, that fighting for relational ground with students isn't the only difficult relational obstacle in the classroom. Teachers also have to deal with how the classroom dynamic has changed. There is a subtext – one that buzzes – that students participate in that teachers have no idea about or control over. I know this has always been the case in terms of the generation gap between students and teachers, but today word travels so fast, and social dynamics are so constantly changing in and among groups and individuals in the student body, that it's impossible to have any feel for how students are doing or what they are feeling like at any given moment. Things can change

so rapidly, from day-to-day, hour-by-hour, that it's mind-boggling for the pedagogue. I attribute this to social media and their influence.

And, even more complicated, I attribute it to the changes in relationships among students. Students might know someone from Facebook, and sit in the same classroom with that person, and never have spoken to them face-to-face. Or, students can be in classrooms with other students all day and never learn their names. How can that be in a small high school, where everyone is on Facebook looking at each other's pictures and reading their posts? And how do those different ways of relating have an impact on the sociology of the classroom?

After all, to be honest, it is students who have Facebook and Twitter and all other manner of social media I don't even know about. Mostly, we teachers and parents don't have access to them in the same ways students have access. Teachers and students, parents and children, all had the phone and TV and computers all at the same time over the decades. Now the social media that is operative is something teachers really don't have access to. So a huge part of students' lives is occupied all by themselves and we can't do anything about it. We aren't welcome in that world, either. And this phenomenon has tentacles into the classroom in ways we aren't even aware of yet. But believe me, it's there. This realization requires open-mindedness and an ability to anticipate and welcome change. It's not going to be easy, especially for veteran teachers. This is where newer teacher, even rookies, need to be flipping the professional development cycle: we need to know all that they can tell us about working with and relating to students TODAY! After all, new teachers are the closest professional resource, besides our students themselves, for showing us the way.

### **NOW Back to The Truth**

As you have no doubt figured out, I have been using "Truth" as a device to lure you into my thinking about teaching. I hope you don't feel cheated, that somehow I am renegeing on my promise to show you the way ahead. After all, the truth is very slippery, multi-

dimensional (at least), universal/particular, and extremely hard to pin down, at least with human language. And, as you know by now, you are reading the perspective of a middle aged, upper middle class white male, along with two others of similar ilk (Robert and Tony). So my truth, their truth, our truths, are no doubt governed and controlled by larger factors outside/inside our control, but no doubt defining us and limiting/extending our vision and power.

That having been said, with the meta-cognition present regarding our mutual lack of footing, I'll go out on a limb and tell you what I think I'm learning from all this, what I think needs to be considered further by those in our network and those interested in teaching and schools. You can chew on it some, or reject it if you like.

First, we have to be aware of and concerned about educational and sociological change. This isn't a cliché. We can ignore change, or we can move. If we don't move, we're just going to be left behind by our students. My biggest fear is that skilled teachers become a rarity, or worse, obsolete. We have to work hard at teaching and change all at the same time. They aren't mutually exclusive things!

Second, there are ways to deal with the great constrictions that movements to standardize and test have placed on teachers and schools. They require more effort, and reconnecting with students, and some risk that making a leap to support authentic learning with students will be castigated, or at least undervalued. Our Nemeses will include peers and powerful superiors, all along the way. But short of upending the system, which could yet happen, teachers have to resist in meaningful ways so that generations of students will actually learn something in school. Robert is learning this, and making his way. Veteran and beginning teachers must work together to make their way in this regard. This will involve new forms of professional development, as well as involving students themselves, and the wider community in the work. I don't know what it will look like yet, only that it has to happen!

And last, students are so much different now than they were a decade ago that it's mind-boggling. The greatest shift in school is similar to the shifts in American families over the past several decades. Families tend to be child-centered, now, not adult-centered.

The time we spend as parents most often is spent nurturing and serving the child, earning his or her trust and respect. Very little time is spent in families today helping children respect and value their parents or the family structure. The same is true for schools and other social institutions. How will we recognize and respond to this shift? How can we use technology to address the issue? How can we become or stay relevant – as human beings in relation to the young – as teachers, parents, and citizens? What would reversing the trend, in small ways, look like? Would it be worth it? Would it be humane? Just what are we going to do?

My answer, and the final word for now, is the truth of the matter:

Teach (well).

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