ABSTRACT

These are three teaching strategies that have worked for me; maybe they will work for others.

Keywords

teaching, love, respect, inspiration, fear, inquiry

Putting any grandiose theories about pedagogy aside, allow me to simply talk about teaching as personally experienced, and offer some simple, end-of-teaching-career observations. I have heard it said that the best teachers are the ones who make you think, or maybe that is just what I think is what makes a good teacher. Regardless, it is a measure by which I imagine one can qualify teaching in a positive way. By looking very briefly at the three teachers who have influenced me the most in the area of critical thinking I have arrived at the following understandings, if not categorical truths. Essentially, I am convinced that the absolutely most important aspect of teaching is the ability of the teacher to embrace their profession whole-heartedly and, in a sense, to love it. Anything less, I believe, ultimately diminishes the product. It is exactly for those reasons, the three teachers who have influenced me the most in my ability to think critically and to want to be a better teacher and who all possess an unequivocal love for teaching are Michel Desjardins, Ken Derry, and Albert Pietersma.

Now, full disclosure, I have never taken an official class with Michel Desjardins, but I believe I have been a student of his for over twenty years now because whenever I am in his company, he makes me think. He is adept at recognizing an opportunity to impart wisdom and not just information. I have always found myself somehow better situated in whatever action I was considering or whatever ideology I was engaged with after spending time with him, mostly at social events. I was introduced to Michel by Ken Derry at a time during my graduate program at the University of Toronto when I really needed a mentor, and Michel was that and more for me. He had an amazing ability to teach through simple conversation. He was a positive force in the lives of almost every person I ever
had the opportunity to talk with about him and who knew him. I think the reason why he is such a formidable influence for good is more a matter of his heart than his intellect. Michel has clearly left a very positive and memorable effect in the lives of so many “students” that he has encountered, in and out of the classroom. Through the simple art of conversation, conversations where he asked question after question, simple and straightforward, Michel made me a better thinker and a better teacher. He taught me how to raise good questions.

The person who introduced me to Michel and who was in fact an official student of his, Ken Derry, is to me the consummate teacher. I have co-taught courses with him and I have continued to meet with him socially over the years. He has, in my mind, consistently constructed tutorials, lectures, assignments, and tests with a view to service the best needs of the students. He always puts considerable thought into what to teach and why it should be taught, and it is never just about filling up lecture time. It is very apparent that his interest is in making the student better for having listened. Almost any conversation I have had with him about pedagogy and teaching has been about how to better meet student needs. He has the unique ability to know when to be strict and when to be forgiving in terms of students who ask for special favours. Through performing a tremendous example, Ken made and continues to make me a better thinker and a better teacher. The most significant moment in our relationship was when he came to my office when we were both graduate students and simply announced that the two of us were going to apply to teach a specific course on the subject of Religion and Film because “we can do it much better than it’s currently being taught.” His belief in me inspired me to believe that we could. Ironically, I taught the course that we both created and he was offered something completely different. It was a turning point in my academic career.

Albert Pietersma was my undergraduate and graduate instructor for several courses over a number of years. He eventually became my thesis advisor. I was always impressed with his scholarship, and I sensed early that this was someone whose class you came to fully prepared to respond to questions and that you did not attempt to “waste his time” with uninformed answers. As a result, I spent more time researching and preparing than I normally did in other classes. My fear of and respect for him made me a better thinker and a better teacher. I recall one undergraduate class in which all students were to give oral presentations. On the day of one student’s presentation, a presentation that I felt was solid and impressive, Albert was very direct and clear in his negative assessment of it. I was so afraid of such a possibility for my upcoming presentation down the
road, that I worked harder than I had ever worked on an assignment. Fear inspired me to say the least. All three of these teachers showed me that what motivates them is a love of teaching and the persistent satisfaction that helping students think more critically is a reward in itself. The art of effective inquiry, faith in one’s self and the fear of failure can be very effective teaching strategies.