After almost 35 years in secondary and university classrooms, I know something about effective teaching. I have certainly seen inspiring examples from other teachers; I have written and reflected extensively on the topic; and occasionally in my own practice I exemplify effective teaching myself.

I also have a modest reputation in my part of the academic world for exploring ineffective teaching—and the source of my most telling examples is still, embarrassingly, myself. In articles and books throughout my career, I have felt compelled to detail my recurring instructional struggles and failures (Christenbury, 1996, 2005, 2007) to serve as a cautionary tale.

This article stems directly from my years of experience and reflection and from my stubborn and consistent aspiration to be a better teacher. I am not yet where I want to be, but as T. S. Eliot (1952) reminds us,

For us there is only the trying.
The rest is not our business. (p. 128)

For those of us who are still trying to become the most effective teachers possible, it may be useful to consider a bit of history and a recent real-world example.

Scapegoats and Superstars
Although it might seem self-evident that effective teaching is at the heart of student learning, teaching has not always been a central part of the public discussion on education reform. Changing the patterns of school days and school years, establishing a common core curriculum, linking assessments to that curriculum, holding schools accountable for student test scores, altering administrators’ preparation and responsibilities, incorporating new technologies into instruction, empowering community groups and school boards—these have all been and continue to be topics on the education reform discussion board.
The teacher, an individual who is crucial to the success of any reform effort, has often been sidestepped, minimized, or even ignored. Only recently has it occurred to a number of otherwise bright people that effective teaching is central to education success. Yet rather than being a wholly heartening development, as many of us initially hoped, this belated recognition of the importance of effective teachers has had unintended and even pernicious consequences. Both at the height of No Child Left Behind and in its current twilight era, the significance of the teacher’s role has often been hijacked and distorted. Some have claimed that because individual teachers are so important, they should be able to overcome any and all instructional, contextual, and societal issues and consistently raise student test scores every year. Some have argued that teachers are so vital that they must be strictly regulated; they must follow scripted curriculums and be tracked, rewarded, or punished for the performance of their students (again, as measured by test scores).

Further, because teachers are so central, some pundits and policymakers now propose that the best way to improve schools is to strip teachers of tenure and seniority protections so that newer and supposedly brighter and better teachers can quickly take the place of “underperforming” veterans. Certainly in the past year, the wholesale firing of an entire Rhode Island high school’s teaching staff and the dismissal of hundreds of teachers from the District of Columbia schools were premised on the idea that teachers are all-important.

The public discussion no longer ignores teachers and their centrality; now it lays most of the onus of blame for student failure on the individual teacher. And it must be reiterated that in these days of high-stakes testing, student success is mostly determined by only one measure: test scores. Can the individual teacher bear this responsibility alone? Carter (2009) critiques the image of the “teacher-as-saint” (p. 86). The public, he contends, expects teachers to work miracles and blames them when the miracles somehow do not materialize. In an online forum on teacher effectiveness, Kate Walsh (2010) points out that these “superstar” teachers are relatively rare. And although good teaching is integral to student success, it cannot by itself supersede the many other
factors that contribute to educational success or failure.

**What Is Effective Teaching?**

I teach preservice teachers at the university level, and one of the hardest messages I try to impart to them is that there is no definitive recipe, no immutable formula, no simple list of do’s and don’ts to ensure effective teaching. As they stand on the brink of entering their own classrooms, many of my students find this news frustrating. Some would prefer the deceptive comfort of Chester E. Finn Jr.’s (2010) reductionist definition, “An effective teacher is one whose pupils learn what they should while under his/her tutelage.”

Only when preservice teachers have gained some experience with a range of students and some sense of themselves as teachers do they understand that the individual, idiosyncratic, and contextual aspects of effective teaching are what make it both enormously rewarding and enormously challenging. Students will always learn more, less, or differently than “what they should.” Good teachers understand this. Most people outside the classroom, especially those who want to regularize and routinize teaching and learning, do not.

But although there is no precise recipe, we can recognize effective teaching by a number of characteristics.

*Effective teaching is variable.* Effective teachers use a variety of strategies and a range of methods, and they change and refine these over time. They do not teach the same way and use the same instructional repertoire year after year. Effective teachers also differ from one another; both teachers who use traditional methods and those who employ the most up-to-date pedagogy can be successful.

*Effective teaching is contextual.* It responds to individual students, school and classroom communities, and societal needs. Effective teachers alter, adjust, and change their instruction depending on who is in the classroom and the extent to which those students are achieving. Effective teachers are not so devoted to their practice that they ignore the students in front of them.

*Effective teaching is premised on students’ intellectual curiosity.* Effective teachers begin with the belief that students are smart and can be enticed to learn. Despite their own skill, knowledge, and experience, effective teachers neither patronize nor condescend to students of any age.

*Effective teaching must be somewhat autonomous.* Reflective and accomplished teachers do not need to be controlled, managed, or strictly monitored. Such teachers are close to their students in intellectual as well as psychological ways, and they must be empowered to use their judgment to make classroom decisions.

*Ultimately, effective teaching is fearless.* Because the goal is learning, effective teachers must adjust curriculum, methods, and pacing to meet the needs of the students. Effective teachers put a priority on student needs rather than on the strictly interpreted demands of the school district curriculum guide or the year-end test. Again, to do this, teachers must have a great deal of independence.

**Walking the Walk**

In spring 2010, I had a teaching experience that illustrates some of the decisions and issues that confront all teachers in all classrooms as we strive for effective teaching.

Because of a scenario that has become common during these recession-plagued days, my university instituted a new round of budget cuts, and I found myself unexpectedly teaching an undergraduate writing course that is cross-listed in English and in education. I had created the course, Teaching Writing Skills, 20 years ago. But my responsibilities had evolved and I had not taught it for a while; it had recently been handled by experienced and talented adjuncts. Now it was mine to teach again.

At first, I welcomed this last-minute change in my schedule, confident that I was in touch with the course focus and the kinds of students who traditionally elected to enroll. In recent years, I had taught almost exclusively graduate students, and returning to teach this favorite undergraduate course would, I thought, be interesting.
New Challenges in an Old Course
Interesting it was indeed. Frankly, a number of issues caught me by surprise. Many of the issues were familiar to me from high school teaching, but I did not expect to find them at my university.

First, it quickly became clear that my 18 students were not prepared for the requirements of the course as I had designed it. On a purely academic level, many students struggled from the outset with the readings, the length and topics of journal assignments, the etiquette of large-group discussions, and the pacing and workload of the course itself. After some awkward class sessions during the first weeks of the semester, I checked student records and discovered that a number of those enrolled in this 300-level course had current grade point averages of 2.5 or lower.

Second, although this course was geared to the teaching of writing in secondary school, few of the course participants planned to go into teaching. (From my experience, this was not the usual course audience, and I wondered whether recent enrollment pressures in the English department had made this course attractive to English majors who needed the upper-level credits.) Not surprisingly, then, early discussions and assignments that addressed teaching scenarios were not successful. When I previously taught the course, the students were relatively able academically and most of them were taking the course as part of their preparation to teach.

As a third issue, some students appeared unaccustomed to norms of academic conduct, a problem I had rarely encountered at my university or even when teaching at the high school level. About half a dozen students had real difficulty with basic expectations: They did not come to class on time; return promptly from the break; or bring the necessary materials, books, and writing journals. When I gave them directions or asked them a question in discussions, some students routinely needed the question repeated; their minds were clearly wandering.

One student was obviously frustrated with the class and dealt with the situation by repeatedly coughing so loudly and persistently in a number of class meetings that class conversations and work had to stop. A least three students, early in the semester, routinely missed assignment deadlines despite an explicit syllabus and reminders.

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In short, these students were not an optimal group. The 2010 Teaching Writing Skills course promised to be one hot mess.

Effective Teaching in a New Context
In this context, what did effective teaching look like?

First, it was variable. I ramped up the classroom intensity to the level I usually reserve for one- or two-day inservice workshops in which I need to instruct—and motivate—busy and often tired practicing teachers. As in those contexts, I worked hard with these Teaching Writing Skills students, being more personable and direct than I had been in any classroom in years to keep them awake, aware, and engaged. I used humor with the cougher and with those who needed repeated questioning. I also moved to more direct instruction, which I rarely used in my graduate-level courses.

My teaching in this course was also contextual. Clearly, what I had done before in this course was not going to work with these students. One strategy was to address the elephant in the room; I talked to the students explicitly about what I perceived was going on in the class, and I proposed solutions. I asked for their advice and feedback and gave them time to deliver it both face-to-face and anonymously. Students told me that they wanted more time with assignments, more direction regarding the content of journal entries, and more feedback from me on drafts. All of this I provided. To make the course more appropriate for the students, I broadened the content of discussions and assignments so that the focus was not just on teaching writing but on issues in the students’ own writing.

And I found that the students were smart—perhaps not smart in the way I had assumed they would be, but in terms of their own interests. As I made writing assignments more relevant to those interests, students often revealed the kind of intellectual curiosity that I knew was there. One student’s traditional argument paper defended the originality of Lady Gaga; another student, in the course of a paper focused on the day he was born, did an extensive—and sophisticated—analysis of affordable Brooklyn apartments that had been available to his young, immigrant parents.

I became more interventionist than I can ever recall in a college setting—or even during my time teaching high school. Specifically, I insisted that students who were struggling meet with me outside of class. I initiated one-on-one conferences, and during the class break I praised students for making progress with behavior and attention. I individually tutored two students whose literacy skills were below par. I used multiple e-mail messages to remind...
students about deadlines. At students’ request, I expanded class time for discussions that were of greatest interest to the students. I also limited large-group discussions—which often veered out of control when students were not able to present comments or ideas civilly—and substituted small groups or pairs.

Most substantially, I concluded that few of these students would pass the course as currently constructed. Therefore I jettisoned some long-standing components of the course—in particular, the culminating assignment, which was a favorite of mine. This assignment had given each student the opportunity to assume the roles of both writing teacher and writing student. Students designed original writing tasks, exchanged and completed them, and then evaluated the final products. However successful this assignment had been in the past, I knew that it would most likely be a failure with these students because their interest in the teaching of writing was not central, and the detailed nature of the work relied heavily on a pedagogical focus.

I also deleted a quarter of the journal entry assignments, doubled the time allotted to writing-group revision, and initiated rewards for completion of minor assignments. I truncated some readings from the two textbooks and skipped other parts of the books entirely. At the end of the course, for the first time in my university teaching career (although I did this regularly as a high school teacher), I provided a two-page, detailed study guide for the exam.

Some of these changes may appear to have weakened the rigor of the original course; from my perspective, however, not making these changes ensured that most students who had signed up for Teaching Writing Skills would falter in the assignments if not fail the course itself. Compromise seemed the better path and gave students a chance to succeed.

How did students react, and how well did they do in Teaching Writing Skills?

Over the course of the semester, nine final draft papers were unacceptable; these students were given an F grade (revise) and the opportunity to rewrite and resubmit without penalty, and every student took advantage of that opportunity. For the final exam, the study guide must have been helpful: 14 of the 18 students received As or Bs; there were only one C, one D, and two Fs. End-of-class anonymous student comments were generally positive (“encourages passionate discussions,” “willing to help anyone who needed it,” “establishes great working environment among all her students”) as were instructor and course rankings (on a scale of 1 to 5, high 4s in almost every category). Regarding final course grades, of the 18 students, 12 earned either an A or a B; 4 received a C; and 2 students—who, despite all my efforts, continued to experience difficulties with attendance and deadlines—received Ds.

Effective teaching must be in service of student learning.

Giving Teachers the Freedom to Put Students First
All of the adjustments I made in response to the context and the needs of students in this course depended on the autonomy I enjoyed in my university teaching position (a level of autonomy that current reform efforts are unfortunately making less, not more, common among elementary and secondary teachers). I think it would be overstating the case to call these adjustments fearless. But I was pleased that by focusing on effective teaching, I could recognize the need for change, respond to the challenges, and make significant pedagogical and content changes to meet student needs.

The spring 2010 Teaching Writing Skills course looked very different from the course I had taught years before. But the point was not to adhere to some preconceived, ideal course that was no longer appropriate for these students; the point was that effective teaching must be in service of student learning. Once we more fully integrate our efforts to improve teaching with school context and student need, we can look more confidently to a future in which all students experience success.

References

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