



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL ARNOLD

# A FEW THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

BY JOHN TRIMBLE,  
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

**A veteran English teacher and student favorite shares the secret of good teaching: caring**

The following is excerpted from a speech delivered by Dr. John Trimble, English professor and a charter member of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers, at the Executive Council meeting of The Ex-Students' Association in July.

Now, as I understand it, the new Academy of Distinguished Teachers is going to have us DTPs not only organize occasional workshops on teaching but also do some individual mentoring for new faculty. Frankly, I'm not keen on advising anybody how to teach. A professor's teaching style is incredibly personal — as personal as their wardrobe. And that's because it inevitably reflects their personality, their values, their educational background, their academic discipline, the size and level of the

courses they teach, their intellectual gifts — even, for all I know, their marriage or partnership.

Besides, in teaching, as in writing, we see all kinds of ways to skin the cat. I've had some terrific teachers who weren't even remotely like me in the classroom. So it's a very subjective thing, this issue of "good teaching."

All that being said, if someone insisted that I share a little advice with, say, a young colleague in the English department or the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, which are my two home departments, here's some of what I'd say — eight points in all:

1) *Teach and lead by example.* We get what we express. You want joy in the classroom? You have to express it. You want to see a passion for ideas in your students? You have to express it. You want honesty in your students? You have to express it. You want dedication in your students? You have to express it.

Work on being worthy of standing up there at the front of the room, running the show. It's not enough to know a lot about our field. We also need to demonstrate that the acquisition of all that knowledge has a moral payoff — that we're improved by it. Otherwise, why should our students bother acquiring it?

No, merely being smart or learned isn't enough. What counts, finally, is what we do with our portion of intelligence and learning. Has it enlarged our heart? Equipped us with sane priorities? Made us a constructive presence in our institutional culture? Made us a worthy model for our students?

Face it, we professors are teaching more than a body of knowledge. We are also teaching, for better or worse, a whole set of attitudes. One of these attitudes concerns the way we approach unorthodox ideas — more particularly, ideas that differ from the ones we currently hold ourselves. Do we show genuine intellectual curiosity about these ideas? Do we work hard to discern what elements in them we can incorporate into our own viewpoint? Do we try to understand exactly how these ideas came about — and also what makes them so persuasive to the people who hold them?

Laurence Housman once said, "A saint is one who makes goodness attractive." Surely, a great teacher does the same thing for education.

2) *Give yourself permission to have fun in the classroom.* As one of novelist Elmore Leonard's characters says, "If it ain't fun, it ain't worth doing." Not entirely true, but it's

true enough, isn't it? How can students have a good time with you if you aren't having a good time with them? How are they supposed to associate learning with pleasure if you're not helping them make that association?

3) *Know your students.* Better yet, befriend them. By week No. 3, make a point of learning every person's name, year at school, major, and career goal. Also try to learn their hometown and a couple of their main interests. You can do this by having them fill out a data card at the first class, which you then take home and memorize. Also, require each student to have at least one 15-minute conference with you, preferably during the first weeks of the term. As each person comes in and takes a seat, say to them, "It's so nice to have you drop in. Tell me a bit about yourself." And then sit back and listen hard.

4) While you're befriend your students, encourage them to know and befriend each other, too, so they'll enjoy a sense of community, one of the essentials of a great class—and something all the more important in a university this size. How to do that? Simple. Distribute a copy of your seating chart so that people know who's who. And on the back, print a class roster listing everyone's name, classification, major, and phone number. Tell them the phone numbers are for people to call each other for missed assignments in case of absence. Also, as an ice-breaker at the very first class meeting, pause shortly after you get started with announcements and tell everyone to introduce themselves to the person on either side of them. Have them tell their name, hometown, and major, and perhaps an interest or two. But suggest that they start with the person on their left, which of course creates a delightful jumble since everyone's turned left! Let that go on for a full minute or more. Enjoy all that suddenly raucous gabbling and laughter—it's the start of a party, which, God willing, will last the entire semester. And later, during class discussions, pleasantly insist that they refer to each other by name, not "he" or "she." You set the example there.

5) *Never have them write just for you.* How boring! Tell them that they're writing for the entire class here. How much more challenging!

Have them put a spare copy of each paper they write in a course folder at the Undergraduate Library. Require everyone to read at least the opening paragraph of each classmate's paper, and have them initial the top of the first page after doing so. Tell them,

"There's no law saying you can't read on. If the opener's a dandy, I suspect you'll want to. If it isn't, I suspect you'll be eager to turn to the next paper. That's your prerogative. But before you do, take a moment to understand what's turning you off. You don't want to be guilty of the same turn-offs yourself." All this ensures that everyone gets to learn from both the positive and negative examples of their classmates. This is but one way to create a situation in which students teach themselves. And that's the best. The only lasting education is self-education!

6) *Lead Emerson's adage:* "The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil." I take that to mean three things: a) respect their dignity and feelings as fellow human beings; b) respect their already acquired knowledge and skills, most of which you'll never know about, unfortunately; and c) respect their

**It's not enough to know a lot about our field. We also need to demonstrate that the acquisition of all that knowledge has a moral payoff—that we're improved by it. Otherwise, why should our students bother acquiring it?**

vast human potential.

If we take Emerson's words to heart, we find that we start saying "please" and "thank you" a lot more freely. When drafting our course policy statements, we now work for a tone that conveys cordiality, civility. We want policies and procedures that sound like pleasant requests, not edicts. And we try hard to avoid setting a policy or procedure without offering its rationale. We want students thinking, "Well, sure, that's only sensible. I can go along with that." In short, we're appealing to their reasonableness, their sense of fairness, even their self-interest. This is, after all, adult education, is it not? And these people are paying us for the privilege of teaching them, are they not?

If we take Emerson's words to heart, we also discover that students can teach us as much as we teach them—at least in the kinds of no-right-answers courses that teach. They've had many life experiences that we ourselves haven't had, giving them perspectives that we lack. They often have questions that we have overlooked asking. And, what-

ever the course, they can always be relied on to teach us whether we're teaching effectively! If we're boring them, alienating them, intimidating them, appearing silly to them, their body language will tell us.

So I would say: Treat each student as your personal meal-ticket, because he or she is. Better still, treat each student as you would President Berdahl's son or daughter, or your dean's, or your best friend's. Even better, treat each student as you yourself hope to be treated—with respect and affection. Life shows us again and again that people tend to act according to the way they're treated. Scorn breeds scorn, respect breeds respect, affection breeds affection, politeness breeds politeness.

If a student seems slow, and many do, remember the times when you appeared slow in school yourself, and maybe still do. Can you program your VCR? Can you tune your own car? Can you do your own tax return? Can you find the studs behind the sheetrock, or the way to type a true em dash on your computer?

And remember that people, like plants, bloom on different timetables.

Take Einstein. His Munich high school kicked him out for being apathetic. True! He was considered a behavioral menace to his classmates! And when he later applied to the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich to pursue math, he flunked the admission test—not because of the math part, but because he was lousy in botany, zoology, and the languages. He had to take a year's worth of remedial work in another high school before he was able to pass the test.

Or take Winston Churchill. At Harrow, the famous school for England's aristocrats, he ranked at the bottom of his class. Dead last! Though he was later to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, he flunked ninth-grade grammar and had to repeat it the next year. True! He later claimed that he owed his success as a writer to that repeated class, for he finally learned sentence diagramming, and so he learned, as he put it, "the bones of the English sentence." After Harrow, he applied to England's equivalent of West Point, the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. And guess what? He flunked the entrance exam—twice! He passed on his third try, though, and graduated eighth out of 150.

Or take Arthur Miller, America's premier living playwright, author of *Death of a Salesman* and a slew of other great plays. He was, by his own account, the most mediocre of high

school students. Flunked *lots* of courses. Algebra, he flunked three straight years! "I was more interested in football, hockey, and just plain fooling around," he says. His record was so pathetic that he couldn't get into a single college. Three years later, though, he experienced an intellectual awakening while working as a stock clerk in an auto parts warehouse, whereupon he wrote a personal appeal to the president of the University of Michigan asking for admission as a provisional student. He managed to convince the man, and a year later was an academic star.

So every time we encounter what seems to be a "slow" student, let's think of Arthur and Winston and Al.

7) *Show them you take their prose — their thinking — dead seriously.* How? Give every paper they write a careful line-edit. Don't merely expect them to edit their own prose. They don't know how, so *show* them how! Not every sentence, no, but lots of sentences, sure. Revise them interlinearly. Show them the difference that artful tightening and brightening can make. Make them fall in love with the potential of their own ideas. It may be the single most practical thing you can ever do for your students. If you're teaching a writing course, as opposed to a litera-

ture course, go even further: Have the students edit each other's papers — all of them, week after week. Make it a Three Musketeers deal — "All for one and one for all." And tell them you'll have them grade each other anonymously at the end of term. It gives them

In teaching, as in writing, we see all kinds of ways to skin the cat.

an extra stake in being constructive and conscientious.

8) *Have them keep a journal in which they write reactions to each story you assign.* This gets them writing at least two pages every day. But here's the kicker: ask that each entry conclude with a section called "Bringing It Home" in which they challenge themselves to relate to the story personally.

Most literature courses, like the ones I took at Princeton and Berkeley, encourage students to detach themselves from the texts they read — to read them simply as occasions for formal analysis, or symbol-chasing,

or theory-spinning. I go the other way. I want my students and me to use literature — plays, short stories, and the like — to illuminate our own lives and the lives of others. My approach is frankly heretical, at least by present academic standards. I talk about the characters in these stories as if they were real. I'm interested in understanding what makes them tick and how they affect each other. Then I want to "bring it home" — to understand how I'm like them, or unlike them. I'm also interested in grasping the chief life issues that the writer is exploring — issues that I may be wrestling with myself, or may encounter a year from now. This is the approach I teach. I want my students to connect, both intellectually and emotionally, with everything they read. I want them to see part-aspects of themselves in all the characters. I want them to see parts of their own life story in these fictional stories. For the point of all this reading, surely, is not simply to develop one's critical reading skills, and not simply to improve one's appreciation of skillful storytelling and elegant phrasing, but to grow as human beings — to be more self-aware, to be more understanding of others, and to be more inclined to try to see things from the other guy's point of view.



## Weekend Comfort Way Above Par.

Enjoy the classic styling of these deluxe pique mesh golf shirts all year round. These shirts are 100% combed cotton with a fashion collar. Available in short and long sleeve with the exclusive Texas Ex logo embroidered on the left chest. Colors: White Only with Burnt Orange Logo. Sizes: Adult S-2XL

101. Adult S,M,L,XL \$46.95  
101b. Adult 2XL \$48.95

102. Adult S,M,L,XL \$44.95  
102b. Adult 2XL \$46.95

(Prices do not include \$5.00 S&H fee and 8.25% tax for Texas residents)

Quantities are limited. To reserve your deluxe golf shirt and to assure shipment please call or write:

**The Ex-Students' Association  
of The University of Texas**  
2110 San Jacinto  
Austin, Texas 78705  
(800) 594-3935 or  
(512) 471-8089

You can also  
FAX your  
order to:  
(512) 475-7740

