Autobiography of a Teacher

What Has Made Me Want To Teach

Consolidating 55 years into a single timeline has been an interesting exercise, and in mapping out my life this way I’ve recognized five primary areas of influence. For context, I’ll pick a key event from each. (Timeline attached for reference.)

**Global**

*Experience*: Like everyone, I’m a product of the culture and the era in which I grew up. The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and the escalation of the Vietnam War, among other events, instilled an awareness of a world beyond my own, and the importance of personal involvement to bring about change. As a teenager, I went to protests and wore black armbands and embroidered burning American flags on my ripped jeans — but that was all, so I wasn’t a full-fledged activist. But I felt firsthand the power of assembly, and learned that as a member of a dedicated group, each of us can make a difference.

*Relevance to teaching*: I have always pursued work with a social purpose. Teaching is, of course, a tangible way to improve the lives of individuals and their communities.

**Personal**

*Experience*: As long as I can remember, creativity and the desire to make things from ideas and other raw materials have been at the core of my personality. That has fueled my career in radio and Web journalism. Fast-forward to the mid-2000s when I endured a series of profound losses, including loss of much of my freelance work.

*Relevance to Teaching:* It is time in my life for a radical change: one that honors my creativity, communications skills and my need to continue to do socially relevant work. My goals aren’t entirely altruistic. I believe that by helping others to learn, the holes in my life will begin to fill. I have much to offer and much to gain.

**Educational**

*Experience*: In my elementary through high-school years, my classrooms represented a continuum. Mrs. Warfield in second grade was at one end: quiet, gentle and encouraging. I’ll never forget what she did when I spelled a word wrong. In correcting me, she had me sound out the word until I was able to find the answer on my own. I loved and did well in her class. Next year it was Draco the Dragon, a figure so scary I don’t know if I ever said a word in class and doubt I learned much. Moving further down the spectrum, two years later: Mr. Griesinger, who smashed kids’ heads into the blackboard. I *did* learn there, motivated by terror. Perhaps ironically, he is the one who taught me to write. I’ve had dozens of teachers since then, of course, but the early years have remained the most influential.

*Relevance to Teaching*: In constructing this timeline, I’ve realized that every time I’ve taught, I’ve unconsciously, and naturally, “channeled” Mrs. Warfield. That’s partly because aspects of my nature are similar to hers, and partly because I have defined myself in opposition to those who caused so much pain. Probably the single most important lesson I’ve taken from outstanding teachers since then is that their high expectations, in combination with their passion for the subject, have led to my most successful learning experiences.

**Cultural**

*Experience*: I’ve had the good fortune to visit several countries where I’ve had sufficient time to get to know natives and develop a deeper sense of culture and place. These experiences have been among the most rewarding in my life.

*Relevance to Teaching*: Simply stated, the prospect of TESOL stimulates my passion for travel and cross-cultural understanding.

**Professional**

*Experience:* My work for National Public Radio and other outlets focused on oral history and folklore: the stories and cultures of underserved communities. Relatively early in my career I worked closely with Haitian “boat people” and produced a documentary about US immigration policy. It was a defining moment. I learned of the intense suffering of these people, and was awed by their generosity and openness. I had similar reactions to my time in South Africa the year after Mandela was elected.

*Relevance to Teaching:* For my students, I’m expecting that my years of work experience, which have required spontaneity and cultural sensitivity, will transition well into the classroom. For myself, I seek more opportunities to learn about and experience other people and their cultures.

Teaching Experiences

Though I’ve never been a professional classroom teacher, I have taught in various settings. Starting thirty years ago I volunteered in my children’s classrooms (also helping teach my kids to read and write). Later, I created and taught radio documentary production workshops in the US and in Africa, led teenagers in a Web site project, worked one-on-one with high-school students on writing skills, and tutored a Bhutanese refugee in English as a Second Language.

The educational contexts into which I’ve stepped have varied, from US public schools to the nonprofit sector. In public schools, educational criteria were established from “on high,” trickling from the nation to the state to the school board. Curricula were relatively inflexible as teachers worked toward concrete, measurable goals. However, I was interested to notice how some instructors worked highly creatively within that framework, while others merely plodded along in dull, predictable patterns. In nonprofit settings, I had no restrictions on what or how I taught, as long as I met established goals.

Teacher-traits to Which I Aspire

There are probably infinite descriptions of a good teacher. The following traits are those I hope to bring to the classroom, based on who I am, rather than on an idealized Perfect Teacher, which I cannot become.

* Prepared: Knowing as much as possible in advance about the students and their goals, about the school and its facilities, and about the educational philosophy, constraints and requirements of the community and beyond — and about the subject matter.
* Respectful: Acknowledging that each student has a personal and cultural history to be honored.
* Observant: Watching to make sure everyone feels included, that slower learners don’t get left behind and quicker ones don’t get bored; being attentive to personality conflicts within the group; acknowledging everyone’s contributions consistently.
* Structured: Providing clear goals and expectations, providing daily agendas according to the established curriculum, defining respective responsibilities, helping develop realistic norms, and being consistent within whatever level of structure is appropriate for the setting.
* Enthusiastic and energetic: Conveying a confident, lively persona that will engage the students’ eyes, ears and minds, and hold their attention.
* Supportive: Creating a safe climate for learning, lowering the students’ affective filter.
* Creative: Bringing and inviting imagination into the classroom.
* Adaptable: Having the capacity to be “quick on one’s feet” intellectually and logistically, to adjust to the unexpected circumstances that are bound to arise.
* Patient but human: Being as calm and fair as possible, while accepting that we will make mistakes as teachers; being honest with students and having the humility to admit an error, as appropriate.

This list a starting point. As I wrote it, I was thinking specifically about language teaching to youth and young adults, but realize that it could apply to many other teaching situations as well.

Teaching Goals & Methodologies

I believe that good teaching inspires the student to *want* to learn, and ultimately be able to do so in a self-directed manner. A good teacher helps students to think critically, builds self-confidence and, of course, strengthens language skill. I see the teacher’s role as a spark that ignites interest, illuminates murky areas, warms the mood of the classroom and sheds light on the larger picture of language within culture.

My goals in teaching are both community-spirited and selfish. As to the former, I want to be able to make a concrete contribution, however small, to individuals and their community by helping them achieve their language-learning goals. I am not happy unless I’m doing work I consider significant. Regarding the latter, I stand to gain rich knowledge about human nature and culture from my students, knowledge that keeps my spirit alive.

In the past, the way I’ve taught has depended on setting. In South Africa I led a seminar about radio production that I conducted as a listening session. Before each audio clip that I’d selected, I introduced the topic and posed some framing questions. Afterwards, I invited and moderated student feedback. I chose that format and content because they seemed best suited for the size, experience and diversity of the group. In contrast, during my tutoring of high school children in writing, I adhered to a pre-established teaching system.

During the past year I’ve started to become familiar with language-teaching methodologies, and the jury is still out on the ones that most interest me. Again, context is the first determinant of which I would use. If possible, I’m likely to rely more on an inductive than deductive approach. As an artist and a documentarian, I will look for opportunities to include visual and aural elements whenever possible and relevant, and to bring student experiences into the curriculum. Here are a few ideas to which I’m drawn:

* Focusing on building and maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect that leads to students’ feeling of safety in learning.
* Interactional and task-based techniques as subject matter warrants: situational role-plays to explore pragmatics; peer scaffolding for real-world conversational exercises; group projects that will yield original, student-generated output.
* For any essential grammar exercises, consider using a playful, inventive variation on a traditional “slot and filler” technique.
* Teacher scaffolding — including framing questions, realia, peripherals, and sensory input — to convey abstract concepts.
* In writing and oral exercises, to develop creative and relevant themes as prompts for students to create their own stories, and possibly to build on these with visual elements and presentations.

I am eager to learn, as I will in the coming weeks, about other methods and approaches, and to discover which dovetail best with my character and the specific teaching situation.