Effective Teaching: What Does It Look Like?

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The problem of identifying effective teaching is one that plagues school administrators, school boards, and school improvement committees all over the world. Everyone seems to have a different idea of who an effective teacher is and how he or she acts. Cruickshank and Haefele identified ten effective teaching styles but admit that there are excellent teachers who do not fit any of their identified molds (2001). Though effective teaching comes in a variety of shapes, sizes, and personalities, a few prominent characteristics and practices remain common.

The Person Behind Effective Teaching

Learner

Effective teaching is done by one who is a learner himself. Walker states that “one never reaches the point of learning all that needs to be learned. . . . Teaching is a learning process” (2003, pp.1, 3). The frenzied pace of change in modern society necessitates a person who is willing to learn. Not only will this teacher be constantly improving his or her teaching, but will also be exhibiting the very characteristics of study, diligence, and motivation that he or she is trying to develop in his or her students (Yount, 1996). For the teacher who is a learner, experience does not necessarily mean less time planning lessons, already prepared tests, or the same illustrations and stories as last year. Experience equals opportunity to improve one’s knowledge as well as practice (Horton, 1992). Perhaps Yount says it best: “The day I stop learning is the day I stop teaching” (1996, p. 300).

Human

The person behind effective teaching is also human, meaning that he or she is able, willing, and even desirous of developing positive relationships with the people, especially the students, with whom he or she works. The majority of teachers have a sincere desire to improve their students’ lives, but it is obviously impossible to influence one with whom there is no relationship. Tomlinson and Doubet report that one of the most pressing concerns of teachers is the near impossibility of “getting to know” their students, yet this relationship is absolutely essential to understanding and motivating students (2005).

While it is true that some students are intrinsically motivated to learn and would be able to learn regardless of who taught them, the number of students who are not so creates a tremendous need for a teacher who can relate. Carson, interviewed by Tomlinson and Doubet states simply, “Unless they have a relationship with me, students have no desire to learn” (2005, p. 9). Effective teachers make students feel comfortable and welcome in the classroom, show interest in their “non-academic” lives (e.g., attending ballgames and concerts), and discover students’ strengths and weaknesses through conversation and observation. In addition to opening the way for influence, a
positive rapport with students can go a long way toward developing a child’s self-concept as a learner, which, in turn, “is a significant factor in student success in school” (Deuink, 1988, p. 63). A positive relationship with students also motivates students to “live . . . within classroom rules” (Prather in Tomlinson and Doubet, 2005, p. 13).

Finally, an effective teacher is human from the perspective of not only the student but also the parents. Parents are understandably more comfortable with one whom they know understands the student’s family background and the opinions of the parents concerning their child’s education (Boers, 2001). Again, Yount summarizes this characteristic very well:

Teachers who are warm, caring, and friendly set a positive emotional tone in the classroom. . . . Contrast this with teachers who are cold, uncaring, and aloof. The former engage all students in an effort to help them learn, the latter confront students in an effort to combat ignorance. It is clear which kind of classroom produces openness, curiosity, and freedom to ask questions (1996, p. 296).

Mature

Professionally

A teacher has many professional relationships to develop and maintain. The effective teacher handles these relationships maturely. Herbster cites several responsibilities that the teacher has to his superior(s). First, he or she seeks to resolve problems early and with the one with whom the problem exists. The teacher also consistently enforces school policy (1988). Both of these practices help to maintain open communication and allow the teacher to freely approach the administrator with problems, ideas, or suggestions. Concerning his or her fellow teachers, the effective teacher cooperates with colleagues by offering encouragement, advice, care, and assistance. Furthermore, he or she is willing to learn from fellow teachers; at times, they will be able to offer this same encouragement, advice, and assistance. The effective teacher avails himself or herself of this resource (Herbster, 1988).

Academically

An effective teacher is mature in his particular academic field as well as “supplementary areas such as literature, painting, and music” (Yount, 1996, p. 300). This supplementary knowledge is a good source of illustrations to use in the classroom (Yount, 1996), and it makes the teacher better able to relate to the variety of students he or she will face. This maturity also involves knowing how to present the subject to those who are immature (Horton, 1992). While just knowing content is not enough, a grasp of academic content is certainly of primary importance for effective teaching.
Spiritually

In addition, the person behind effective teaching must be mature in spiritual matters. From the Christian's perspective, this maturity is perhaps most important. The student will become like the teacher in academics as well as spirituality. To be effective, the Christian teacher must model Christlikeness through the power of the Holy Spirit (Herbster, 1988).

The Practices Behind Effective Teaching

Accommodates the Needs of All Learners

Effective teaching adjusts its teaching methods and strategies to meet the needs of all learners. This practice begins with an attitude (Bowen & Parker, 1990): the effective teacher must want to meet the various needs of the students. Meeting the needs of a variety of students in a classroom can be further complicated by the inclusion of special education students within the general classroom. Most schools offer special education services for students with special needs; however, these students are very likely to spend at least part (sometimes the majority) of their day in a general classroom setting. Thomas states that the growing preference for the educational setting of students with mental retardation and other disabilities is indeed the general education classroom. The general education teacher must be equipped to help these students reach their highest potential.

The teacher must also be able to challenge gifted students and keep disturbances from especially active students to a minimum. The effective teacher makes use of a variety of teaching practices including such motivating techniques as cooperative learning and peer tutoring to help accomplish these goals (Hardin & Hardin, 2002). The effective teacher is one who is willing and knowledgeable enough to adapt teaching strategies and methods to meet the varied needs of the learner.

Practices Good Classroom Management

Another practice that results in effective teaching is that of good classroom management. "Good classroom management is almost invisible" (Canter & Canter, 2001, p. 171), meaning that it is something that an effective teacher does, but he or she does it in a way that the students do not recognize that they are being "managed." Classroom management involves discipline of behavior and management of routines and procedures.

Discipline of Behavior

Management of students’ behavior is essential for learning to take place. Effective teachers do not let lack of preparation, fear of students, or an inability to identify patterns of bad behavior prevent them from maintaining the best possible learning environment (Jacquot, 1984). The effective teacher’s discipline works because
it is based on the proper motive. The effective teacher does not discipline only to make his or her life easier. In a Christian setting, the ultimate purpose for discipline is to lead the students to Christlikeness. Other valid purposes for discipline include enhancement of learning, permanent behavior change, and encouragement of self-discipline in the student (Jacquot, 1984). This last purpose is extremely important because self-discipline is necessary for growth (Horton, 1992), and growth of some kind (academic, physical, social) is the goal of all education.

The effective teacher’s discipline of behavior works because of the methods he or she uses to discipline. Marzano and Marzano state that the most important factor in classroom management is the teacher-student relationship, which is built on a teacher’s specific behaviors (2003). Students’ own perspectives on their teachers’ discipline point out several of these behaviors. First, students say that good teachers discipline on an individual basis rather than in front of the entire class. Second, effective teachers also seek out all the facts before disciplining. Third, effective teachers clearly communicate to students what they have done wrong and what they should do to correct the problem (Walker, 2003). Finally, effective teachers’ discipline works because they help students prevent bad behavior with adequate preparation, alertness, and early intervention (Horton, 1992).

Routines and Procedures

Another aspect of classroom management is the organization and orderliness of day-to-day occurrences. An effective teacher manages these everyday occurrences well. In an attempt to prevent behavioral issues, effective teachers outline specific ways of acting in the specific situations that occur on a day-to-day basis. They determine which settings and activities need specific directions, and they clearly communicate these directions to the students (Canter & Canter, 2001). The effective teacher also models this discipline for the students. The students will not develop discipline in their own lives if they do not witness discipline in the life of their teacher (Horton, 1992). An effective teacher manages this aspect of his classroom knowing that organization and routine will save time and effort (Jacquot, 1984) and will thus increase his instructional time. Teachers’ preferences and school policies will vary. The value of procedures does not lie so much in the specific way a teacher chooses for something to be done as in the fact that the teacher establishes a specific way for each routine to be done. An effective teacher realizes the power of organization to either facilitate or inhibit the education of students and responds accordingly (Jacquot, 1984). “While good disciplinarians are not necessarily excellent teachers, excellent teachers are necessarily good disciplinarians” (deZafra cited in Jacquot, 1984, p. 48).

Uses Appropriate Instructional Strategies and Methods

The effective teacher makes use of many tools in order to accomplish his or her goals. The strategies and methods are not more important than the purpose for their use—to make content relevant and meaningful for students. The effective teacher
understands that memory depends on the level of thought students give to the material (Willingham, 2003) and uses strategies with the goal of engaging students’ thoughts about the concepts being taught.

**Questioning**

Effective teaching employs questioning to get students to think and to prompt students’ questions (Walker, 2003). When used to find out what students know, questions are most effective after a clear presentation of material; questions prior to teaching only discourage students by revealing a lack of knowledge or make them dependent on the teacher to direct meaningful responses. An effective teacher also employs a pause for students to think both before and after student answers (Yount, 1996). The frequency and difficulty of the questions is directly related to how much students learn (Yount, 1996) and are therefore carefully planned to have the greatest effect (Walker, 2003).

**Motivation**

A study by Csikszentmihalyi (as cited in Scherer, 2002) indicates that students achieve most and care most when they see their activity as both a meaningful endeavor as well as “play.” In other words, students need to see the importance of the activity and enjoy participating in the activity. Effective teaching creates such a learning environment. Yount discusses several ways that effective teaching provides motivation, including raising curiosity, developing meaningfulness, and showing usefulness of material to be learned (1996). Effective teaching also encourages and praises students who do well. Studies show that effective teachers motivate by praising the effort of the student rather than achievement only. These teachers want students to know that success is based on factors that the students can control (Dweck, 1999). Finally, effective teachers motivate students with personal enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is contagious, especially in the classroom (Walker, 2003).

**Variety**

Though important, questioning and motivation are not the only instructional tools of the effective teacher. Other tools include group learning, lecture, discussion, participation, and technology. The best teaching practice includes all of these strategies for the purpose of motivation and reaching students at all levels and learning styles. An effective teacher knows the abilities and backgrounds of his or her students and uses a myriad of available strategies to encourage optimum student involvement in the learning process.

**Assesses Teaching and Learning**

Effective teaching requires two different kinds of assessment. Reflective practice, defined by Walker as “a careful review of and thoughtfulness about one’s own teaching process” (2003, p. 10) is necessary for improvement. Effective teachers want criticism of their teaching practices in order to improve those practices, and they do not hesitate
to try new strategies in order to make content meaningful to more learners (Walker, 2003). They are constantly looking for content that needs enrichment, strategies that need development, and activities that need enhancement. In addition to the assessment of teaching practices, there must also be assessment of students' progress. This assessment of student learning can come in many forms. Vander Ark gives several principles of practice behind effective teaching and assessment. First, effective teaching does not delight in “finding out what students don't know” (2000, p. 86). Effective teaching practice assesses what the students have gained (2000). Of course, not every student will score a 100 percent, but the assessment is an accurate gauge of how the students have grown during the teaching process.