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The Art of Inspired Teaching

by Eileen Dormer

Thorough and Efficient. No Child Left Behind. Portfolio Assessment. Problem-Based Learning. Understanding by Design. Statewide Standards. Core Content Curriculum Alignment. Differentiation. Summative evaluation. The education machine continues to spit out buzz words at an increasingly rapid clip. Whatever the latest education initiative, there is always the difficulty of forcing square pegs into round holes, since these administrative edicts come down from above, often removed from the teachers themselves. But buried beneath this torrent of trends lies the bedrock of an inescapable truth: inspired teaching is an art, not a science.

As a teacher for four decades, I have observed countless colleagues who demonstrated a broad range of pedagogical artistry, running the gamut from deadly seriousness to flat-out insanity. Current administrative observers, while looking down at their laptops and checking boxes on “domains,” would never select any of these educators as exemplars of their theories. Yet, these teachers inspired their students- and me- because they were all remarkably effective in their classrooms. There was the teacher who was completely incapable of communicating with any other adults but who literally “came alive” as if on stage in front of a group of students, using his own method of sardonic discourse to encourage critical thinking about literature. His pupils worshiped him.

Another educator was completely “old school,” insisting on strict grammar and reading just the classics, so utterly out of touch with current vogues yet assured of her own direction that she seemed original and cool to the students. One memorable guy was crazy and compulsive, leaping around the room, full of rituals from which he would not allow his students to deviate: pencils placed on the upper right corner of the desk, no curled corners on papers, and daily memorization of critical facts about our world and its cultures. Students watched this teacher in the same way they might watch an exotic animal in a zoo, with rapt attention and fascination. I would venture to say that the thousands of students who spent a year in his class can still recall and apply everything they committed to memory and could be great *Jeopardy* candidates (or more knowledgeable political candidates than some we have seen lately).

These teachers have left their classrooms now, along with many more quirky, creative performance artists like them. Their square pegs splintered in the smooth round holes of new, required methods forced upon them. Seated in their well-worn chairs are those for whom teaching is a science, earnest professionals who are competent and comfortable in checking off core content standards, teaching to tests, and using newest technology in their disciplines. They are accountable, their successes are quantifiable, and their methods are validated by research.

But that certain spark, that ineffable quality that marks teaching *artistry*, seems harder to find. In the myriad forms of evaluation developed by the education gurus, where have they included the box that can be checked off noting that the teacher skipped lunch for a week, talking to a student who couldn't talk to anyone else? Is there a number that correlates to the inspiring teacher who made her students museum cognoscenti, even paying for their trips? What rating would have been assigned to that teacher who still insisted on teaching pristine grammar when her supervisor required her to eliminate it in favor of problem-based group learning projects?

The science of teaching leads us down the straight highway of endless measurement and computation. But the art of teaching finds many winding roads that lead to personal journeys. I prefer those pebbled paths less taken, and I am inspired when the byways lead to an open sunlit meadow for my students to explore. We are off the grid for a just a little while, with no scientific instruments to calibrate the pleasure of our discoveries.

I know that it is much harder and possibly even professionally unsafe in this time of scrupulous evaluation for teachers to let their freak flags fly. But I am sure we can seek gentle breezes here and there, let those flags flutter in a freshening wind, and be inspired once again.

Eileen Dormer, MA, is an adjunct professor of introductory college writing at Union County College, New Jersey. She has also taught at Bergen and Brookdale Community Colleges and at Montclair State University. Dormer is retired from the West Essex School District, where for 36 years she indulged her passions by teaching reading, writing, studio art and AP art history.



Photo by Sarah Curtis.