

TEACHERS AS ROLE MODELS

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This paper focuses on a number of indispensable traits of a really competent and responsible teacher, irrespective of his specialty, in the absence of which he can only be a dull source of information, instead of a complete and complex personality, capable not only of providing knowledge but also of shaping people's minds by exerting a many-sided beneficial influence on their lives as a whole. Additionally, we will also make several remarks on the special status of the foreign language teacher, as well as on some specific aspects related to working with adults.

Keywords: professionalism; skills, responsibility; creativeness; attitude.

Preliminary remarks

Each of us is the product of the conjoined efforts of a number of teachers, who exerted their influence over certain periods of our lives. From among them only a few or maybe a single one stands out as "THE teacher(s)", even at an age when we were not yet able to define what being a teacher meant.

What are the features that have such a strong impact on a pupil/student, turning one particular teacher into an epitome, a symbol, a cherished image we gratefully and critically hold as a standard against which we mercilessly judge and rank all the other teachers met in our lives?

In other words, what are and should be the personal and professional traits of a teacher, so that he may be remembered and acknowledged as a competent and reliable moulding agent of a child/teenager/adult's knowledge and personality?

Such a question is even more relevant when it comes to working with adults, whose personalities have already acquired shape and complexity, so that didactic "interventions" risk being deemed intrusions, unless conducted with great care, subtlety and professionalism.

In my case, the (very few) teachers whose impressive personality and skill really stay with me even today happen to have been all teachers of

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English, which amply justifies my choice of a career. By a strange coincidence – or maybe not! – they all displayed the same features, out of which, in my estimation, the following would be worth mentioning:

Professional knowledge

This is by all means an essential prerequisite in qualifying someone as a great teacher. None of the other features, regardless of their importance, can make up for this one. Professional knowledge is not so easy to define, since it does not only refer to knowledge proper but also to one's propensity for lifelong study, to the capacity of striving towards self-improvement, the ambition of being the best in one's field, maybe not for one's own sake, but in order to teach other people. The teachers mentioned above were the acme of perfection and their extensive knowledge could only be superseded by their strong wish to share it with their disciples, an aspect any pupil/student is extremely sensitive and receptive to.

Professional skills (or teaching skills)

Such skills are by no means to be ignored, since in their absence professional knowledge becomes barren ground, utterly inaccessible or even forbidden, instead of a bottomless fountain of wisdom to be shared with the learners. Professional skills refer to the ways and means of conveying knowledge so as to make it palatable, easy to grasp, even agreeable and desirable. Without adequate – not to say exquisite – professional skills, science and knowledge are useless, an end in themselves, destined to feed the teacher's own ambition rather than accomplish the sacred mission of instructing people.

Creativeness

One might be tempted to believe that, given the extraordinary range of printed and online learning/teaching materials in any field, there is very little left for teachers to do, but this is far from being true. A good teacher will never take over materials without adjusting them specifically to the class/group he is working with, bearing in mind a long list of criteria: age groups, level, learning background, personalities, to state only a few. Using the available materials indiscriminately means breaking or overlooking some very basic learning principles, with disastrous consequences, the aftermath of which might last for a lifetime. Henceforth the imperative of displaying a creative spirit, able to produce original materials or work out new activities, suitable for a specific group of students. A creative teacher will never be at a loss when losing a book or his notes, on the contrary, he will carry all (or most of) his materials in his mind, ready to produce them whenever necessary.

Responsibility

This should be the cornerstone of any didactic undertaking. A responsible teacher knows that his task is not only that of broadening his students' horizons. He also provides them with learning strategies, making them aware of the necessity of lifelong learning and self-improvement and shaping their character. Exceptional teachers turn into role models, staying with us for a lifetime and inspiring our attitude to study and knowledge. Without a strong sense of responsibility, this spiritual transfer is impossible and the act of teaching becomes a pitiful failure.

The capacity (I would rather say ability) of working with people

Undoubtedly, this ability does not arise over night, it is either inborn or cultivated throughout years of experience. It involves a number of personality traits, such as: patience, empathy, open-mindedness, love (of people and of the job), as well as communication skills, willingness to teach and so on. Not any teacher will display this special ability, but those who do will work wonders, even when confronted with difficult personalities or negative character traits, which impose a specific approach or particular strategies for scoring the expected results.

The attitude towards one's pupils/students

An arrogant, overbearing and contemptuous attitude will never win over the learners. On the contrary, respect, friendliness, encouragement will bring out the best in everybody. Setting a breach between the "all-knowledgeable" teacher and his students, estimated as incapable of attaining the „rarefied atmosphere of academia”, will never yield results, acting as a deterrent to any impulse, initiative or availability for study. A good teacher should be a fine judge of human nature and individual inclinations, so as to rightly appraise his students' potential and perspectives. This is even more important in the case of adult students, whose personality is already crystallized. They will never condone supercilious attitudes, ironic remarks, indifference and detachment. In contrast, trust in the students' capacity of processing the knowledge input and making progress will stimulate their endeavours, instilling into them a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Humour

Incongruous as it might seem, humour plays an essential role in the teaching/learning process. First and foremost, it creates a relaxed atmosphere, extremely favourable to study. Humour must not be equated with lack of seriousness: on the contrary, it is a powerful tool for conveying knowledge.

Secondly, well-placed, judicious humour will make information much easier to remember, connecting it to some pleasant, informal comment of the teacher. Thirdly, humour will establish a friendly relationship between the teacher and the students, (apparently) reducing differences of status and background, therefore nervousness and frustrations, which can only be propitious to self-expression. Far from demeaning the teacher's personality, suitable and good-quality humour will strengthen the teacher's perception as a wit, which can only add to his aura of an intelligent person.

When all these desiderata (and a number of others) come to be fulfilled, the teacher will see a group of perfect strangers become a team, an essential condition for accomplishing any task in best conditions. Despite the many differences, students will manage to blend individual progress with the team spirit, which in turn will lead to an extraordinary climate of good examples to be followed and high standards to strive for.

Though each of them may come from a distinct background and may need to acquire knowledge for a particular reason, yet they will all progress as a team, contributing information and experience for the benefit of the entire group.

Besides their propensity for study and strong desire to attain their goals, if skillfully guided by a resourceful teacher, all students will evince good will, total admiration for their classmates' performances, in a word, an attitude totally devoid of envy or any other negative feeling.

Being a foreign language teacher

Being a foreign language teacher implies a number of particular aspects, since the teacher acts as an interface for and catalyst of two different cultures – one more reason for him to display thorough knowledge of both. The greater the dissimilarities, the subtler the teacher's approach must be in order to coax the students into integrating new cultural patterns. Such patterns may contain amazing or shocking elements of novelty, occasionally even unacceptable for students studying a certain culture. The teacher must work on his students with patience and care, not imposing but explaining things, stimulating awareness and gradually inducing an empathic approach in those who might regard anything foreign with distrust and apprehension.

There are numberless strategies to support and supervise the teaching/learning process of acquiring a foreign language. When implemented by the teacher, they undoubtedly have a great impact – but also a certain degree of compulsion, which might somewhat undermine the efficiency of this approach.

In opposition to such strategies, if a teacher is capable of tackling a subtle course of action, consisting of unseen control over an atmosphere of emulation and competitiveness, his endeavour is likely to yield considerably better results.

Working with adults

As mentioned above, working with adults is infinitely more challenging and rewarding, at the same time. The rationale of this assertion is based on several aspects, such as the difficulty of approaching well-defined personalities, the challenge of learning new things at an age when knowledge acquisition might become hard, the necessity of teaching new learning strategies to people inured to old or standard study methods etc. All these drawbacks impose specific didactic techniques, meant to select information, to make it accessible and above all functional, in keeping with the students' particular needs and job requirements.

Adults are occasionally more reluctant to acquire new knowledge, especially if unrelated or remotely related to their field of interest. Additionally, they may become excessively cautious and inquisitive, sometimes even overreacting to certain elements of novelty, when faced with teaching strategies entirely alien to them.

This is why the teacher must be a fine psychologist and evince subtlety and intelligence in finding the right path so as to arouse their interest and initiate them into new learning/teaching methods, thus bridging over difficulties inherent to learning at an adult age.

Conclusions

We rarely stop to think that what we are today is to a large extent the product of our teachers.

Few of us remember and cherish the image of certain teachers because they were lenient and less demanding or the opposite, uselessly strict and unforgiving, in the absence of an appropriate scientific and moral support. Indeed, we have occasional recollections of „weak” teachers, always inclined to give in if faced with a strong-willed group of students, or of unnecessarily „tough” ones, whose reputation resided exclusively in their sternness, unsupported by any real merits.

But the teachers we will always remember with pleasure and gratitude are those that really left a mark both in our minds and souls, doing their job with utmost care and responsibility. That is why I felt the need to devote a few lines precisely to this rare „brand” of teachers who do not deserve to fade into oblivion, who really love their job and do it greatly.

And if we feel we are worthy human beings and good citizens, then we should have from time to time a grateful thought for those to whom we owe so much and whose efforts seeded inside our minds the spark of knowledge, opening our hearts and consciousness towards a better understanding of the world.

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