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What Teenagers Can Teach Us About Good Teaching

Karin Mika, Cleveland-Marshall College of Law

I've spent most of my motherhood taking the sides of the teachers whenever my kids lodged any complaints about them. Until a certain age, kids' complaints are essentially the same. "Good" teachers are those who don't give a lot of homework and don't enforce discipline, and "bad" teachers are those who impose more rigorous standards. However, as kids get older and start to appreciate that a good teacher can be one who does impose rigorous standards, it's time to take notice of what the kids think is going right or wrong in the classroom.

As my older daughter finished up high school and then started college, I got to be a voyeur to her conversations with friends in the house. Those conversations often involved their classes and I was repeatedly startled about what they were saying about their teachers. I often wondered if maybe my own students were saying some of the same things teachers.

So I started paying more attention to what they were saying. I found that if I listened hard enough and asked a question here and there, I could learn a lot about improving my own teaching. Here are some of the things I have learned from my teenager about what our upcoming generation of students believe makes for a good teacher:

1. Be enthusiastic about the material. If you're not interested, don't expect anyone else to be.
2. Never, ever scare students. A state of terror is not conducive to being receptive to information.
3. Never proselytize in generalities. Students who did well on an assignment do not appreciate a teacher exasperatingly berating an entire class for poor performance.
4. Don't waste their time. We may have lived long enough to have a lot of war stories to tell, but those stories are far more interesting to us than to them.



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5. Never read from the textbook – or else don't make them spend the \$100 to have bought the textbook in the first place.
6. Repeat and write down the most important things for them to focus on. This is especially important if one spends a lot of time digressing into war stories.
7. "Don't read from the PowerPoint slides!" And while we're at it,
8. They don't like Powerpoint presentations as much as we think they like Powerpoint presentations. ...Or at least the ones that just repeat verbatim what's in the textbook.
9. Don't cancel a class for something that's your fault, and then reschedule the class for a time that's convenient for you and inconvenient for you and inconvenient for them (like a Saturday).
10. Don't get angry if students don't understand allusions to historical events that happened before they were born. If you think the references are that important, explain and give the references some context.

Correspondingly,

11. Have some clue about their own pop culture or life experiences. If you can't connect, you cannot teach.

And lastly,

12. If you don't have one already, get a sense of humor. Teachers who can laugh along with their students and at themselves are liked and respected most of all.