

The McCaig Files: A Primer on Becoming a University Teacher

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On May 21, 2012, Dr. Thomas E. McCaig, Professor of Teacher Education, beloved colleague, and mentor to many new university professors passed out of this life and into one without pain and the limitations of a failing physical body. He had been the heart and soul of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Dr. McCaig began his teaching career in the inner city schools of Chicago and later became a teacher of teachers as he helped train and prepare a new cadre of elementary and secondary school teachers who would take some of his ideas and wisdom into their own classrooms. Tom told a story of his days teaching junior high at Emerson School. His classroom was on the third floor and every day he would pass the primary grade rooms as he made his way up three flights of stairs. One day as he was teaching his junior high students, he looked over to his classroom door to find a very small child staring in at him...one of the littlest ones from downstairs. The tiny kindergartener asked, "Are you the giant who lives on the third floor?" During his years of helping to prepare future elementary, secondary, and university teachers, this giant left us with many lessons. The ones in these files are intended for new college professors...those who have prepared diligently in the content areas of their discipline, but who may not have experience instructing college age students.

Dr. McCaig left the legacy of his philosophy for us all to review and incorporate. His twelve points on what makes an effective teacher are as follows:

First, an effective teacher must understand the unity of all knowledge. Different academic disciplines are varying reflections of "Scientia" – knowledge, and insofar as possible, academic disciplines should be fused during every class hour. An effective teacher models the oneness of human knowledge.

Second, an effective teacher understands that another mission of the teacher is to transmit the best and the worst from the past in order for students to translate them into the present and transmute them into the future.

Third, an effective teacher understands the unity of human nature, and the beauty of racial, ethnic and sex differences among human beings. The effect of this understanding will be to raise the esteem levels of students, enhance self concepts, and to create a classroom environment wherein every student feels safe to learn and to be.

Fourth, an effective teacher is one who unconditionally loves all of his or her students. Love, I define as a positive will act of commitment, very often devoid of any emotional content. We are not enjoined to like our students – but to love them, and to give all of them our knowledge, time, understanding, compassion, and guidance. Love is obviously a hard discipline to learn and to practice.

Fifth, an effective teacher is one who understands that teaching is more an art than science, more intuitive than concrete, and more personal than impersonal. An effective teacher personalizes instruction i.e. causes each student in a group to feel that he or she is being personally addressed and cared about.

Sixth, an effective teacher uses method as a process to transmit academic content, and technique as the creative use of the teacher's self within the dynamic process of the method. A method is virtually useless without the teacher's effective presence within it.

Seventh, an effective teacher teaches in such a way as to insure students ultimately learn those ideas, concepts, and appreciations that are good, true, and beautiful. These should insure that students will incorporate harmony, wisdom, and simplicity into their adult lives.

Eighth, an effective teacher is not afraid of being vulnerable. A good teacher is a risk-taker, and is not discouraged because of criticism or out of fear of success or failure.

Ninth, an effective teacher is one who teaches his or her students to think at the highest levels of intellectual and will functioning. The teacher will teach in such a way as to cause students to become independent thinkers.

Tenth, an effective teacher presents to his or her students a model of moral and ethical behavior, and teaches those values necessary for human nature to grow, and for societies to survive and to flourish.

Eleventh, an effective teacher maintains an optimistic view of life, possesses a great sense of humor and a keen respect for the absurd.

Twelfth, my students have taught me these concepts, and I believe them to be correct. For all these understandings, I am grateful to all those students who taught their teacher so well.

So, how is it done? How does the new professor learn to reach the minds of the college age student? Some of those who have already walked this path have put their ideas into writing. These are the ideas not typically found in books. These files are intended, in some small way, to carry on the mission of Dr. Thomas E. McCaig, the teacher of teachers

It's All About Timing

Dr. Christine Gould, Professor of Teacher Education

Traditional age college students are black and white thinkers. There is no getting around it. They simply don't have the cognitive development and life experience to understand nuance. This ability just isn't there, yet. Give them five years and they will begin to understand that the world isn't a black and white place, but right now, it is.

This became evident to me one year after I played a video for my undergraduate students and then later for my graduate students. The video followed a teacher for a year as she taught in a high risk, inner city school. My undergraduates – who had only spent minimal time in classrooms- all had very specific ideas about what the teacher SHOULD have done and how they would have done things MUCH differently and how RIDICULOUS it was that she didn't do things differently. Their worlds are full of many SHOULDs and OUGHTS.

Not so with the graduate students. They immediately picked up on the classroom dynamics, the predicament of her setting, and the outside, uncontrollable factors facing her. They didn't have many specific ideas for her about what she should have done differently because they understood the difficulty of the problems she faced.

Given their lack of life experience and developmental levels, passing on the critical pieces of information to undergraduates becomes a very tricky thing. Any experienced professor knows that the same students who discuss critical and controversial issues with you will six weeks later act as if they had never heard of these things. I firmly believe undergraduates need more repetition than we think and we make a serious mistake in not recognizing this. I also believe they need something to hook their ideas to. An idea that is just floating around with nothing to hook it to – simply floats away.

Recognizing how to hook that idea depends on your timing – or what some people refer to as a teachable moment. If you try to hang that information onto a hook before the timing is right, it will simply fall off and clutter the bottoms of their metaphorical closets.

So, how do you know when the timing is right? How do you know when to introduce the critical pieces of information? As time goes on and you review your end-of-semester evaluations and your students' scores on assignments and tests, you will quickly begin to understand where the breakdown occurred. Once you have identified the breakdown point, the trick is to find the teachable moment.

You will start to notice a look of understanding on the faces of your most involved students. That same look will be quickly followed by your brightest students and then your least involved students. This becomes your signal. When the look appears on the faces of a critical mass of your least involved students, that is the moment. That's the teachable moment -the moment when they actually have something to hook the idea to. Introduce the information here and they will remember it.

Teacher as Explorer, Translator and Listener

Dr. Leslie McClain, Professor of Teacher Education

The most important part of teaching is to teach what it is to know.

~Simone Weil

After all these years of study, research and looking closely and deeply into your subject matter you have been given the gift of teaching. You are a master at learning in your discipline and undoubtedly a master at the work of 'school.' So it may be helpful to wonder what it means to know in your field. What is Knowing? How does one come by Knowing? How is it that one thinks, organizes, discovers and uncovers understanding in your field? How is it that one comes to feel resilient as a learner in your field?

Field guide, mentor and discoverer. Look in, too. Recent research has shown that experts in the fields of science, history, and mathematics (for example) think about, organize, study, and remember their content in unique and different ways. So: *How is it that you study, reflect and integrate ideas in your field?* You have become an expert at learning in your field... what can you offer from 'your practice' to young adult learners in your discipline? By the way, this is not about your telling them what to do. Rather this is about sharing the way that you have discovered... and inviting your students into the discovery *with* you. Blast away from the 'right answer syndrome'; instead wonder.

Wondering is a side-by-side experience. I have found it helpful to consider with my students how knowledge, methods and intentions in my discipline have shifted through time – thus reminding myself and my students that what we are exploring is ever emerging, ever dynamic. We become explorers together, as we are 'looking into' and 'wondering about' together.

Translator. Over and over again I remind myself it's not about what *I* know, it's about what 'we' know. Get out of my own way. In making way for the reciprocity of teaching, real learning

begins to occur. I do not *hold* the key to their learning; rather together we use the key to open doors of learning. How to prepare students for their time, a time I will not witness? *How to educate them to know current understandings of the discipline and use those understandings as stepping stones toward further discovery? How to teach them facility with the language of the discipline?* Am I merely asking them to robotically repeat the language/technical terminology or am I inviting them in, to become a part of the language and dialogue of the discipline – to truly use the language as a way of thinking about and thinking with. One of my students, a future teacher, was a brilliant math and physics major. When he spoke in class, his language was filled with the flourish of the technical vocabulary of physics. Unfortunately much of what he had to say was lost on us. We were not invited *into* the discipline, we were merely given a show. It seemed that his challenge as a teacher would be to learn empathy. Be a Translator of your discipline. Meaningfully Connect. Don't just 'hose them down'.

Listener. Listen. Care-fully. Another essential aspect of wonder, discovery and translation is listening... to our students *and* to ourselves as learners. The art of listening is not often considered in teaching methodology. And yet, it is in the ability to hear students in their expressions of knowing in the discipline, their confusions and curiosities that we will come to authentically affect their learning. Listen to what they are bringing to the class community. What do they know? Allow them to bring their voice to the class. My classes generally have 25 students in them – and I tell them no one is invisible in our class. Everyone has a presence and understandings that they bring to us. No one is invisible and I strive to hear everyone's voice, every class session. What might you do to let your students' voices be heard, so that you can listen? (Be sure to blast out of the right answer syndrome.) And listen to yourself as well. What do you notice? Bring yourself to the class. Learning to listen will lead you into the reciprocity of teaching.

One of my students, when asked how his science class was going, replied ‘Oh it’s so boring.’ I suspect he and his peers expected to find some sympathy on my part. Nope. I said, “Huh? What’s this? You are an advanced student in science, how could it be boring? Do you know how much he knows?! If Einstein were sitting up there talking to you would you say, it is so boring? Why don’t you ask him some questions? Engage the teacher! See what you can discover.”

A few weeks later I asked the student again, “So, how’s the class going?” “Great!” he replied. Wow, I thought and asked “Why?” “The prof brought in his guitar and played for us – teaching us all about physics.” Ahhha! this prof is an explorer, a translator, a listener – one who is engaging in the reciprocity of teaching.

So, try it out! Be the explorer, the translator and the listener... you will be amazed at what your students discover with you at their side. (And all the while their teacher is teaching them what it is to Know.)

Weird Like Me

Dr. Dona Warren, Professor of Philosophy

Shortly after I started teaching philosophy, I was afflicted with a student who personified everything that stood in somewhat hostile opposition to me. Each day, he was there in the front row of my introductory class, wearing his baseball cap backward and exuding cocky self-assurance that was mixed with a pinch of disdain for formal education. While I readied myself for class at the front of the room, I'd try not to listen as he talked to his buddies about how much he drank at the most recent party. I was sure he thought that I was weird, but I knew better. I had, after all, pursued my Ph.D. not because I expected to get a job (philosophy positions are a rare and wonderful thing) but because I wanted a credential that could transmute my natural weirdness into eccentricity. I wanted alchemy, and I had it. In the classroom, I could be myself, no matter what others might think of me. In the classroom, I could tell my stories, no matter what others might think of them. I still like to tell stories, and I hope that some of my stories help some of my students to see different things or to see the same things differently. That is, of course, the hope that encourages me to share this story with you now. I can never guarantee success - sometimes stories don't fit - but they are mine to tell anyway. And I reminded myself, the day that I introduced my class to Descartes, that students who partied, and who wore their caps backward, and who viewed me with probable scorn, didn't matter. I owned the room.

"So," I concluded near the end of the hour, "Descartes is saying that for all you know, everything you see, and hear, and taste, and feel, and smell could be nothing but an illusion, something fed to your mind by an evil demon bent upon deceiving you. But you don't even need to believe in that demon, do you? Maybe your mind is responsible for generating the totality of your experience. Maybe your entire existence is nothing more than one amazingly coherent and well-coordinated hallucination. It's possible, right? I've wondered about it. I can't remember how

old I was, but I must have been six or seven because I remember what house I was living in, when all of a sudden, while I sat on the living room floor watching T.V., I thought, 'What if none of this is real? What if I'm not a little girl, with a poodle named 'Wiggles,' and a canopy bed? What if I'm *really* a disembodied space alien, the *only thing that ever existed* , and I got so *lonely* that I had some kind of break down and started to hallucinate everything - my mommy, my daddy, my doggy, my dolls, and *everything*? And what if after awhile I'll stop hallucinating and just be all by myself, floating in the dark, alone forever?"

At this point, some of my students were looking at me as though I'd dropped in from Mars. Among this group, not surprisingly, was Mr. Baseball Cap Partier. He was gaping at me, but I didn't care. I'm not weird. I'm eccentric. I continued. "Well, it didn't take long for me to freak myself out, so I went to the kitchen where my mom was making dinner. I didn't ask her if I was a disembodied space alien, of course, because I knew it didn't matter what she said. After all, if I was a disembodied space alien, my mom would be part of my hallucination and so any reassurance she might offer to the contrary would be empty. So I just made small talk with her and before long I felt better. But I realized, of course, that I *shouldn't* have felt better, that I hadn't solved the problem. I had only found a way to ignore it."

I dismissed the class, but Mr. Baseball Cap Partier lingered behind. "Did you *really* think that when you were six or seven years old?" he asked. "Yes," I unapologetically answered. And then he said something that changed my life forever. He said, "*So did !!* Only I made the mistake of telling my mother and I was in therapy for eight years." In that moment, everything separating that student from me was dissolved into our much deeper sameness. He was no longer someone opposed to me, but someone with whom I shared something important. He was no longer a student, but a person – someone here on this planet with me, muddling through the human experience as best he could with the resources he had, just as I muddle through as best I can with mine.

Remembering that has enabled me to see the abiding commonalities between my students and myself, and this has allowed me to relate to them differently. It's not that my students put off writing their papers. It's that we all - my students and I – are tempted to postpone unpleasant tasks and are often genuinely overwhelmed with too much to do in too little time. It's not that my students are too wedded to their smart phones. It's that we all – my students and I – are social beings who need connection, especially when we are far from home. It's not that my students are uninterested in my subject. It's that we all – my students and I – can feel disempowered by an extended conversation that systematically forces us to acknowledge the expertise of another while giving us very limited opportunity to talk about our own particular passions. Thanks to that fellow in the front row with the baseball cap, I've tried to remember that students aren't another species to be analyzed from the outside-in. They are fellow human beings to be understood from the inside-out. They aren't lazy while I am industrious. They aren't normal while I am eccentric. I'm weird. We're all weird. And some of my students are weird like me.

The Evolution of a Teacher

**Marty Loy, Dean of the College of Professional Studies;
Professor of Health Promotion
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Professor of Health Education**

It has been said that teachers undergo a metamorphosis of sorts, and that over time they evolve from novice or inexperienced into expert, sometimes called “master” teachers.

Throughout our careers, we have seen changes in our own teaching that we have categorized into four evolutionary archetypes called: The Sage, The Thinker, The Builder and The Master. We have seen ourselves in each of these characters and have learned that improvement is a dynamic process that spirals up and down on the evolutionary continuum.

We wish all teachers the best luck on their evolutionary journey.

The Sage

The sage walks into the classroom, proceeds to the front of the room, finds a comfortable position and begins to disseminate information. This teacher employs the long dominant lecture mode and is truly the “sage on the stage”. This mode of teaching is easy and non-threatening, and Sages are generally good at it and can hold the attention of their audience. Regardless of one’s skill, reflection is based on the teacher’s efforts, not on the learning experience of the students. The sage uses an occasional visual, overhead or Power point presentation, but the discourse remains teacher-centered. Teachers who are sages know their expertise better than any student and they enjoy power and the importance they gain through this approach. Meanwhile, students are passive recipients, taking dutiful notes, sleeping, or

skipping class because they know lectures mirror the textbook. Education is being done to these students, rather than providing them with a sense of ownership in the educational process. The learner is not given much consideration in this heavily teacher-centered approach.

We are not suggesting lectures are wrong, or educationally unsound. In fact, in the evolutionary process, lectures serve a definite purpose. New teachers often have a great deal of knowledge needing organization and quite often, the process of preparing lectures helps organize thoughts, builds confidence and actually facilitates teacher growth. We strongly believe that all teachers want to teach well, unfortunately, new teachers often teach as they were taught, or in ways that are safe which is usually heavily reliant on the lecture.

The Thinker

The Thinker begins to consider different approaches to teaching. This is not to say that teachers who are non-thinkers, but merely, that they are typically not thinking about the learning experience of their students. Thinkers have received feedback causing them to reflect on the methods of teaching they use in their classrooms. Thinkers have started to consider the impact of their efforts on student learning.

A teacher-thinker begins to question the merits of lecture, becomes aware of the issues related to student learning and realizes the classroom can become more student-centered. Thoughts of moving toward a student centered approach are intimidating because lecturing is comfortable, enjoyable, and a means of disseminating large amounts of content in a short period of time. Thinkers may wonder, “why change a comfortable, long-standing, time-tested way of disseminating information?” especially if they are good at delivering lectures.

The Builder

When thinkers try new approaches they begin to create student-centered classrooms. This step moves them from a thinker to a builder. Builders leave the comfort of the sage and the discomfort of the thinker and move into the domain of the third archetype, best described as controlled chaos. Builders accept an approach that is more student-centered with less personal control. Teachers who are builders find moving from passive learning to active learning both frightening and exciting. It is frightening to give up control and engage in spontaneous classroom interactions that may challenge the teachers' position as an expert. At the same time it is exciting to create a student-centered classroom because the teacher becomes a guide and learner as well.

Parker Palmer says that people engaged in teaching that is student centered as becoming aware of one's inwardness. For better or worse, students witness the conditions of Builders' souls as well as gain subject knowledge. Teaching in this way embraces the idea that "we teach who we are" and teaching is essentially a mirror to one's soul. Builders may have similar traits and qualities and in many cases may be very different from each other. Some may use a great deal of lecture, while others speak very little, some may stay close to their material and others' let loose their imaginations, some teach with a sense of motivation, while others use intimidation. The common thread connecting them with other builders is the fact that they have brought student learning into their teaching. In other words, they have embraced both subject matter and students.

Behaving as a builder, creating experiential opportunities and guided classrooms is hardly new to the world of education. John Dewey in 1902 wrote about the value of classroom interaction and placing students at the center of the learning experience.

Teaching in this way cannot be reduced to technique because an effective technique for one teacher may be completely ineffective and awkward in the hands of another. Builders choose from a wide variety of student-centered strategies such as: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, employment of case studies, and experiential learning. Students and teachers are involved in analysis, evaluation, synthesis, integration, perspective taking, internal dialogue, debate, making connections and posing questions. Intellectual discourse allows each student to grow from biases and perspectives found within a classroom of individuals all respected for what they bring to the learning environment.

The Master

Becoming “The Master” is a goal for anyone wanting to become a great teacher, but like many goals, becoming a Master is difficult to attain. Whether Builders try new techniques, or employ tried and true methods, they will have days where everything clicks and other days where nothing goes as planned. On the days where everything clicks, there is an almost magical feeling present in students and teachers that remains for a lifetime, these are moments of true mastery. However, for every magical day there are many days that, for a variety of reasons, may not go so well. Teachers may not be as organized as they should be, may be pre-occupied, or perhaps not comfortable with the strategy or technique. Students may not be prepared, disengaging, uninterested, preoccupied or simply absent. In teaching, hitting one’s stride and experiencing mastery in the learning exchange, take’s time.

It is our belief that the Master archetype is attainable, but not sustainable. In fact, teachers who believe they are “Masters” are in all likelihood delusional, retired or both. If you think you have arrived at this stage it is a sure indication that you have not...proceed to step one, you are back at the beginning.

