

Core Beliefs

“Skraba,” Mr. Mitch said in his gruff cigar-smoking voice, “you’re an idiot compared to your brother. But if you take my AP Calculus class next year and earn your ‘C’ - you’ll breeze through college math.” He then walked away, spoke with the next student, and left me to mull things over. I was shocked and pissed, but when I signed up for the following year’s classes a few days later, AP Calculus was at the top of my list.

Looking back on Mitch’s class, I am continuously amazed at how he put into practice what are now my core beliefs of education. The most effective teachers are the ones who genuinely care about their students’ wellbeing and success. By taking the time to get to know their students, teachers demonstrate that they care and will find the ways to communicate with each student. This allows for differentiated instruction, which increases student learning and sets the stage for success. Students take ownership of their education in classrooms that are safe and stimulating, and where they can create their own knowledge. Teachers should create these classrooms and model learning as a life-long process.

Mitch was an absolutely outstanding teacher. First of all, he took the time to get to know each student. By asking personal questions and listening to the answers, he showed that he not only cared about his students, but also found the means to communicate to each one. According to Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, and Choi (2011), “exemplary teachers each showed acute awareness of the importance of knowing

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and connecting with their students. They genuinely liked and cared about their students” (p. 117). I wouldn’t recommend comparing a student to his or her siblings, but Mitch knew me well enough to know that I would take it motivationally instead of insultingly. He was not belittling me, just getting my attention and establishing an expectation that was challenging and attainable. He helped me set a goal. Teachers, who genuinely care about their students’ well being, and not just their academic performance, will find ways to motivate their students. For the record, I earned a C+ in his class and not only did I breeze through college calculus, but the professor recommended me to enter the tutoring program. Thanks Mitch. I would not be writing this paper if it weren’t for you.

Not only did Mitch tailor his communication, but he also differentiated his instruction. Teachers that implement small group differentiated instruction in the classroom increase student achievement (Kosanavich, 2012). He was able to increase each student’s learning by altering his teaching strategies and the structure of the class. His class was segmented into lecture (direct instruction), group work (collaborative learning) and individual assignments (practice). In doing so, he reached more students across various learning styles and dedicated more resources to students who needed additional help.

Mitch created an environment that was safe and stimulating. Since fear kills learning and creativity, the classroom should encourage students to take intellectual risks without fear of criticism. Mitch avoided put-downs and put in place the

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structure to build student confidence. If a student had a question, he or she could turn to the group for help. If the group could not solve the problem then a representative opened the problem up to the class. Mitch never chastised and only got involved if his expertise was required. Not only did he encourage students to think independently and ask questions, but also helped them to construct the solutions themselves.

What was perhaps most striking about Mitch's class compared to other instructors was the amount of time and energy that went into group work. As lectures focused on knowledge and understanding, the group work allowed for collaborative learning and higher order thinking. Individuals fed on each other's learning. Groups had to apply the methods and analyze problems to determine ways to find the solution. When individuals and groups create their own knowledge learning has the most meaning and longevity (constructivism). The more that teachers can facilitate students' learning, the more students will make that knowledge their own and be motivated to learn. Mitch provided us with the facts and tools and then guided us to figure out how to use them. In this sense, teachers are guides of content, but more so, they are guides for life and learning.

Teachers should demonstrate that learning is a two-way street and a life-long process. When teachers listen to and respect students, it is more likely that knowledge and ideas will move in both directions. Modeling this process in the classroom is critical for individuals if they are to find the importance of contributing

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to and taking ownership of their education. Students will find greater joy in learning and see that it is a life-long process. Teachers reinforce this principal by reflecting upon their lessons and making adjustments. They continually develop their knowledge and skills and become better teachers. Parker Palmer (1997) writes about teachers teaching who they are: “As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together” (p. 1). In essence, teachers model how to be.

Everyone is capable of learning and succeeding if given the right relationships and environment. Students are more open to teachers who care about and take the time to get to know them. The ways in which we are open to communication differs as much as our motivations and interests, but shapes the way in which we learn and find success. By differentiating the means, teachers are more likely to help students define and reach success. Exemplary teachers like Mitch, challenge their students in just the right way so that they can succeed, but have to work for it. They create classrooms that are safe-havens for learning and encourage students to take intellectual risks. They help students to create their own knowledge and model that learning is a life-long process.

Gentry, M., Steenbergen-Hu, S., Choi, B. (2011). Student-Identified Exemplary Teachers: Insights From Talented Teachers. *Gifted Child Quarterly*. 55(2) 111–125

Kosanovich, M., & Center on, I. (2012). *Using "Instructional Routines" to Differentiate Instruction: A Guide for Teachers*. Center on Instruction.

Palmer, Parker. (1997) Excerpt from *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*.