



The dork with the chalk



Has anyone else noticed that teachers seem very unhappy? Why is it so? At base I

think it is a question of the respect and esteem in which teachers are held. And one of the most depressing causes of low esteem is that the profession itself, by which I mean all of us who work in education, has progressively articulated a role for teachers that sounds marginal and passive.

Look at a collection of first-year teachers. If you have been a teacher, remember how you felt when you were starting out. Didn't you feel fired up to make a difference, to intervene, to change the lives of young people? You were going to be the teacher they would remember, the one mentioned in the graduation speeches, the teacher they would write to years later expressing their gratitude. Now, apart from the fact that gratitude is a commodity in short supply, we have produced a definition of teaching that is so limited, it is hard to imagine a student being grateful for the attentions of a teacher who behaved as our theoretical and policy statements imply.

What imagery do we have from contemporary discussion of teaching? We hear that the teacher is now a resource person or a facilitator. Experts talk about the need for teachers to move from being the 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side'.

But teaching isn't like that. It is an interventionist profession.

Teachers are brain surgeons. They operate on the young brain to enable the entry of knowledge, conceptual understanding and skills. They change things for students, not by standing aside and letting them grow, but by the judicious use of the intellectual scalpel.

Teaching is like high-rise construction or mountain climbing or political direct action or downhill skiing. It is a big, bold, adventurous, dramatic, exciting profession. It is about knocking things over and putting up new things in their place, spilling blood, taking risks, making students anxious, excited, exposing them to failure and helping them succeed; in Michael Barber's words, 'making their heads spin'.

There's not much of that flavor in the way we talk about teaching now. Our current constructions of teaching position the teacher as the 'dork with the chalk' or the 'fraud at the board'. We have turned teaching into a Cheshire Cat. All of the substance and power and glamour of teaching have faded away in our discourse, leaving only a grin in the corner of the classroom. We have removed the dangerous, interventionist, downhill skiing brain surgeon from the classroom, and replaced her with a cipher. We should put that teacher back in the classroom. We should restore the idea of inspirational, powerful teaching conducted by an individual with strong ideas and a rich base of knowledge.

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