

Is the Great American Teacher Dead? Principles to Resurrect Meaningful, Effective, and Consciousness Raising Instruction



Citation

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Abstract

A couple of decades ago, a visiting anthropologist agreed with some U.S. authors that the American intellectual on university campuses is basically dead and his/her demise is reflected in the superficial, boring, and uninspiring content to which students are exposed. More recent evidence indicates that things have not changed very much. In this article, I attempt to provide ways in which the great American teacher can be resurrected through the use of meaningfulness, metacognition, Transformative Education, cultural introspection, cross-cultural exploration, brain research, Invitational Education, and the study of human universals extant in all cultures.

Around 360 BC, as night fell on an Athenian street, a dejected-looking young man was seen walking with his head down and sorrow in his eyes. His name was Demosthenes, and he had just failed yet again, in one of his many attempts at public speaking. A friend, walking behind, soon caught up to him and started a conversation. This friend was Satyrus, a highly regarded actor of the time. Satyrus, noting the gloomy countenance of his friend, inquired as to the cause of such a somber mood. Demosthenes then poured out his soul to Satyrus claiming that even drunkards and illiterate people were better speakers than he. To this Satyrus agreed! This brutal affirmation of Demosthenes' self-estimation, although stinging, was more than compensated by the advice that followed – advice that would initiate a process that would put Demosthenes on the intellectual map for millennia. Satyrus requested that Demosthenes recite a passage or two from Greek literature. This he did, and to his amazement, Satyrus enunciated the exact same words in a way that was more powerful and compelling. It seemed to Demosthenes that it could not really be the same passage. This experience convinced him of the overwhelming importance of *delivery* and set him on a speaking career that would bring him everlasting regard and put him on the intellectual map for millennia.

Public speaking and teaching are cousins. At the core of both is communication. The above story, found in the writings of the ancient biographer Plutarch (2001), illustrates the concept that education is more than just exposing people to the facts. It is an acquisitional process that without the proper delivery system, tends to fall flat. As calcium needs vitamin D to maximize its absorption, learning, as I will show, is enhanced by a teaching that is passionate, positive, inspiring, inviting,

meaningful, and transformative, addresses world problems, shifts paradigms, and attends to fragile self-concepts within its recipients.

So, what is the status of great teaching in the U.S. today? It is difficult to tell. Are many teachers walking that Athenian road with their heads down and gloom in their eyes? Are many walking that road with a self-assurance supported by years of positive feedback, informal and formal assessments, and heartening student outcomes? Or, quite possibly, are many walking that road with an unjustified spring in their step not realizing they have just bored their students to tears? These things are never easy to determine, and *measuring* exactly what constitutes great teaching seems to be the quintessential problematic issue in disputes between teachers, administrators, and politicians. It will likely remain unresolved for decades, if not centuries. The tangled web of human factors, in both the messenger and recipient, *may* make it impossible to *ever* resolve. However, the wearisome complexity of the issue does not prevent one from latching on to a passing hint every now and then about what might be right and what could be wrong in the educative realm.

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One such passing hint into the mysteries of the instructional universe might be the opinions of anthropologists. Having been an anthropology minor in college, I learned that it is kind of an axiom in the field that members of a particular culture can often be blind to the cultural tacit assumptions, the implicit messages, and the culturally created models of reality that often subconsciously manipulate their interpretations of reality. If one wants to see things more clearly, one must go to the *outsiders*. Anthropologists would generally claim that cultural outsiders are much better equipped to see the “obvious.” If that is truly the case, what might foreign anthropologists be saying about the U.S. educational system and its teaching?

Views from the Outside and the Inside

Coming to America

Italian anthropologist, E. L. Cerroni-Long (1993), spent time at an American university and came to the conclusion that American students were not very deep intellectually. She also found American students to be profoundly anti-intellectual in their attitudes. Having spent time in the former Soviet Union, Cerroni-Long was surprised to encounter the same sort of oppressive and ideologically rigid culture in American universities. She felt that U.S. universities were replete with competitiveness, lack of compassion, cultural casualties, and psychological insecurity. She believed that such conditions help foster a culture which, in some ways, more closely resembles a war zone rather than a supportive, inviting environment.

A Dutch anthropologist, Rik Pinxten (1993), who also studied the U.S. university system, implied that he agreed with some American thinkers at the time who felt that the American intellectual and intellectual discourse at universities was, for all intents and purposes, dead. He asserted that it was rare to find a real intellectual among university faculty. He felt that the characteristic professor in America seemed to take too much of a no-nonsense approach to knowledge dissemination, and the result was tremendous boredom. He asserted that the American university world is not the place where inspirational, deep, and awe-inspiring teaching can flourish.

Although neither Cerroni-Long nor Pinxten come right out and say that the actual mechanics of teaching were bad in the U.S., it would be hard to infer otherwise (at least in the broader sense), as their words, taken together, seem to impugn both the professors themselves *and* the products of their labors.

Closer to Home

Pinxten and Cerroni-Long find themselves somewhat supported in more recent times by some rather successful

publications on American educational challenges. Arum and Roksa (2011) studied more than 2300 undergraduates at 24 institutions. Their findings were that 45% of the students studied showed no significant improvement in complex reasoning, critical thinking, and writing from the time they entered college to the *end* of their sophomore years. These data were obtained through use of the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*; a standardized test. Cote and Allahar (2011) lament a high degree of student disengagement, lack of rigor, and a general devaluing of the powerful messages to be learned from the liberal arts. Bauerlein (2008) implied that teachers are abrogating their responsibility to be real educators. He asserts that current U.S. student culture, which can be academically incapacitated by high-tech social media, is replete with lack of motivation and inspiration. He maintains that student culture is a place where high-quality performance is very often found wanting. Hacker and Dreifus (2010) claim that poor teaching, even at the most elite institutions, is “a pervasive problem, if not a national disgrace” (p. 77).

These books, none without controversy, tend to indicate that the anthropologists speaking in the early 1990s may have been on to something that may be quite extant today.

Teachers on a Mission: Making Things Meaningful

One of the threads emerging from the above studies seems to be a considerable lack of depth and a concomitantly severe lack of inspiration. So, could it be that American teaching cadre is replete with boring and superficial ideologues? Well, even though the above judgments may be a tad harsh, my own experience in the American intellectual arena tells me that we teachers could at least do a little better in our deliveries, depth, and demeanors. Not only does a foreign anthropologist find teachers lacking a healthy dose of idealism, but I once heard William W. Purkey, a former professor, say, “The most important aspect of a teacher is to be a romantic.”

I was fortunate to have many inspiring professors where a sort of reasonable idealism was ever-present in their classroom pronouncements. Another, David E. Purpel (1989), criticizing the field of education, has written,

“The profession must begin with the perspective of hunger, war, poverty, or starvation as its starting point, rather than from the perspective of problems of textbook selection, teacher certification requirements, or discipline policies. If there is no serious connection between education and hunger, injustice, alienation, poverty, and war, then we are wasting our time, deluding each other, and breaking faith” (p. 106).

The above quotes seem to embody a zest for the educative realm seemingly more consistent with arenas other than classrooms. What they imply is that, metaphorically speaking, teachers should be “on a mission.” In this age of nuclear proliferation, genocide, terrorism, and suffering on massive scales, how could the essence of teaching divorce itself from these painful and pervasive realities? An internationally recognized expert on the human brain, John Medina (2008) claims that students remember meaning before details (Medina, 2008). This sense of meaningful engagement in a great cause can significantly contribute to the success potential of any undertaking. It can work many miracles of the mind, even in extreme circumstances. Anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) mentions how a major mental institution in France virtually emptied itself during the French Revolution as the patients found life suddenly imbued with a novel sense of meaning and purpose (and obviously also imbued with unawareness of the oncoming horror). Since no educators chose the profession to get rich, I assume meaning and purpose must have had something to do with it. It might behoove a few of our educators, especially those who have been here awhile (like me), to return once more to our youthful, ideological roots. Teachers should not fear to be a little more exciting, a little more courageous, a little more entertaining, a little more stimulating, and a little more inspiring. If one believes he or she is engaged in a great work, one’s comportment and bearing need to be proportionately reflective.

Purpose and Paradigms: The Need to Go Deep

Metacognition and the Great Teacher

As mentioned earlier, lack of depth seems to be an issue in criticisms leveled at U.S. teachers. In the book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain (2004) examines excellent teaching at the college level. Bain believes in the efficacy of *metacognition*, which he describes as *thinking about thinking*. A facet of metacognition involves the presentation of alternative paradigms to facilitate the student’s reflection upon his or her own models of reality, possibly raising him or her to new levels of consciousness. He basically says that the great ones inspire their students with attention-grabbing ideas, testing general assumptions, tackling captivating problems, and examining the paradigms that inform social reality. This claim is bolstered by Nilson (1998), who says that critical thinking in college students is best enhanced by dialogue concerning intriguing questions, exploring the unknowns, and new ways of looking at the world. Ivers (2005; 2007) believes that metacognition could be efficacious in cross-cultural instruction, not only in bringing much needed depth into the classroom, but also in aiding

students to question the numerous cultural paradigms that irrationally traumatize student self-concepts.

Transformative Education

In my opinion, a promising and compelling view of teaching is Transformative Education. This mode of learning is replete with deep, personal reflection; reflection that potentially pushes back the parameters of reality. Three highly respected experts in the field, Dirkx, Mezirow, and Cranton (2006), claim that great teaching should consider challenging the taken-for-granted, the established beliefs, and the widespread assumptions in a society. One should critically examine how some deceitfully axiomatic models of reality may manipulate his or her consciousness and shape personal viewpoints and how such viewpoints, most problematically, convert into questionable action. In the Dirkx, et al. (2006) article, the authors stated (in a quotation attributed to Dirkx) that a truly transformative learning experience is one where “we are left with the feeling that life will not be as it was before, that this experience has created a sense that we cannot go back to the way we were before the experience” (p. 132).

Cultural Self-Examination

A transformative approach to education is sorely needed because there is no doubt that almost all people in the world suffer, to one degree or another, from a form of “culture addiction.” Could it be that learning about diverse paradigms, besides adding depth to the curriculum, might have a positive effect upon the student’s ability to overcome personally destructive elements in his or her culture (Ivers, 2005; 2007)? Could it be that questioning the cultural self-evidence of things might facilitate students being able to better withstand the constant bombardment of culturally created false needs, irrationally based embarrassment, and socially induced insecurities (Ivers, 2005; 2007)? Every culture possesses a unique system of requirements for obtaining prestige and avoiding shame. However, with many people, the cultural *ought self* does not match up very well with the *actual self* (Wang & Ollendick, 2001). Some of these requirements, especially those in the materialistic realm, the physical attractiveness realm, and the dogmatic realm often enjoy virtually no consistency with the rational realm. As a result, people consequentially may suffer serious emotional discomfort originating in conceptual patterns of dubious origins.

Sigmund Freud showed how rules for feeling good are built into the child in each society (Becker, 1973). However, the artificiality and irrationality of some “cultural rules” often lead to disastrous personal circumstances. For example, schizophrenia, which is definitely associated with chemical imbalances, subsides more rapidly in some cultures rather

than others (Matsumoto, 1996). Also, a recent study showed that one's chance of becoming schizophrenic is more than doubled if one is born and raised in a large urban center rather than a rural area (Minkel, 2009). A study was conducted involving females' perceptions of the perfect body in both Spain and Mexico. The girls were of basically the same height, weight, and social class. The girls in Spain wanted smaller thighs and hips, and the girls in Mexico wanted larger thighs and hips (Toro et al., 2006). Anorexia is extremely uncommon in third-world living circumstances where people may actually be hungry (Matsumoto, 1996). Depression, which undoubtedly has a significant genetic component, is more common among Asian, African, and Hispanic Americans than Asians, Africans, and Hispanics, even though the genetics are very similar (Bean, Perry, & Bedell, 2001; Breslau & Chang, 2006). There are significantly different depression rates based on where one lives in Europe (Copeland et al., 2004). About a third of all older people in Amsterdam, Munich, Berlin, London, and Verona have signs of depression, whereas only about one in five have such signs in Dublin, Zaragoza, and Liverpool (Copeland et al., 2004). There is no doubt genetics account for some of these differences, but probably not all, especially between places like London and Liverpool. European Catholics also enjoy measurably lower depression than European Protestants (Copeland et al., 2004). Thus, significant interplay exists between biology and culture. Culture shares the stage with biology as two of the most powerful forces in the world. Could deeper educational experiences involving paradigms, advocated by many of the above instructional experts, enhance the likelihood a student could transcend (at least to a small degree) irrational and harmful cultural concepts that inform his or her world view?

Mining the Rich Cross-Cultural Landscape

Speaking of cultural differences, researchers have discovered a positive correlation between human achievement and being raised in an environment that is rich in cultural diversity. A researcher named Dean Simonton (1997) found that high achievers *tend* to come from larger cities that are culturally diverse or from small towns that are home to a great university. Culture consists of a huge multitude of paradigms that its adherents utilize to interpret the social reality that surrounds them. It could be that one's propensity to be a high achiever might be related to the more diverse paradigms one has at his or her disposal. It may be that every time a student is exposed to a different paradigm, new neural connections must be formed in the brain during the process of understanding it. Experts have often said that to comprehend new knowledge, one must somehow first link it to mental models already understood (Belth, 1977). These new neural

connections and the mental models they constitute will then be at the student's permanent disposal to assist in future acts of cognition (Ivers et al., 2008). In-class exploration of the deep recesses of our cultural worlds could serve students in a multitude of ways.

The Scientists and Psychologists Get Involved

Brain Research

According to scientific research, going deeply into the paradigmatic realm in teaching can have added benefits. Research on the human brain has found that continuing to engage the mind can assist in keeping it healthy similar to the way physical activity keeps the body healthy (Kennedy & Reese, 2007). Studies have shown fine tuning and enhancement of brain performance, in rats and humans, following complex learning experiences (Greenough, Black, & Wallace, 1993; Karni, et al., 1995). Darwin noted that the brains of wild animals, which had to struggle to survive in challenging circumstances, were 15-30% larger than the members of the same species who had been domesticated and lived a life of relative ease (Medina, 2008).

But how can students acquire these new paradigms in the first place? There are probably legions of teachers who exhibit considerable depth in their teaching but, inadvertently, leave their students behind wading barefoot in shallow waters. Well, to start out, research shows that one needs to grab students' attention at the very beginning of a lesson (Medina, 2008). As mentioned above, this might be achieved by calling attention to mysteries, great questions, new paradigms, telling an applicable story, etc. After attention is captured, one needs to maintain it by following what is known as the *Ten Minute Rule* which means that one needs to reboot the students' attention every 10 minutes or so by inserting something interesting, exciting, or engaging into the lesson (Medina, 2008). Learning improves significantly when lessons are enhanced with relevant stories and real-world examples (Medina, 2008). Most teachers need to use *a lot more*. Students should be afforded opportunities to review material covered very soon, maybe even while they are still in class. This reviewing might best be done in groups. In groups of three or four they can take turns teaching or quizzing each other. Research shows that memory is augmented if an event is reviewed immediately after it happens (Medina, 2008). Occasional group work in class may also be a way to bring about the variety necessary as required by the *Ten Minute Rule*.

Brain Research and Invitational Education Come Together

An often overlooked component of excellent teaching is that of the affective realm. Brain expert, Medina (2008), and

Invitational Education experts Purkey and Novak (1984), talk extensively on this. The acquisition of knowledge is profoundly impacted by the emotional environment in which it takes place (Medina, 2008; Purkey & Novak, 1984). A positive teacher-student relationship and the enhancement of a positive student self-concept are extremely important (Medina, 2008; Purkey & Novak, 1984). People do not learn or perform well if they do not feel emotionally safe (Medina, 2008; Purkey & Novak, 1984). The brain remembers the emotional components of an experience better than any other aspect (Medina, 2008).

It is not surprising that brain research and Invitational Education seem to go hand in hand concerning the pedagogical power of the emotive realm. Invitational Education attempts to create inviting, and therefore ideal, learning environments by emphasizing optimism, trust, caring, intentionality, and respect (International Alliance for Invitational Education, 2012). Research has shown that school principals who were inviting in their actions and policies were more trusted, respected, and judged to be more effective in carrying out their responsibilities (Asbill & Gonzalez, 2000). Also, the teachers under their supervision experienced higher job satisfaction (Asbill & Gonzalez, 2000). Conversely, teachers who maintained inviting and optimistic ambiances in their classrooms tended to receive higher ratings from their principals on teacher effectiveness (Cloer & Alexander, 1992). In one study, strategies based on the principles of Invitational Education were used to effectively reduce teacher burnout (Trent, 1997). Besides the obvious benefits to the students of more effective teachers and principals, Invitational Education will afford students a more positive self-concept and commitment to learning. For example, a group of 175 junior high school students who were exposed to Invitational Education in their schools did *not* experience a decrease in their *self-concept as learners* from 7th to 9th grade as predicted by earlier studies (Stanley & Purkey, 1994). Also, student commitment is apparently enhanced by classroom atmospheres where more humanistic values rule (Schmidt, 1992).

The importance of attending to the affective in educational settings is especially compelling in light of some recent findings. In the U.S., almost one in five college students is seriously considering suicide (Drum, et al., 2009). 45% of all college females and 36% of all college males feel so anxious and/or depressed that they find it difficult to function (Tartakovsky, 2012). In such dire cultural and educative circumstances, the significance of the principles of Invitational Education such as trust, optimism, respect, intentionality, and caring cannot be overstated.

All facets of teacher-student interactions with students should never escape personal scrutiny. As a teacher, it would not hurt to occasionally reflect upon one's preconceptions. For example, back in 1963, in a classic experiment, a group of students were given white rats to look after. Some were told that the rats they were working with were smart, and some were told that the rats they had were dumb. It was observed that the "smart" rats got much better treatment than the "dumb" rats (Rosenthal & Fode, 1963).

It is essential to keep a student's dignity and fragile self-concept always on one's radar for a multitude of reasons. Recent scholarship by Mario Martinez (2007), an expert in culture and health, has suggested that causing people to feel shame increases the production in their bodies of pro-inflammatory elements that lead to heart disease and strokes in the long run. Guilt also will produce these things but on a much lesser scale. Apparently, shame is the big one, and the damage can begin at a very young age. Classroom subcultures need to be developed that are rigorous, yet at the same time have the tendency to enhance one's self-actualization rather than detract from it. I know this not easy to do. However, the struggle for it should always occupy our thoughts. When teachers interact with students, their actions should embody the immortal words of Mark Twain when he said, "Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great."

What It Might Be

The Dynamics of Delivery

Medina (2008) puts it plainly and succinctly. He says, "We don't pay attention to boring things" (p. 71). Besides the examples, the stories, the Ten-Minute Rule, and the group reviewing, as teachers, it behooves us to work on our *deliveries*. In my opinion, a little intensity, a pinch of dynamism, a little inflection of the voice here and there will do a lot of good. This is consistent with enthusiasm, to a certain degree. Watson (2011) analyzed over 7400 teacher evaluations from undergraduates over a period of 4 years. His research showed that instructor enthusiasm accounted for almost 40% of the variation in student responses concerning whether or not the class afforded them new skills or knowledge.

From all the research I am sharing, it is obvious I consider teaching to be a science, but I think it is also an art form. Every time a teacher walks into a classroom he or she should take their craft as seriously as a Shakespearean actor entering the stage.

Human Universals and Great Teaching

There are some inherent qualities in human nature that go beyond often capricious cultural paradigms. Many *universal elements* permeate *all cultures* and leave their mark on the emotional and cognitive fabric of our lives. Knowledge of some of these elements can be instructive in the art of teaching. Steven Pinker (2002), in his book *The Blank Slate*, includes a rather exhaustive list, generated by researcher Donald Brown, of these *human universals*. A very small number that I picked out of the great multitude are as follows (any comments in parentheses are mine). *As one goes through these, it is instructive to reflect on how they might relate to great teaching.*

- Abstraction in speech and thought (go deep)
- Aesthetics (a good delivery)
- Concept of Fairness
- Concern for self-image (enhance the feeling of security and a positive self-concept in one's students)
- Dance (the teacher moving around the classroom and making gestures might be helpful)
- Empathy
- Generosity admired (be fair, not a tyrant)
- Imagery (importance of examples and stories cannot be overstated)
- Jokes (keeping attention through humor is good)
- Marking at phonemic, syntactic, and lexical level (a good delivery)
- Prestige from proficient use of language
- Metaphor (maybe the essence of thinking itself – see Belth (1977))
- Play
- Poetry/Rhetoric (a good delivery)
- Poetic lines demarcated by pauses (a good delivery)
- Rhythm (a good delivery)
- Special speech for special occasions
- Symbolic speech

Maybe these cross-cultural universals, deeply embedded in one's psyche, immediately generate recognition of great teaching even though one's exposure to the great teacher might be *extremely limited*; and the words *extremely limited* here, are not just a figure of speech. In his book *Blink*, author Malcolm Gladwell (2005) makes the case that humans often make hefty judgments in almost a snap of the fingers. One of many studies he proffers is one where a psychologist by the name of Nalini Ambady asked students to rate the effectiveness of teachers after viewing just *two seconds each* of three silent videotapes. She discovered that the ratings

were remarkably similar to the ratings given the teachers by students who had sat in their classes *the whole semester!*

A Feeble Try

As teachers attempt to implement this very artistic science, there is no doubt that, at times, they can act in ways that have the potential to both enhance and stifle the acquisition of the material and the excitement of learning. There has obviously been a lot of research on good teaching. Even though it is difficult to quantify, some common threads can be found throughout the research. There is so much to cover, of course, that I can only review a disappointingly small part of it all. However, I will be unadvisedly audacious and proffer my own list of the elements of great teaching. In all humility, I need to say that the following is an “unimpeachably *unauthoritative*” list concerning what *might* be the ten most important elements in good teaching. I have created the list by selectively taking bits and pieces from some of the literature (Bain, 2004; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Hanna & McGill, 1990; Medina, 2008; Pinker, 2002; Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purpel, 1989; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011; Weimer, 1990). Some will, of course, dovetail into others. They are not necessarily in order of importance. The following assumes adequate lesson planning and instructor competence in the subject matter.

1. Positive teacher-student relationship
2. A good “delivery”
3. Edifies rather than damages a student’s self-concept
4. Clarity (through the use of *many* examples and stories)
5. Encourages deep and critical thinking
6. Variety instead of monotony (do not forget the Ten-Minute Rule)
7. Grading and workload is generally perceived to be fair
8. Enthusiasm and zest for the topic
9. Meaningful to real world problems
10. Potentially transforms one’s world view from one of uncritical acceptance of cultural dictates to one of deep, reflective, and compassionate thinking

Conclusion

Some of my friends who have served in the military have informed me that they were taught that if one wants to complete the mission, the first order of business is *to take care of the troops*. If one takes care of the troops, the mission will have the best chance of success. If we take care of our students, our mission of educating them will be greatly facilitated. Even though we may never be able to perfectly

quantify good teaching, if we do our best to align ourselves with the principles of sound instruction such as meaningfulness, metacognition, Transformative Education, cultural introspection, cross-cultural exploration, brain

research, Invitational Education, and human universals, we will, at least, be doing our best to take care of our students as they march off to engage the many hostilities and challenges of life.

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