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## What Makes a Great Teacher?-Some Questions and Answers

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# The Weekly Reader

*Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC*

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## What Makes a Great Teacher?—Some Questions and Answers

Even though I still have some responses from Facebook friends about the effect college teachers had on them, I will refrain from running a third Tom Sawyer column, where I make my friends do my whitewashing for me. I thought about reflecting on their comments, but I think I will let them speak for themselves, after saying that I was surprised but pleased that almost all of the responses were about positive effects of teachers. Sometimes it seems that we are hard-wired for the negative, so it was heartening to see that people recalled positive comments as the first thing that popped into their heads.

For the past few years, I have been invited to the first meeting of new faculty orientation. I get to tell our new faculty about the Teaching and Learning Center, what we offer, and how they can contribute their talents too. But rather than just do an informational session and an advertisement, I always begin with this

question: “Who was your best teacher ever, and why.”

I ask for volunteers who want to share their responses. The answers are all over the board, from a kindergarten teacher who nurtured a shy but talented student, to a 7<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher who lit a fire in a student’s mind and set her on a course to a PhD in math, to a band director who taught a student about creativity and discipline, to a coach who brought out the competitive fire in a person who was not that great an athlete.

What strikes me is that, over and over, very few of the immediate responses about best teacher ever involve college teachers. In the four or so years I have been asking that question, college teachers are usually mentioned by only three or four people. I always ask how many named a college teacher because I want to make a point. (This year, though, nearly half cited a college

teacher, so our newest faculty are either anomalous or signs of a new trend.)

I’m sure there are a number of good explanations for my findings, aside from an unscientific nature and small sample size. First, I think our formative years provide us with the deepest memories and the closest emotional and cognitive connections, so we are more apt to think of a teacher from our earlier years. Also, I suspect that for many of us, our love of learning burned brighter in those early years: the grind of year after year of education tends to quell that spark that almost all kids have, but many lose along the way.

Even so, I see no reason why we as college teachers cannot be high on a student’s “best of” list. I know from my interactions with colleagues and from observations of their teaching and from discussions with students that we have many

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teaching stars at Winthrop.

What makes a great teacher? The question is too open-ended and too complex to be answered in this short space. Oddly enough, that question was on the cover of *Parade* recently, the August 3, 2014 edition. I don’t usually expect to get material for a column from that source, but you never know.

The cover article by Elizabeth Green comes from her book *Building a Better Teacher*, published last month by Norton. She researched what makes a great teacher: “one whose classroom is inspiring, exciting, imaginative.” She discounts the myth of the “natural-born teacher,” finding that teachers come in all personality types and with all sorts of approaches:

“Researchers have found that the most effective teachers can be extroverts—or they can just as easily be introverts. Some are humorous, but others are serious. Some are as flexible as rubber; others are as rigid as a ruler.” She concludes, “It’s not personality that makes a teacher great, but a specialized body of knowledge that must be learned—and that often goes against what comes

naturally.”

Green lists five examples of what great teachers do differently, based on the research of a number of people:

**1. They can right a wrong.** A math test for teachers, not students, from the school of education at the University of Michigan tested teachers for their ability to understand why students were wrong and for their ability to teach students the right way.

**2. They never say “Shhh!”** Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion*, calls such a command ambiguous. The best teachers respond to misbehavior with specificity.

**3. They encourage deeper thinking.** James Stigler studied American and Japanese math classrooms to find out why Japanese students score higher on standardized tests. He found that Japanese teachers ask more “why?” and “how?” questions than American teachers, who generally ask more “what?” questions.

**4. They “cold call”—with purpose.** Lemov advocates “cold calling” students to make sure they stay engaged. One

good strategy is to say the student’s name at the end of the question: that makes the other students stay alert to the possibility they may be called on rather than relaxing as soon as they hear Ethel’s or Fred’s name called.

**5. They show more than they tell.** Great teachers model the thinking that underlies complex tasks, making thinking visible.

I think we can come up with more examples, but that list is a good start...

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Watch for a call for papers and presentations for our Second Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015, on the Winthrop campus. This year we are inviting colleagues at area colleges and universities for a full day’s focus on teaching and learning issues and strategies. A conference fee will cover a continental breakfast, a buffet luncheon, a keynote speaker, and conference materials. The call is coming soon, but mark the date!

## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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## Thought For the Week

"None of us can have as many virtues as the fountain-pen, or half its cussedness; but we can try."  
--Mark Twain