Parker Palmer’s Message on The Art of Good Teaching

A summary and adaptation by

Michel Wattiaux
Dairy Science Department

The essence of good teaching

Good teaching is hard to define. It may be best to express the elements of good teaching in metaphors that invoke the imagination. Thus, Parker Palmer tells us that good teaching is akin to weaving a fabric of connectedness between student, teacher and subject. The weaving cannot take place without a loom. The teacher is the loom on which the fabric is woven. The loom itself is a work in progress: to make oneself available, teachers need “inner work”. Good teaching is not about doing “the right move”, but rather it demands that I, as a teacher, question myself. How am I holding my knowledge?

• as a sword (to threaten the other),
• as a wall (to protect myself from the other),
• as a tower (to feel superior relative to the other),

or,

• as a bridge (to reach out to the other),
• as a loom (on which good teaching can be built!).

Good teaching is not about good techniques. This doesn’t mean that techniques are irrelevant. Techniques should be used to reveal rather than conceal the teacher’s identity and integrity. Gaining self-awareness of one’s own identity and integrity demands “inner working.”

In more than 30 years of trying to understand what is good teaching, Palmer never found a technique that worked across the board. However, what he found to be surprisingly consistent is the ability of the students to perceive the authenticity of the teacher’s intents.

Students can define very easily “bad teaching”. It occurs when a teacher is perceived as a cartoon character talking out into a bubble. Bad teaching occurs when there is a disconnection between the person who speaks and what is being said, that is when there is a lack of authenticity. On the other hand students have more difficulty defining good teaching. A good teacher connects the students to the subject matter. This connection cannot be done without the teacher’s full commitment to the process. The weaving of a fabric of connectedness comes in a myriad of ways.

How do you know if “connection” is taking place in the class? Pay attention and look for sign of “community formation”. Once the capacity for connectedness has been opened, students become more willing to work with the subject matter, other students and the teacher. Palmer warns us that this sense of “community” or of “connectedness” in the class may or may not have anything to do with a group of students working together in one place at one time. In short, “team” activity may or may not be a sign of connection. Using team-work as a classroom technique may hamper rather than enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

Then, if one cannot enforce good teaching with techniques, how does one become a “good” teacher? In essence, Palmer suggests that one has to work “within” to find one’s own identity and integrity. Once you know where you stand as an educator, what to do in the classroom becomes more “natural.” The following three pedagogical examples may help in understanding Palmer’s message.
Example 1: Medial school teaching
In this example, Palmer explained an approach that has been proposed as an alternative to “traditional” medical school curriculum.

In a traditional medical school curriculum, students study anatomy (with a skeleton, right in the class), and other “basic” and “compartmentalized” disciplines first. They do not get in contact with a “life” patient until the third year. This educational system has led to the training of doctors who have lost (or never gained) the ability to see the whole person in front of them. Instead, the misled practitioner sees a patient as bones and organs that need fixing. Thus, a critiques of the traditional competitive system of education is that the science and the “objectivization” of data and information has taken away from the students what made them come to medical school at the first place: a compassion for the patient.

Another critique of the traditional system is that it fails to help students in becoming life long learners. Traditional education does not provide students with a solid foundation on how to keep up with advances in medical sciences.

To address these shortcomings, an Ontario medical school tried to create a learning environment in which mentor, students and patients are together from day 1 of medical school. Although the traditional system does not value what the students bring to the table, the Canadian model created a context in which students generated their own questions and sought “deep” answers by tapping in the knowledge available in specific discipline as needed (see Figure below.) In addition, this model lay the foundation for life-long learning.

Unfortunately, some will say, this model is labor intensive and costly. But it represents an alternative with which we ought to work. How can we (teachers, students and administrators) work together “to institutionalize” components of this model in our curriculum?

Example 2: The stubborn teacher
This is the story of a teacher who started the semester with readings and other assignments meant to prepare students for class discussion. When the first discussion session came about, none of the students were prepared (surprise - surprise!). As the stubborn teacher tried to launch the discussion and asked her first question, not surprisingly, it remained unanswered and silence felt into the classroom. The teacher kept silent to everybody’s surprise. Students became agitated, but could not decide what to do. None dared say a thing! After a few minutes of what appeared to last for hours, the stubborn teacher got up. With no frustration nor anger, and no other emotional tension, the stubborn teacher, which by now had turned into a frightening “God-like” figure simply dismissed the class. She left the classroom leaving bewildered students behind. The story goes that the students did stay in the classroom for a while, stunned, not knowing, not understanding, but just recovering from what had just happened.

Next class, the students came a little better prepared. Class discussion went on for about 20 minutes. Students ran out of ideas and again the stubborn teacher dismissed the class early.

The power of this teacher was in her ability to hold a very tense environment (complete silence in the class) and then, let go without anger or tension. This was her way to make it clear to the students that they had to be responsible for their own learning. “If you don’t do your share, I won’t share with you neither”, is what the silence really meant.
Example 3: The brilliant lecturer
He was a shy man, but passionate about his area of expertise. He could have filled lectures with boring numbers, dates, fact and figures. Instead, his lectures were mesmerizing because he could “create the story” of historical social events during class. His stories resonated so well with students. He hardly had time to answer questions during his lectures. When a student would ask a question, he’d say: “I’ll come back to this in a moment”. Sometimes he did and sometimes not depending on where the story he was enfolding was leading him. Sometimes, he got so involved that he would stand in one place, present an argument and then moves a few step aside only to look at the space he just vacated and counter-argue the point he himself made only a moment ago.

His lectures left students in their seats as an audience of a great theatric performance. Were they inactive? No, the mind is a connecting organ. And the brilliant lecturer was able to capture the mind of his audience.

Thus, this story illustrates how an instructor who is deeply engaged in his subject matter may be able to create a deep connection with the students in a very traditional teaching method: the lecture.

The morale of these stories:
- Good teaching comes in many shapes and forms; the ability to connect comes in many shapes and forms.
- Good teachers are authentic; they are “real.” They are not like characters in a cartoon.

The reality of our academic world:
“Pedagogical reductionisms” threatens the two teachers described above.

Not all students might have welcomed and appreciated either of the teaching style described above. What kind of student evaluation did the two teachers get today? How many students recognize them as excellent teachers at the time? How many ever realize at all that these were great teachers? And for those who did realize, how long did it take and what made them come to that realization?

Similarly our institutions might not welcome the types of teachers described above. How are they using tax-payers money? How will they be rated by their peers? If on tenure-track, how would such teaching be perceived by a tenure committee?

Where am I as a teacher and where do I go from here?
We know now that good teaching is not only about technique nor is it about “doing what ever you want or whatever feels right.” So what is the “right” thing to do? How do I choose and use a technique that works for me as a teacher? As I discover my gift as a teacher and try to translate it into a capacity for connectedness, how do I find out whether I am on the right road? Is there a litmus test? What are the standards, the benchmarks, the underlying principles we should be looking for? Palmer gives us some pointers:

1- Emotions are intertwined with, if not inseparable from cognition. Our educational system has divided the “cognitive” world from the “emotional” world. In higher education, faculty is in charge of the cognition and “campus services” is in charge of “touchy feelings stuffs.” Yet, put it simply, love animates the mind while fear turns the rational mind off (see “Emotion and Cognition” below). If our interest is to serve the learner, we cannot separate these two worlds. How do we fight this

Emotion and Cognition, an example
For many years young girls were assumed to have less ability to study math than boys because it was assumed to be a gender difference. In fact research has shown that the difference could be explained in part because the educational system in place instilled a sense of insecurity, fear and inadequateness in young girls in their math classes.
disconnection? To what extent should “emotions” be introduced back in the classroom? Are our institutions missing the point? How do we account for this principle in our daily teaching?

2- **All together, we are smarter than any one alone.** “The mind of the gathered group”, as referred to by Palmer, allows for individuals in the group to benefit from the learning power of the group (see sidebar story).

3- **Create a context.** Teaching styles that appeal to human brain’s strongest function will have more impact. The weakest human brain function is to remember. The brain’s strongest function is to collect and integrate interrelated information and data that make sense. Without a context, data don’t make sense. Without a context, a teacher’s message is lost. Without a context, the subject matter is less relevant. **The context is what allows us to define what we do, how we do it and for what purpose.**

4- **Tap on vivid areas/issues that are morally compelling to students.** Professors rarely tell students why they care about the subject they teach! Most of us went into teaching because we “love it.” Unfortunately, we forget to share that passion with our students. Again let us use a medical school example. Medical students have the patient’s health at the heart of their future profession. Yet most medical schools do not offer the students with the opportunity to maintain, let alone to grow”, their initial passion. Yet it can make a difference. A comparative study showed that students who did 2 hr per week of service learning in the community performed better in the academic portion of their classes despite the “extra” time commitment.

**Final thoughts:**
Our academic environment is one of objectivity. This yearning for objectivity has lead to a culture of disconnection. Teaching has suffered from this culture. Yet, there is an increasing number of scientists who are very interested in teaching issues and who are not afraid of questioning the dogma of our teachings. These people have learned to swim up stream in our academic world!

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**The mind of the group helps individual group members: The Berkley Researcher story**

A Berkley math teacher found out, as many before him, that race appeared to be a factor in the ranking of his students. Asian students performed consistently at the top, Caucasian in the middle and African-Americans at the bottom of the class. The faculty was not willing to accept the traditional “race” argument that says that Asians are “genetically wired” to be excellent in math and African-Americans lack math abilities at the other extreme of the spectrum.

The Berkley professor took a year off to study this problem. He spent a lot of his time mingling with students in and out of classes. What he found out was that the level of understanding of class material was identical in the three groups at the end of class time. No differences. However, what he also found out was that after the class was over, Asian students would tend to talk to each other about their math, as some of the Caucasian did, but not the African-Americans. African-Americans followed their tradition of not talking about academic issues to each other outside the class.

Eventually the Berkley researcher was able to prove that (group) work outside the class is what is needed help students of all races to achieve a higher level of performance in his math class.
This document was an effort to capture Parker Palmer’s messages during the lecture that he presented on Nov. 29, 2001 on our campus at the invitation of CCLE.