

On Joyous Teaching...

By Catherine L. Belcher, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

Happiness and pleasure on Saturday - they come with sunlight, beach runs, good friends and long dinners. But joy, joy resides exclusively in Room 31.

(Caroline, second year teacher, Los Angeles, Calif.)

I have been much absorbed lately with thoughts of the great and unforgettable pedagogues I have known. You likely hold a similar cast of characters in your mind: the all-knowing, sly 4th grade teacher, the ecstatic history buff, the kind, wise woman who made you feel safe while she magically taught you math, the incredibly enthusiastic first year teacher who had so much to learn, but whose energy was absolutely contagious, the one who believed you could do it when you thought you couldn't, the English teacher who introduced you to Jane Austen and made it matter, the gifted artist who taught you to stand on stage and shine, the one who made you want to be a teacher.

I find that these days I can't stop thinking about them – probably because I have become a teacher of teachers and after a few years am starting to come to some understanding about what that really means. The weight of it is both welcome (I *want* this to be vitally important) and daunting. Because being a teacher of teachers in 2010 requires an understanding that while the teaching profession has always faced challenges to its professional standing (“you only work 9 months a year,” “those who can't do, teach”), nothing in the past compares to the current deskilling, “technicizing” and, frankly, overt debasing of teachers. And I can see this in my students' eyes. When so much genuine enthusiasm hits such a hard, immobile wall, it gives one pause.

So, in working to put together my thoughts, and in honor of a too soon departed, joyous former classmate, I think of why I became a teacher, why I became an education professor, and of

those who inspired me to work in education. I've thought a lot about the expertise of the teachers I have known, of their exceptional caring, of the years of experience. Mostly, though, I find myself thinking about the joy they showed for their work. In each of these teachers there lived an energy, a creative spirit that pervaded their efforts – a spirit I fear we are ultimately losing to scripted curriculums and standardization. The joy in educational work is leaving us, and with it, I fear the best and brightest will leave as well; either that, or they'll never come at all.

Deciding how I feel about the situation, and how it lives in my professional life, where I am positioned to serve as both advocate and critical eye, is proving a struggle. Often, I am uncomfortable with where I land.

I hold the distinct privilege of working with both preservice and novice (first and second year) teachers in urban Los Angeles. The majority are Teach for America students, which, for the purposes of this essay, only serves to provide a sense of their age (so young!) and level of perseverance (extraordinarily high). Others are traditional teacher education students working towards credentials and master degrees. I worry about all of them. Their energy, love, determination, and intellectual capacity, which should be welcomed and nurtured, are instead constantly stifled, most often *not* by the children and difficult working conditions under which they function. Those who elect to teach in today's urban classrooms expect to face complex challenges. They don't necessarily expect their joy and desire for the work to be extracted from them, quite painfully, by external entities who claim to support education and students of color. Namely (but not always and not solely), school boards, NCLB proponents, overtaxed administrators focused on test scores and standards, and burned out teachers who probably should never have

worked in education in the first place.

In class, we spend a great deal of time considering all that is “wrong” with our current public education system, constantly unpacking poverty, racism, inequality and the like in classes based in critical pedagogy, practitioner research, and sociocultural analysis. Given their high stress teaching placements, I find myself a cheerleader of sorts, advocating for optimism. Teachers can be intellectuals! Teachers can conduct their own classroom research that both helps them become better practitioners and informs the field! Teachers are professionals who can progress in their work and contribute to their workplace as leaders! Teachers can help kids grow to become critical thinkers and skilled, savvy students! Teachers are advocates for social justice! Teachers are role models! It is head-rush inducing, exciting, exhausting work.

I am beginning to wonder, though, if the divide between what I want for them and the current reality of the profession is growing too wide to reconcile. After all, the particular vision of teachers and teaching I advocate is not measurable through a standardized test. I am likely proving more hopeful than real, and if that is the case, then perhaps I need to take a more honest approach with my students. However, I don't want to lose the joy, energy, and hope we share, especially since those can prove difficult to find.

Complicating the issue further, I find I am hitting a wall as well, one quite familiar to professors, established by academia. While I teach at an institution that values teaching, it is clear that I need to be getting on with other things (publishing, serving on committees). I accept the fact that I was well aware of academia's publish or perish traditions long before I became a professor, but I posit that schools of education should serve as stronger advocates for the space teaching occupies in our

careers. We are, after all, the teachers of teachers and it is time, I believe, to talk more deeply about what that truly means. Certainly, we must advocate for teaching that moves beyond traditional boundaries, that creates a classroom space where, in the words of bell hooks, we bear “witness to education as the practice of freedom” (1994, p. 11). Such teaching, based in critical pedagogy and a “quality of care” (p. 194), requires passion, dedication, and love. Hopefully, these characteristics abound in the teachers we teach, but how will we know if we do not take the journey ourselves, collaborating and reflecting with them as colleagues in the process?

The best teaching classrooms, at all levels, function as communities, as shared group experiences where co-created learning takes place. In these spaces, professors engage in the very type of teaching they espouse to their students, allowing for both an equal exchange of ideas, and grounding in the “real” world. Again, bell hooks:

To the extent that professors bring this passion [uniting theory and practice], which has to be fundamentally rooted in a love for ideas we are able to inspire, the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears. (p. 195)

Such pedagogy is hard work and, much as good research, it takes *time*. It requires constant reflection and emotional energy not necessarily recognized or awarded by academia (or public schools for that matter). I’d like to imagine, though, that if university teacher education programs became loud advocates, and highly visible exemplars of break-the-mold teaching, that somehow we might break open the ever-narrowing vision of what “teaching” means. For in the end, if we, at the university level, can’t manage to shift the teaching paradigm at our own institutions, how can we continue to expect it of our students?

I occasionally share my frustrations in class, and find that my students’

energy and devotion to their students serves as my exemplar. In the end, my students set me straight. They may hit their own walls, but while that steals their energy, it does not diminish their dedication to their students. My students’ joy in this regard is, thankfully, contagious. I asked my class of second year teachers to write to me about what “joyous teaching” meant to them, and they did so with gracious enthusiasm. Some answers reflected their exhaustion: “If I had to define joyous teaching it would probably be related to the idea of exhaling at some point throughout my day” (Jessica). Other responses reflected their depth of concern: “I would say my most joyous teaching moments come when my students get into something in a deeply emotional way” (Devin). Another reframed the question (and rightly so): “. . . but the infectious nature of joyous *learning* is what makes teaching a joy for me . . .” (Nick). A different student very simply stated, “I am learning to appreciate where they come from (Why do they yell? Why are they angry?). When I know them I learn to love them. When I learn to love them, I love to teach them” (Britt).

If we truly believe in social justice in education, at all levels, we must advocate for the space and time to allow such teacher growth to happen. I believe this begins in a fundamental determination to not forget the gifts our best teachers gave us, and to grow those in both our students and ourselves; and to decide that when we hit the wall, to hit it loudly and forcefully, in the full conviction that someday soon, it will indeed fall.

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REFERENCE

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