

The Teacher as a Leader and Mentor

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Abstract

Teachers have great influence on the students they see each day. The responsibilities and the associated influence are great and involve such things as grades, ethics, fostering learning, mentoring, and other facets of student's lives. Students ask that teachers have character, competence and compassion in dealing with everyday classroom situations. They expect to be treated as adults, and to be respected as they respect the teachers. This relationship, based upon respect, places the teacher in a position of power, and with this power comes the responsibility to exercise the power fairly.

Inherent in this discussion is the fact that teachers are now leaders and mentors of their students. Some would say that this is not the place of a teacher at the University; others understand that this is a natural extension of the position called teacher. It is necessary for teachers to establish standards, standards used in assessment of both the course and the students. It is important that teachers make the classroom a place that provides the optimum learning environment. To some the responsibilities of the job of teacher are already overwhelming.

This paper will address aspects of the teacher as a leader, the teacher as a mentor, and the teacher in the role of friend and counselor when necessary. It is important that teachers determine who they are as teachers and where they are going as they develop the skills of students necessary for success in the professional world. Teachers are in fact the leaders that students meet today so that they may prepare themselves for employment in their future. Although some believe that this influence is excessive, it is in fact real. How teachers teach students to survive in college will help them survive after graduation.

Introduction

Watch carefully. Listen intently. The sights you may see and the sounds you may hear are teachers abdicating their roles as leaders in the classroom. Discussions and concerns over the "power" of the teacher and the adjudication of that power in the classroom echo from educational meetings. Concern over the power of the syllabus, the exams, the grades, and the rights of a teacher to impose standards on the students and the concern that this power detracts from student learning and adversely impacts on student evaluations of teachers is of constant concern. Some teachers protest that they are not leaders and that their job is to enlighten young minds by revealing the world through critical thinking and development of creative thought. Watch and listen, it is around all of us; the movement away from classroom leadership.

In her presentation "Reflections on Power: Changing How We Use Our Power in the Classroom"¹, Heather W. Hackman provided a thought piece about power and its tie to the

classroom. What is it that teachers are allowed to do? What should they be doing? How can they harness this power, or give it up to make learning more acceptable to the students? The questions beg the answer: Be a leader!

The word "lead" slips into Jim Stice's piece, "Habits of Highly Effective Teachers"²; however, it is doubtful that it was a slip. Along with "lead" were other "leadership" words and phrases like respect, motivate, honesty, dedication, passion, energize, model, objectives and problem-solving to mention a few. These words encourage teachers to be leaders and leaders have power. Teachers have power of position but not all teachers are leaders. So what do teachers need to do to harness the power to be leaders? Should they harness that power?

Students want their teachers to be of good character, competent in their role as a teacher and connected to them as students, all traits of a leader³. Another set of words, provided by the students, that characterize this leadership match some of the words in the Stice piece: honest, compassionate, enthusiastic, prepared, competent and integrity to mention a few. This overlap is a result of the fact that leadership is influence⁴ and teachers spend their entire lives influencing the lives of their students. It is from this premise that this paper presents the teacher as leader, mentor and friend/counselor.

Leader

Who is in control of the classroom? Who is in control of the course? Is it the student? Is it the teacher? Ultimately, it is the teacher that is expected to lead the course and the classroom. The leader is the one who influences the action. It is the leader who establishes the climate and provides an environment for learning. Each of these requirements falls directly on the shoulders of the teacher. The teacher is the leader.

The teacher must develop the expectations for the course, expectations that can be reasonably met by the students. The teacher should provide feedback so that the students understand the standard against which they are evaluated and to assist the learning process. The good leader provides praise for those who deserve praise. Other feedback should be of a constructive nature to facilitate learning.

In the development of student expectations the teacher should develop a plan and provide the plan to the students. Students will welcome the organization of a plan, will understand that the plan required considerable work, and recognize the teacher as a leader. With expectations in hand the students will now be able to follow the teacher through the course and will do so eagerly because of the predictability of their leader. Predictability here means that the leader describes what is ahead, and in large measure, follows the plan. Lowman⁵ indicates that predictability is a characteristic most sought after by students and that teachers who fail in this area find their job to be difficult.

Leadership requires a series of actions so that teaching elements are properly put in place. These actions include the development of a plan, practicing the plan, testing the plan, reviewing the test results, and making a new plan. This evaluation process mirrors that of the military, of major sports programs, and is the basis of every successful business venture.

Contact between the students and the teacher must be established and reaffirmed as often as possible to provide a communication link for feedback. Feedback normally travels from the teacher to student. The best teachers recognize that feedback should be a two-way process. Information received from the students, both verbal and nonverbal, provide valuable information in assessing teaching and making the new plans.

The teacher as a leader influences the future of the class. A teacher who chooses not to be a leader also influences the class. All teachers have influence. All teachers are leaders. The only choice is whether to be a good leader or to abdicate the responsibility of leadership. Knowing the responsibilities of the teacher as leader and creating an environment that facilitates learning are important steps in becoming a good leader.

Mentor

To mentor students is to help them move to the next level. In every academic institution students arrive with varying levels of preparation for academics and life. The "Seven Principals for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education"⁶ start with student-faculty contact. Within this principle is advisement about the career or major of one's students. There are formal and informal contacts such as students visiting the office, extracurricular activities, professional meetings, and formal mentorship programs. In each of these areas of possible contact it is important that the teacher understand the responsibilities inherent in being in leader.

Students who seek mentors are looking for direction and for help in charting their future course. Teachers are asked what lies ahead, and it is the teacher's experience that provides the answer. Often, it will be necessary to provide feedback as a result of actions taken by the student. In a mentoring relationship this feedback may need to be brutally honest in order to help the student move forward. Teachers, especially leader teachers, must understand their responsibilities when helping the students. One of the primary responsibilities is to lead by example in every contact with students. The best way to mentor students is to provide an example that is professional and easily followed.

Mentoring continues even after students' graduate. Faculty often find that contacts with former students become more frequent as the students move into their first jobs. This form of mentoring can be the most exciting and provide exceptional feedback to the faculty. As the mentoring process continues, the graduate provides information about the application of the preparation received in school. Continued mentoring often provides jobs to students graduating in future years. This type of networking, networking based upon mentoring, is obvious at many prestigious universities.

The teacher as mentor has enormous responsibilities that include providing information about careers or majors, providing a place for students to "experience" the professional life that is ahead of them, and to provide a model of professionalism at all times. Being a mentor is a tough job but is one that provides a lot of personal satisfaction. Satisfaction is gained by immediate feedback and through feedback for years to come. Faculty should look for students who are seeking mentors and select those with needs that the faculty can support.

Friend/counselor

The teacher as a leader and the teacher as a mentor provide the opportunity for the teacher to be a friend and counselor. It is not the job of the teacher to counsel students with difficult personal problems, rather, it is important for the teacher to recognize the needs of the students. Students ask that teachers be caring, fair and compassionate in both in-class and out-of-class situations. Teachers should be aware of students' affective domain and the needs that pertain. When students seek approval and obtain that approval their learning increases. Simple comments about students' ability to learn and any other special remarks provide the approval they are seeking. Grades are means of providing approval but comments about improvement are often more important to students who struggle.

At this juncture one common concern that arises is that teachers and students should not be friends because friendship jeopardizes the leader-follower relationship, or for those not convinced that they are leaders, the student-teacher relationship. Teachers should provide plans, rules and grades in an effort to develop a structured that makes them predictable in the classroom. Grades are a very touchy subject and evoke concern from both students and teachers. Good exams and enforced standards allow predictability of results. Students thrive when they know that an "A" is really 90% and above, rather than some place on a normal distribution. This does not mean that teachers should "dumb down" the exams, it means that they should design them. Teachers need to provide similar rules for relationships with students so that these relationships are predictable. If teachers are leaders, they are in charge. If good teachers are good leaders, they will be in charge and liked by their student followers. Being a strong leader and having followers who like the strong leader are not mutually exclusive.

The hallmark of the teacher as friend/counselor is the ability to be strong and compassionate within appropriate boundaries while developing a relationship with students that supports their success. Every teacher leaves a legacy; part of that legacy is the friends developed from the students they teach. Another part of that legacy is the success of those same students.

Summary

The idea that teachers are leaders, mentors and friends is not new. Teachers have been influencing students for years and have developed lasting personal relationships with their graduates. What is new is the idea that teachers should take this responsibility seriously and consider how they can be better leaders, mentors and friends. Teachers should think of the boundaries that need to be imposed to allow the professional application of these actions so that the students are the winners and that the teachers are not the losers. Those who read the literature of teaching find that the best teachers support the fundamentals of the leader theory of teaching but often fall short of using the term leader in defining their methodology.

Conclusion

Teachers need to take time to review the operation of their classroom, their courses and their relations with students. Teaching faculty spend a lot of time being concerned about their student evaluations and an equal amount of time criticizing the students and the rating system. It is time

to stop and evaluate themselves as a leader, mentor and friend/counselor. It is time to make the adjustments necessary to become teacher-leaders. Teacher-leaders inspire learning and are appropriately recognized by grateful students.

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Biography

Dr. Jerry Samples holds a BS ChemE. from Clarkson College, MS and Ph.D. in ME from Oklahoma State University and is licensed in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Dr. Samples served at the United States Military Academy as an Academy Professor for nine years before assuming his current position of Director of the Engineering Technology Division at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. He is the President of Teaching The Teachers, Inc. and is the primary instructor during workshops presented to teaching faculty.