

Effective Teaching: Putting Yourself OUT There

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My desk at school peaks the interest of students and teachers alike. As students filter into my classroom before the late bell, some enjoy analyzing or rearranging the elaborate configuration of historical and psychological action figures. Others choose to peruse the current display of postcards purchased during various trips and excursions—the most recent from my trip to the Freud Museum in Vienna. The more curious ones venture a bit further over to the collage of favorite film stills and humorous quotes mounted on my podium. When people enter my classroom, they are drawn to this visually and tactilely pleasing space. As people explore all that my desk has to offer, they inevitably see the framed, black and white photograph of my partner and me, taken at a friend’s wedding. If they ask me, I am happy to explain who the beautiful woman (or as they often say, “that hot chick”) in the picture with me is. Through their excavation of my desk space, my students learn a bit more about who I am.

What they may not know from what they find on my desk is that I currently teach AP psychology *and* AP European history at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, New Jersey. Before coming to Highlands in the fall of 2008, I taught at Arthur L. Johnson High School in Clark, New Jersey for the first ten years of my teaching career. I started AP psychology programs at both Highlands and Johnson. At Johnson, my AP psychology students boasted the highest AP test average of any AP course in the school, and I had the pleasure of teaching nearly every graduating senior. In just two short years at Highlands, the psychology program has grown to ten full sections for juniors and seniors, including six sections of AP.

I was recently honored at the 2009 APA Convention in Toronto as the recipient of the Mary Margaret Moffett Memorial Teaching Excellence Award. In 2007, the APA Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools selected me as one of three recipients of the Teaching

Excellence Award. I was chosen as one of New Jersey's Outstanding Educators by the College of New Jersey and was recognized by Rutgers University Douglass College for encouraging achievement in young women. At Arthur L. Johnson, I was honored as the 2005 National Honor Society Faculty Member of the Year and was voted Teacher of the Month three times by the student body.

I am a member of the APA TOPSS and STP divisions and have served as an AP European history exam reader for the College Board since 2002. I am dual certified as a teacher of social studies and psychology, and have completed my certification in educational supervision. I graduated from Princeton University with a bachelor's degree in psychology and certificate in women's studies and earned my master's degree in history and secondary education from Smith College. I am currently completing my doctoral studies at Drew University.

My Early Development as a Teacher

When I decided to major in psychology as a sophomore at Princeton, I did not have any idea that I would later teach the subject—or teach at all, for that matter. The adjustment to college had been challenging for me, as the interests that had served me well in high school—science and athletics—did not bring the same sense of satisfaction or success at Princeton. My plan had been to major in biology, complete the pre-med requirement, play soccer and softball for four years, and go to medical school. These had been my goals since seventh grade, and I had spent most of my time since then studying and playing sports to achieve them.

Once I arrived at Princeton I found my oversized chemistry lectures impersonal and dull, and I was spending hours at practice and lifting weights only to spend most of the games on the bench. My roommates seemed to be learning more interesting things in their classes, while my course schedule resembled a continuation of high school core classes; my pre-med requirements

left little room for electives. Additionally, I was going through a personally challenging period, as I had recently come out as a lesbian at a time when the university community was not terribly supportive, and the fledgling internet had not yet evolved to offer the sort of instant social connections it does today. I had a sense of isolation and self-loathing, having never had any sort of lesbian mentor who was out, well-adjusted, and successful. I was depressed and withdrawn, and my preoccupation with these personal issues distracted me from my studies and sports. My grades suffered, my relationship with my family was severely strained, and I engaged in self-destructive behaviors. In retrospect, I believe this experience is what later motivated me to become a high school educator. High school had prepared me academically and athletically, but these painstaking preparations were completely undermined by a lack of self knowledge and acceptance. Many of the classes I took in psychology, as well as those in my certificate program, women's studies, helped me to regain a sense of purpose and rebuild my self esteem. It took almost my entire college experience to have a better understanding of who I was and feel comfortable with myself. Eventually, I found supportive friends and a small gay community at school, and graduated in June of 1995.

It was not until the year after I graduated from college that I decided to pursue a teaching career. I spent my first year out of college in a job that gave me little sense of purpose, and I realized that I had wasted quite a bit of my college education learning not to hate myself rather than making the most of my academic experience and figuring out what I wanted to do with my future. I was drawn to high school teaching because I wanted to actively reconnect with learning and academics in a way that I was not able to do during my turbulent college years. I also wanted to help adolescents to feel more comfortable being themselves so that they would not have to go through the same thing I had experienced in college. Encouraged by a work colleague who had

coached at Smith College, I applied to their MAT program in secondary education and social studies in 1996.

At Smith, though the program required several educational theory and pedagogy courses, I found that the classes I took for my subject-area certification revealed the most important aspects of good teaching and best prepared me for success in my own classroom. My history and psychology professors at Smith not only had great passion for and broad knowledge of their subject areas, but they also had a genuine interest in awakening in their students the same sort of passion for the subject. These professors modeled teaching behaviors I would later incorporate in my own classroom. Classes were small enough to allow for more of a personal connection between professor and student, and it was this experience that shaped me most in my own approach to teaching. I felt that I knew who my professors were as people, and learning *about* them made me eager to learn *from* them.

My education classes, on the other hand, seemed less relevant. I learned various approaches to teaching and the “best” and “worst” practices. When I began student teaching, naturally I tried to use the most current methods, according to all the pedagogy I had learned. My attempts to follow the most popular theories yielded the least interesting classes, however. Discouraged by the lukewarm reception I was receiving from my students, I thought about the teachers and professors I liked most and from whom I learned the most. I realized that many of my favorite teachers engaged in pedagogy deemed “antiquated” and “ineffective” by the prevailing theorists. Additionally, few of these teachers taught in the same way. What they all had in common, however, was that they were extremely knowledgeable in their subject area, they took an active interest in their students as individuals, and their teaching style seemed to reveal a lot about who they were as people. Some had neurotic mannerisms while others drew

me in with their dramatic story-telling or their off-beat senses of humor. These qualities made coming to class an experience to which I would look forward. These teachers were always *themselves*, and because they were comfortable putting themselves “out there,” their students would often do the same.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

As a new teacher, I had been so concerned with following the “appropriate” methods that I lost sight of the most important features of a great class. Focusing on following a canned theory and pre-fabricated lessons inhibited many essential aspects of good teaching: subject area expertise, awareness of student needs, and self-knowledge. This is not to say that all educational theorists are *wrong*; rather, it is wrong to embrace only one approach and force it on everyone—especially when the approach will likely fall out of favor within a few years anyway. Some methods work for some people, and fail miserably for others; some work in certain classrooms and not at all in others. I found that my teaching improved drastically when I thought about my own personality and used methods that showcased my individual skill set most effectively. Once I stopped trying to be Grant Wiggins or Harry Wong and started being “Spence” (as my students call me), I became much more real to my students, and they were much more interested in learning what I was teaching. Once they began to respond, it became much easier for me to take an active interest in them as individual people.

Learning how to run my own classroom, however, was only one part of teaching in a school. Certainly, it helped to “find myself” in my teaching, and have my students enjoy my classes more for it. However, the politics of the school outside the classroom were much more difficult to navigate. When I arrived at Johnson to begin my career, I was the only teacher under the age of forty in the school. Many veteran teachers laced their “nuggets of wisdom” for me

with phrases such as, “When I still believed I could make a difference...” or “These rotten kids today just aren’t the way they used to be when I started teaching.” They asked to see my class lists and made black marks next to the names of “bad kids” I should “watch out for.” Needless to say, I found that the so-called “bad kids” behaved just fine if they were treated like human beings. I stopped eating in the teachers’ lounge within the first week of school. I found that there were better places to make connections with colleagues through extracurricular activities at the school, through taking graduate classes in my teaching subjects, and reading exams through the College Board.

Thankfully, my department supervisor was an excellent mentor. My supervisor at Johnson, Douglass Felter, encouraged me to enroll in graduate classes, read for the College Board, and become involved in extracurricular activities to gain a richer perspective on the lives of my students. The most important thing he did for me, however, was give me the freedom to experiment with different methods and approaches while he continued to have confidence in my ability to ultimately succeed. He provided guidance, materials, and ideas, but never told me *how* to teach. He treated me as professional, not a minion, and showed he had confidence in me by giving me an AP class my second year and supporting my suggestion to begin an AP psychology program by my third year. He allowed me to find myself in my teaching, and be myself in my classroom, including being out to my students. I taught all three of his children, who all took both of the AP classes I taught. Although it meant that I would not have his youngest daughter for AP European history, he still supported and encouraged me to leave the district when I had the opportunity to start a new psychology program in a larger school district at Northern Highlands.

Although my supervisor was supportive when I eventually told him of my decision to be out to my students, my initial thought on the issue was that my personal life was just that—personal. I felt no need to discuss my sexual orientation with my students. However, working with curious, outgoing high school students coupled with teaching a class like psychology where human sexuality frequently is discussed, sticking to this plan was hardly realistic. I decided that if students asked me, I would never lie to them about my partner. I had students and players ask me, because of my ring, if I were married. I told them I had a partner and that her name was Lauren. Three years into my teaching career, however, I decided that the “tell if asked” policy just did not go far enough. I came to this conclusion in the middle of a lecture on human diversity. As I was discussing “the sometimes challenging experiences of people who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual in our society,” I suddenly stopped and said, “This is ridiculous. I am gay. I can give you at least one perspective.” I went on to tell my students about my experience of coming out in college, and coming out to my parents. Many students emailed me later that day to thank me for sharing my story with the class. My sexual orientation had been the last part of myself I was not sharing, but it was a part that, ultimately, could help countless students to feel more connected to me in the way I had connected to my favorite teachers.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

As the years passed, I found that several students came to me to talk about their own coming out issues, or even their experiences of feeling different. If anything, being out as a teacher has made me more effective at reaching my students, and has made more students feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment. Unfortunately, despite working with several other gay teachers, I have yet to work with another *out* gay teacher. When I think of how long it took me in college to feel comfortable with myself as a lesbian, I cannot help but think of how

the whole process was more difficult because there were not any out, gay role models for me growing up. It was almost worse that there were teachers everyone believed to be gay or lesbian, but that they were completely closeted. The message was clear: being gay is something to be ashamed of. I want to be sure that I never convey that message to my students, whether they are gay, straight, bisexual, or transgender. For the past nine years, I have been as open about my partner as any other teacher is about his or her spouse. Despite what many closeted teachers may believe, this decision has caused no more stress for me than if my partner were a man, but I am certain that being as open as any of the heterosexual teachers has made students and staff—gay and straight—more accepting of diversity, as it is obvious to them that my sexuality does not have any negative impact on my ability to teach and reach students.

Most people who pursue a career in teaching want to make a difference in the lives of students. Sometimes, this desire can surpass our capabilities. Another challenge for me in my teaching has been knowing my own limitations. For many years, I combined teaching an extra class, coaching three sports, attending graduate school, and working all summer. One year, I even taught three different AP classes in addition to these other responsibilities. I started to realize that I was not able to do any aspect of my job to my satisfaction, though it took ten years of doing too much and a relocation to a new school district for me to finally see it.

Although I do not regret the activities in which I was involved at Johnson, I see now just how much I was not able to do with my teaching as a result of spreading myself too thin. It is not that I spend fewer hours at my job now; I actually spend longer hours at work, but I am spending the hours on improving my teaching specifically. I have continued to stay involved in extracurricular activities, but in areas I did not have the time to explore earlier in my career. While I am not presently coaching, I still attend my students' games to show my support, but I

can now also attend my students' concerts, plays, musicals, and talent shows, and have time to finish my graduate school program. I have been approached to coach sports at Highlands, but I have learned to say no, knowing that I can still be actively involved in students' lives. Having this opportunity to reconfigure my priorities has given me the opportunity to cultivate other interests that had been on the back burner. While the decision to change was difficult and frightening, I feel that forcing myself outside my comfort zone has made me a more effective educator.

Advice for New Teachers

Nobody can become an effective teacher by memorizing pedagogy from a book or taking education classes. These activities may be required to complete a teacher preparation program, but they contribute little to one's development as a teacher. I found that the best place to start was to think about the most effective teachers I had known, and the qualities that made them appealing to me. Qualities that all of these teachers shared were those I felt were most imperative to incorporate into my own teaching, and they tended to be broad and general. The most important of these qualities were being open and accessible to students. Qualities that differentiated these teachers from one another made it clear to me that being effective in the classroom was also related to being yourself. No two people are exactly alike—nor are any two teachers. While taking bits and pieces from effective teachers may be helpful in developing one's teaching skills, trying to *be* another teacher—no matter how effective he or she may be—simply does not work. In order to *be* yourself, one must *know* yourself, and this is an ongoing process. Goals and priorities change, as do our preferred methods of fulfilling them. Change may be scary, but cannot be avoided out of fear, lest we stop evolving and improving as teachers.

Throughout this dynamic process of knowing yourself, just don't forget to keep sharing who you are with your students, and keep putting yourself out there, and your students will do the same.