

TEACHERS: MISSIONARIES FOR LEARNING

BY JAMES M. BANNER, JR., AND HAROLD C. CANNON

*A new and elegant little book—what one reviewer called a “Valentine to dedicated teachers”—would make the perfect holiday present to give to a colleague (or to yourself). Entitled *The Elements of Teaching*, each chapter focuses on the qualities of mind and spirit possessed by good teachers: learning, authority, ethics, order, imagination, compassion, patience, character, and pleasure. Each chapter ends with a portrait of a teacher who exemplifies—or fails to exemplify—the quality described. “While the characters are fictional,” the authors write, “they are by no means figments of our fancy; we have drawn their traits and tactics from teachers we have known and from our own experience. . . . No single person to our knowledge has ever possessed all the virtues or vices we portray, but all these attributes of teachers have existed somewhere, sometime.”*

The authors note that “teachers . . . are rarely . . . invited to think about what they are and what they know of themselves.” This thoughtful book helps fill that void. We have chosen to reprint the chapter on learning.

—EDITOR

ALL TEACHING involves the transmission of knowledge, like the handing-on of the torch in the Olympic Games. Just as the flame must stay alive while the torch passes from hand to hand, so knowledge must remain kindled if anything is to be transferred

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from teacher to student. If the fire of knowledge is extinguished in teachers, even the best students are unlikely to reignite the torch and carry it to its ultimate destination—the achievement of understanding.

Teachers are presumed to possess knowledge, which their teaching communicates to their students. It follows that in order to teach they must know what they teach and know how to teach it; and in order to teach effectively, they must know deeply and well. Teaching requires more than knowing how to learn, although that is important. Above all, teaching requires learning itself; and, if possible under the demanding conditions that face so many teachers, it requires mastery of a subject.

By *learning* we usually mean one or all of three things: either the act of gaining knowledge—“to learn something”—or the knowledge gained by virtue of that act—“that which is known”—or the process of gaining knowledge—“learning how.” All three are essential to good teaching. And each kind of learning is and must be a lifelong pursuit, not something that, as is so often mistakenly believed, fills only the years before teachers enter their classrooms.



True teachers always seek (often they must struggle) to learn more, to remain current with what is known about their subjects, to keep those subjects fresh and exciting enough to sustain the exhausting act of teaching day in and day out, year after year—in sum, to expand their ability to teach. The need to keep learning has to do also with the nature of knowledge itself. Often thought to be static, knowledge is ever-changing and ever-growing; the known is never the same from one day to the next. Thus to possess and master knowledge, one must wrestle with it constantly, fashioning and re-fashioning what one knows and how to present it. Knowledge taunts us with its difficulty, its incompleteness, its ambiguity. As Aeschylus reminds us in the *Agamemnon*, to learn is to suffer.

Yet many mistakenly believe that teachers, at least at the precollegiate levels, can get by without learning, that they can just step into the classroom after gaining the minimum amount of knowledge in order to justify their being paid while they pursue their real love—say, coaching football—from which they cannot otherwise earn a living. But students know better, as the many

jokes about coaches in the classroom and ill-prepared teachers attest. Students usually know which of their teachers think teaching a mere job and which of them approach it as a learned calling. The most ambitious students quickly spot the teacher without command of a subject or the one who has no genuine thirst for knowledge; they mark that teacher as lacking in authority, as someone whose ignorance of a subject poses a threat to their own well-being by preventing them from learning all they might be taught. And they are right, for their well-being as students depends on their teachers' knowledge, and on their teachers' willingness to learn more all the time.

By saying that the true teacher must master a body of knowledge, we distinguish knowledge from information. Much confusion results from mistaking one for the other. Information is to knowledge what sound is to music, the unorganized material out of which the structured result is composed. We do not ask teachers to convey information; we seek information from newspapers, the stock market ticker tape, or price tags on items in a store. Instead, we ask teachers to transmit knowledge, that which is organized and for-



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mally known about a subject—facts, findings, explanations, hypotheses, and theories accepted for their proven accuracy, significance, beauty, utility, or power.

The struggle to gain and sustain this knowledge is probably the most exacting work of any teacher, and it never ends. True mastery of any subject is probably beyond our reach, but reach we must. Sustained intellectual vitality requires a self-imposed sentence to hard labor—the kind of labor, however, that liberates rather than imprisons, with all the satisfactions and rewards of liberation.

No one should think that mastery of a body of knowledge is easy. It is devilishly difficult, necessitating a degree of devotion, concentration, discipline, and effort demanded by few other pursuits. And because knowledge is always a work in progress, it is never complete; we must run to keep up with it.

Mastering a body of knowledge well enough to convey it to others is a lonely task; it is usually a silent conversation between someone who is learning and others—authors, scientists, artists—many of whom are dead, known only through their words on the page, the symbols with which they have worked, or the art they have created. Often, too, learning must proceed without external incentives or rewards—no additional pay, no more promotions. Gaining knowledge is private, individual, solitary. How then is knowledge sustained? And why should it be?

For the most skilled and devoted teachers, knowledge comes through an intense love of learning and of a subject, a love whose origins may be mysterious and unknown, awakened perhaps by a chance encounter with a children's book, by a parent's praise, or by a cherished teacher's encouragement—by something special that forever marked the future teacher. Most devoted teachers were "hooked" early by some distinctive curiosity, whose magic and mystery continues to hold them; and thus teachers are always trying similarly to "hook" their own students. Knowledge, to say nothing of keenness of instruction, is also sustained by a never-ceasing aspiration to learn more, an insatiable yearning to know and to understand. So, too, knowledge is strengthened by teachers' openness to students' beguiling ability to involve them in their own learning, to pull teachers in with their own excitement and curiosity.

So teachers are and must be thinkers in their own right, not just "doers" who happen to teach and possess the skill to do so. Their minds must be continually restocked and nourished. They must become capable of gaining and using knowledge on their own, independent of others, and of leading others to do so, too. True teachers liberate the thinking of others.

What, then, does it mean to say that a teacher must possess learning?

Learning means knowing and mastering a subject. For many people, thrust suddenly into a new classroom and asked suddenly to teach a new subject, this may seem an impossible luxury. Yet a teacher must seek to have full command of a subject, not just enough knowledge to get by or to know more than the very best students. A teacher should possess enough knowledge of a subject to be able to consider it independently, to play confidently with it, to enter-

tain surmises about it, to imagine its possible significances and implications when it is placed in various contexts. A teacher, that is, should know enough to be a thinker as well as an instructor. When that is the case, the teacher has joined a discipline, a professional guild of people with an agreed-upon warrant to consider themselves guardians of, and contributors to, a branch of knowledge.

Learning embodies the act of learning. In many respects, the search for knowledge is infectious; it can be transmitted to others, and it can be caught. Possibly the best way for teachers to transmit learning is to embody the act of doing so—to be seen among papers and books ("these kinsmen of the shelf," as Emily Dickinson called them), scurrying toward a library, exclaiming upon the solution to a problem, expressing delight when a student proposes a plausible interpretation new to the teacher. Teachers, in showing their students how to learn, must seek to be caught *flagrante delicto* with their subject, for the aspiration to learn should be as compelling to students as the knowledge they gain. It is a teacher's infectious enthusiasm for learning itself, as much as the student's own curiosity about the teacher's subject, that is apt to captivate a student.

Veteran teachers, long familiar with the material they teach, may choose to stop learning because it seems no longer justified. This is always a mistake, if only because it risks suggesting an unbridgeable distance between the teacher, who seems to know it all, and the students, who may think they know nothing—which is also wrong. Thus for a teacher to stop learning is to destroy one of the principal means a teacher has to bridge the gap between ignorance and knowledge and between despair and hope. What is more, to stop learning suggests to students that a teacher is bored with the subject; and, alas, boredom is every bit as infectious as enthusiasm.

Learning requires keeping up with one's subject. This may be a teacher's hardest task, for it requires application after the normal, depleting workday is done. Yet it must be undertaken. If a teacher falls behind in a subject, so do the students, whose preparation for advancement in competition with others is thereby diminished. Keeping current with a body of knowledge does not, however, necessitate only solitary reading and study; it can be accomplished with colleagues in study groups, in formal programs of continuing professional education, and by attendance at meetings of scholars and fellow professionals. What matters is not the means of staying abreast of knowledge but the actual pursuit of that knowledge.

Learning conveys the spirit and love of learning to others. All teachers are, in effect, missionaries for their subjects. They must care passionately about what they teach; they must be able to reveal to their students how exciting learning can be. That is an additional reason why teachers must clearly possess knowledge, or at least display a visible desire to possess it; only then can their love of knowledge be exemplified in their enthusiasm and bearing, in the sheer fun of engaging in discussion, hunting down a fact, polishing a skill, exploring a new subject, reading a book for the first

time. Of course, trying to transmit knowledge has its risks, the chief being that students often do not want to learn—or at least to learn what they are asked to learn at the time in their lives when they are asked to learn it. A pertinent story is told of John Scotus Eri-gena, an Irish teacher and philosopher in the court of the Holy Roman Emperor in northern France. Our philosopher was murdered by a group of his students who hacked him to death with their pens because, it is said, he tried to force them to think.

One moral of this tale, among others, is that not all subjects, after all, captivate students as naturally as, say, learning to drive attracts the interest of teenagers. The culture has already done a reasonably good job of explaining to the young the advantages of driving a car. But when it comes to such subjects as foreign languages or the physical sciences, teachers have more work cut out for them; it is they, and few others, who can best reveal how and why subjects scarcely known to their students offer excitement, satisfaction, and utility. And to do that, teachers must know their subjects thoroughly and assume the responsibility and risk of finding ways to impart those subjects to their often recalcitrant students.

Learning means being open to the knowledge of others, especially of one's own students. Often, because teachers must learn from other authorities in a field, they forget that their students may be authorities too, that they may surpass their teachers in love for a subject, or knowledge of it, or skill and intelligence. After all, is it not all teachers' best dream that their students become so fueled by their teachers' knowledge as to surpass it? Thus teachers must signal to their students that the search for knowledge is cooperative and collective, that its pursuit is a shared journey—though one that often requires much solitary work.

Detecting ignorance while inadvertently overlooking understanding is one of the great hazards of all teaching. That is why teachers must work hard to encourage their students to make known their knowledge to other students; that is why they must provide the settings, free from constraint and evaluation, in which students can do so. In this way, teachers themselves are helped to focus on what students know rather than on what they do not.

Learning provides the basis for independent thought. Active engagement in a field of knowledge becomes critical at that stage when teachers realize their engagement arises from the possession of enough knowledge to be confident in thinking about the field independently. Recognition of oneself as a thinker as well as a teacher—as someone who is part of a larger community of learning, as capable as anyone else of engaging in the intellectual play of knowledge—may be among the most difficult transitions in a teacher's professional life. Yet when that transition occurs, a new world opens, new authority is gained, and a new teacher is born—one who determines independently what is best for students and what they should know. At this stage, too, the teacher recognizes that learning is an end in itself, that not everything needs to be related to instruction, that thinking is a world without end, without known outcome.

Learning justifies learning. A teacher's confidence in the intrinsic worth of knowledge is fundamental to all instruction. Such deep-rooted belief makes a teacher able to relate knowledge to life, to all human experience. To students' typical questions, "Why do we have to learn this? What good is such knowledge?" the typical instrumental answers come to mind easily: "Because it's required by the school board." "Because you will do better on your licensing exam." "Because you'll need it later when you study economics." But the teacher with deep learning answers with conviction and authority more pertinently: "Because acquiring this knowledge is difficult. Because you will feel triumphant when it no longer confuses you. Because you will enjoy what you can do with it. Because in learning it, you may discover new perspectives on life, new ways of thinking. Because its possession will make you more alive than its alternative, which is ignorance."

The teachers whom we remember most vividly are those who knew their subjects best and transmitted them with the greatest intensity and love. They were confident in their knowledge, and not dogmatic; they acted out their own struggles to understand in front of us, joyful when they understood something fresh, troubled when they did not or could not know. They joined us at the laboratory bench, in the library, at the museum, puzzling with us over a test tube result, complaining about a book's interpretation, discovering a painting's meaning. They stood before us to present the act of learning with a sort of honesty that we rarely encounter in everyday life. It is such examples of passion and exhilaration that students need in their teachers. Only in that way can students meet the importunate demands of learning with a full heart; only then can the thirst for learning move them on.

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FELICIA GONZALEZ tucked her two children into bed, told them each a favorite bedtime story, kissed them good night, and returned to the kitchen. With her husband away on business, it fell to her to clean up from dinner and straighten up the children's toys alone. It was 9 o'clock; she'd be up at 6:00 A.M., getting her children off to school at 7:30, and in front of her first class at 8:30. Fortunately, she had no papers to grade, and earlier that afternoon she had reviewed what she was going to teach tomorrow by skimming through class preparation notes from the past few times she had taught the same course. So she could go to bed. Yet she hadn't opened the new book that she'd bought on the establishment clause of the Constitution, and she would be teaching about the First Amendment to her eleventh-grade advanced placement history class the next day. She realized that she should try to read some of the new work. And so she did—not to her satisfaction, but enough to learn its author's argument and to reexamine what the Framers meant by an establishment of religion. She turned off the light at 11:00.

The next day, sure enough, one of her students asked her to explain not the clauses prohibiting limits on the right of assembly or of the press, which were

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