

The Hand That Rocks The Curriculum

Today's teachers are innovators at the highest level. Dr. Linda Yonke discusses what distinguishes "excellent teaching" with high praise for her colleagues in the classroom.



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While at a friend's wedding when my daughter was in high school, she and I walked over to look at the beautiful display of pictures and memorabilia created by the bride and groom's families. Courtney reached out to touch one of the items, and much to our alarm, it fell off the display. As we tried to re-affix the memento, a different picture fell off and the whole display teetered; the more we tried to fix things, the worse they got. As we were frantically trying to make repairs before anyone saw us, I laughingly scolded her: "You *always* have to touch things — you have been that way your whole life. *Why do you do that?*" She looked at me with a straight face, and replied, "Because I'm a tactile-kinesthetic learner."

Of course I laughed, and we fixed the display with no permanent damage — but I have always remembered that moment. My daughter, a high school junior at the time, had been given a learning-styles inventory by her science teacher, and had gained a new insight into herself as a learner and a student. I am convinced that the inventory and other exercises helped her understand her strengths, helped her learn to study effectively, and even helped her select the college that matched her personality and needs.

When Courtney became a teacher, I was struck by the high expectations of her generation of educators — much greater than what was expected of my peers and me when we entered the field 25 years earlier. Today's teachers not only have to learn their specialized content, but they also must master learning sciences, individualization, differentiation, technology, and social-emotional development. They must be collaboration experts, assessment specialists and research participants.

For a recent administrative-team meeting at New Trier, I asked each person to be prepared to talk about an example of excellent teaching that he or she had witnessed this year during the evaluation process. I was inspired by what I heard, and we were all struck by several commonalities.

Excellent teachers have a connection with their students that is evident from the moment kids begin walking into the room. Mutual respect, good humor and high expectations can be seen when teacher and students greet each other and begin class promptly. During pre-conferences, these teachers describe how individual students will react to the lesson, anticipating problems and taking measures to ensure that each student's needs are met.

Excellent teachers understand the big picture as well as the daily objectives; they know the curriculum from a global perspective and can describe for the observer how a specific lesson fits into year-long and unit plans. Their planning reveals an understanding of how students think and how their interest is engaged. Lessons are not thrown together (or created especially for the observation) — they are part of a master plan that moves students through the content in a deliberate process that connects content acquisition with student learning styles.

Excellent teachers learn constantly and translate that learning into exciting new instructional methods and curricular materials. I recently read through notes from a New Trier Science Department professional development day when groups of teachers met to share ideas for instruction, assessment, projects, and activities. I learned, for example, about a teacher who recently traveled to Florida for the Mars Curiosity Rover launch and shared curricular ideas provided by

NASA with her colleagues. As a result, New Trier students in Geoscience this year will participate in activities designed to choose the Mars Rover landing site or discuss the sources of energy used to power the vehicle.

Curriculum innovation is pervasive at New Trier, ranging from the newest methods of effective writing instruction to the latest thinking in math pedagogy. Walk through the school on any given day and you may see students doing a virtual dissection on their tablet laptops, editing materials for their writing portfolios, or holding a Socratic seminar about their assigned reading.

Teaching at the high school level is an art that combines knowledge of content, knowledge of adolescents, and understanding of how students learn the specific concepts of that discipline. Great teaching is not about controlling students but about motivating and inspiring them to want to learn more.

My daughter's science teacher from all those years ago was just that kind of teacher. He understood her as an individual learner and helped her gain new insights into her own capabilities. Prior to taking that class, she thought of herself as a mediocre science student, but she became inspired by his teaching and experienced the content in a completely different way than in any previous science class. In my work at New Trier, I am constantly amazed by what I see and hear from and about our teachers who work to master the art and science of teaching every day. Teaching today requires a keen understanding of child development and motivation theory along with content expertise and a commitment to lifelong learning. I admire the work of talented, dedicated teachers everywhere, and I am grateful to be part of such an inspiring profession. 