Reflections on good teaching

5 tips from a veteran educator

Thirty years! Sometimes, I find it hard to comprehend that I have been a teacher for 30 years.

Much has changed during that time. What I was teaching when I began my career at a public high school bears little resemblance to what I teach today as a community college instructor. What it takes to become educated as well as the technology tools that exist today have completely altered my subject matter (I teach office systems/computer information systems) and made it necessary for me to be a lifelong learner as well as a teacher.

And, in many ways, as I near my own retirement, I feel as though I am just hitting my stride. With that in mind, here are some thoughts I’d like to share with those who will follow.

Always, always, make the student your first priority. Teachers are more than just providers of information. What I learned in my education classes years ago has proven invaluable in helping to address students’ different learning styles and different needs.

I’ve lived through many innovations in education including individualized instruction, competency-based education, and, more recently, online learning. The bottom line, however, remains unchanged. Students need to be actively involved in their own learning. Passive receivers of information, who simply parrot back that information on tests, really haven’t learned much. As the legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden stated, “You haven’t taught until they have learned.”

Teachers at all levels have a responsibility to try and help all students reach their full potential, and that includes what I consider to be the single most important thing we can give our students—the knowledge that they can continue to learn and discover on their own long after they’ve left our classroom.

And though it’s important to try and reach every student, don’t cheapen what you do by making it too easy or too readily available. Some have taken the push toward “learner-centeredness” to mean that we give students whatever they want, whenever they want it. The problem is that students may know what they want, but they don’t necessarily know what they need. That’s where the professional educator is needed. Don’t be afraid to maintain high standards. I am of the sometimes unpopular opinion that getting a quality education should actually require some sacrifice from students if they are to truly appreciate it.

Promote the image of the teacher as a professional by correcting those who claim that teachers work only nine months a year. Nearly all of the quality instructors that I know cram 12 months of “working” into nine and then continue to live their jobs the rest of the year. Good teaching does not come easily, but the best teachers will make it look easy.

And finally, realize that it may take years for you to get recognition or evidence that you have made a difference in someone’s life. Sometimes the students themselves do not recognize the impact that you had until long after they have moved on. But when it happens — and a former student sends that letter or e-mail to tell you — it will make everything you’ve done for the past 30 years completely worthwhile.