



How to Become a Good Teacher

What is a good teacher? How do you recognize that rare individual? One of the problems Bill and Melinda Gates have had in making grants for education reform through their billion-dollar foundation is that no one seems to know what makes a good teacher. Indeed, Gates stated: "The single most decisive factor in student achievement is excellent teaching." But no one could tell him what made a good teacher. But since I spent 12 years — 1932 to 1944 — in public schools, I think I have a good idea of what a good teacher is, and I wish to pass on to Bill and Melinda and the coming generation of teachers some of the wisdom I have acquired.



Who were the good teachers in my own experience as a public school student? There were a few, not many, that I can remember. My first and second grade teachers were good because they taught everyone in their classes how to read. We were taught to read by phonics. We were also taught penmanship, how to hold the writing instrument correctly, and we were taught arithmetic mainly through rote memorization. In other words they did not permit us to develop bad habits. And everything they taught we would be able to use for the rest of our lives. Nothing we had been taught had to be later unlearned.

They were middle-aged women with years of experience and they were helped greatly by the classroom configuration. We sat in rows behind desks bolted to the floor. There were no distractions in the room. The walls were bare with only a portrait of George Washington hanging on one of the walls. The teacher was the focus of attention, and she was able to conduct the class from the front of the room, frequently using the chalk board. Her authority was unquestioned and respected, you didn't dare speak out of turn, and you did not litter the room. She did not have to be a great teacher, but as long as she could teach the basics competently, she was a good teacher.

In the third grade I had a younger teacher who taught us music appreciation. She would get a hand-driven portable [Victrola](#) out of the closet and play records of classical music. We had to write the names of the musical selections and their composers. We listened to *The Swan* by Saint-Saëns, *March Slav* by Tchaikovsky, and other short selections. She helped us develop a taste for classical music which would provide us with a lifetime of musical pleasure. She was, in my opinion, a good teacher. Her mission was simple: to make sure we developed good taste in music.

Our first lessons in geography and history were about the city of New York. They were competently taught. We got to know about the founding of the city by the Dutch who called it New Amsterdam. The Dutch had paid the Indians \$24 in trinkets for the island of Manhattan, which years later became the most valued piece of real estate in the world. We learned about the one-legged Governor Peter Stuyvesant and his pegleg. We learned of the takeover of the city by the English who changed its name



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to New York. We all came to love our great city and appreciate all of its marvelous sights and beauties. In junior high my favorite teacher was Mrs. Strongin, who made learning French interesting and pleasant. Because of her I became something of a Francophile. She was an excellent teacher with a love of the subject and an understanding that learning French would expand our horizons and add a bit of sophistication and savoir-faire to our cultural repertoire. In junior high we were also taught touch-typing, probably the most useful subject I was taught in my 12 years in public school. It helped me become a writer. Our teacher used marching music to help us develop an even rhythm in our mastering of the keyboard. I can still hear those 30 Remingtons tapping away in military rhythm, the happy sound of positive physical effort.

In those days, the teachers actually cared about what they were doing and knew they were adding to our knowledge, skills, and academic competence. But I did have some unhappy moments during those 12 years. In the fourth grade a teacher humiliated me before the class because, for some reason, I could not solve a simple problem in fractions. She did what no teacher should do: lose patience and humiliate a student in front of his classmates. It was totally uncalled for. All she had to do was simply point out what I had missed seeing, and I would have appreciated her help and thanked her.

In my own book, *Alpha-Phonics*, I instruct the teacher or tutor to never lose patience, never scold, never humiliate a student, never let a student develop a bad habit, and never teach anything that later has to be unlearned. These are simple rules that should be taught to every student of teaching. There are good reasons why students make mistakes, and the job of the teacher is to find out why the mistake was made, not to humiliate the student for making the mistake.

The second unhappy experience I had was in junior high where I was placed in the open air classroom. In those days there was the quaint belief among educators that underweight children needed to sit in a room with all of the windows open. Every junior high school in the city had its open air classroom to which a motley assortment of students were assigned. The school authorities convinced my mother that because I was a bit underweight I should be assigned to that class. My mother, an illiterate immigrant, assumed that the educators knew what they were doing and consented to my being put in that awful class. I rebelled, of course, became the teacher's bane of existence, and actually played hookey for the first and last time in my life.

The educators then realized that they had made a mistake and reassigned me to a regular class where once more I became a happy camper. My English teacher, a tall spinster who taught us how to parse a sentence, encouraged us all to take the exam for Stuyvesant High School, a prestigious exam school known for its academic excellence. I took the test and passed it, which meant that I would have to travel every day by subway and el from the East Bronx to Manhattan, where Stuyvesant High School was located. The teachers there were known for their great competence. But only one of them appreciated my budding talent as an architect. He was Dr. Greene and taught architectural drawing. I excelled in his class. Indeed, it was because of him that I was awarded at graduation a medal for excellence in architectural drawing.

But I was never able to attend my graduation since I had enlisted in the U.S. Army in order to take advantage of the Army Special Training Program (ASTP). My mother attended the event and accepted the medal. But I corresponded with Dr. Greene while in the Army, and he was so impressed by my letters that he advised me to become a journalist. That was the most important advice I was ever given by a teacher. I was the best student in his architectural drawing class, but he thought I would be an excellent writer. His encouragement is what made me decide to become a writer instead of an architect.



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Thus, teachers can and do play an important role in the lives of their students. This was especially valuable for us children of immigrant parents who had no idea how to help their children pursue American careers. In fact, the worst advice I ever got was from my father, who, when he saw me diligently reading and writing something, told me not to work so hard. He didn't realize that in America you had to work hard to get anywhere. You have to work very hard, and I had to learn that the hard way.

So, how do you become a good teacher? First, good teachers should know their subject well and know how to make it interesting. They should also know how to teach the three Rs in case they are ever called upon to apply that basic knowledge in their classrooms. Second, they should be intellectually curious and be lifelong learners. Third, they should be patriotic and know the history of our republic and the writings of the Founding Fathers and the meaning of American freedom. Fourth, they should know the Bible, which is the divine source of wisdom and the story of man's relationship with his maker. Fifth, they should adhere to the truth and reality and not succumb to politically correct dogmas that defy common sense. Sixth, they should be individualists and not socialist collectivists. And seventh, they must love and respect the children they are educating and help guide them toward a productive adult life.

Unfortunately, there are not many colleges of education that train future teachers to be the kind of individuals described above. That is why a teacher must have personal integrity and be able to tell right from wrong in a school. And that is why Bill and Melinda Gates might consider setting up a teachers' academy to produce the kind of teachers I've described.



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