

Open Door, Open Mind, Open Heart

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The Art of Education:

A Panel Discussion with the SECAC 2010 Excellence in Teaching Award Winners

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Reader:

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Recently I came across the following Chinese proverb: "Teachers open the door; you enter by yourself." This simple truth, validated for me initially by pondering my own continuing educational journey, fortuitously dovetails with the few words that I uttered a year ago upon accepting SECAC's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Those words constitute a sort of personal motto for my general approach to the profession that I chose to pursue forty and more years ago: "open door, open mind, open heart." The fact that the adjective "open" recurs three times in this catchphrase is significant, for I believe that if a teacher demonstrates openness in tangible, intellectual, and emotional ways, that modifier will—or at least can—transform itself into the transitive verb of the Chinese sage's dictum for the benefit of students, such that by opening the door to learning, teachers provide their pupils with the means of access to varying worlds of discovery and lifetimes of learning.

My remarks here are not of a theoretical nature but rather practical in their intent, beginning with a good question. What are the things I actually did inside and outside the classroom that made some people think I might be considered worthy of our organization's teaching award? Certainly, my six-word slogan regarding openness implies a few prerequisites, and please note that while I am an art historian—a recently retired teacher who is unable to draw a straight line without a ruler!—I believe that what I say here is fully applicable to the teaching of art in the studio as well. For me, perhaps first among practical matters was preparedness, having a solid handle on the facts pertinent to the artworks I intended to present each day; and organization, addressing those works in a logical, meaningful order. Once underway, in order to add nuance and resonance to the material, discussions would invoke different methodological approaches such

as compositional and stylistic analysis, iconographical symbolism, original location and audience, historical setting, cultural context, and economic considerations. Over the years, students expressed both verbally and in writing their appreciation for consistency in my way of conveying art-historical information, of assigning papers and oral presentations, and of writing essay-only tests that required of them a mastery of factual material but also an ability to think, synthesize, and respond on the go. Students made it plain that they did not like surprises, which often interfere with optimal performance. And while my seriousness of purpose was clear to students—on the downside of this, my occasional attempts at classroom humor often fell flat!—so was the enthusiasm and energy that I brought to the varied tasks at hand. Indeed, the thing I miss most since resigning my position over a year ago is preparing, reviewing for, and actually teaching classes. Readiness and organization, the application of diverse methodologies, consistency, a businesslike manner leavened by enthusiasm: these are the practical prerequisites that informed my teaching for well over three decades.

What I mean by an “open-door” policy may be both evident and not so evident. I was easy to find, for students knew that I would be in my office not only during established office hours, which I scheduled daily and observed religiously, but also prior to and after morning classes—I always taught before lunch—and very frequently in the afternoon right up until dinnertime. Ninety per cent of that time my office door was wide open, and I made it clear that students were free to stop in as they saw fit. Moreover, while I like a tidy desk, my office otherwise looked lived in, with lots of interesting stuff on the walls, shelves, and cabinet-tops. A Spartan office is not a welcoming one, and students seem to concur; witness the average dormitory room! An

important corollary to an open office door is visibility among students outside of the office. I made a point of doing research, reviewing classroom notes, even correcting exams and papers in the college library, where students could see me at work in the building that is the heart and soul of every campus, and I attended more than my share of extracurricular events daytime and evening as well. While I never tried to be one of them, students understood that I was an integral part of their community. An important addendum here: one reason—though not the only one—that over the years I regularly presented scholarly papers at professional meetings and published my research in appropriate venues—and students knew that I was thus engaged—was the importance I attributed to serving as a model of intellectual curiosity and rigor to them. I asked my students to do research, give oral reports, and write papers at a high level, and I felt that I should do the same. I am confident that this enhanced my accessibility—that it helped to prop open my door—in students' minds.

Again, students knew that I had high expectations for their academic performance. Teaching and evaluating according to the lowest common denominator are disservices to more gifted students, obviously, and they do not permit less gifted ones to challenge themselves intellectually. Furthermore, had I set my sights too low, I would have bored myself right out of a job! But teachers also should be fair in their expectations as well as in their assessments, knowing that students—young adults—really are pulled in many directions at once, as are we all. Among other things, it helps to remember that yours is not the only course they are taking in which they are trying to do well. Such empathy is part of what I consider maintaining an open mind. In addition, teachers should be as honest in a constructive, encouraging way

when critiquing students' work as they should be fair, judging each good effort not according to preconceived notions but with an open mind. Conversely, sugar-coating a sub-par performance, especially when you know that a particular student can do better, is not helpful to that student—or fair to others. It is a matter of giving credit where credit is due, but not hesitating to withhold it where it is not earned. Of course, an open mind also means not denying credit to the student who argues logically and well for a point of view other than the one held by the instructor. Reasonable diversity of opinion is the core of intellectual discourse. And the open-minded teacher generally seeks to present course material taught repeatedly in a fresh way, integrating stimulating ideas, juxtapositions, and theories that have come to his or her attention in the interim since the previous go-around. I always was on the lookout for intriguing and pertinent news items and advertisement imagery that could be brought to bear in order to spice things up in class, for example.

Finally, it is with an open heart that a rewarding teacher-student relationship is cemented. Not unrelated to some of the things I have already touched upon, we are here dealing with the difficult and emotional process of growing up, of guiding other people's children to full maturity. Requiring of students what sometimes seemed to them and to me an endless number of papers and speaking "opportunities" in fact helps them to develop a pair of lifelong skills, namely, writing coherently and speaking confidently and articulately before others, that will prepare them for and serve them throughout their futures—in private life, in business, and in the public forum—long after many of the minute facts presented in college courses that they once knew are forgotten. Related to this, impressing upon students how to think and apply data—that is, demonstrating what they can do once the

facts are assembled—and honoring them by listening attentively when they speak up and give presentations in class are both vital. Time-consuming and frustrating for instructors as it often is, aiding students to attain polished communication skills is a professional promise and commitment to quality, a deed born of dedication and devotion, and thus in the end a labor of love. An open heart also means that students know that their teachers really do care about their relationships with their families, how they are getting along with their roommates, what other courses they are taking and how they are doing in them, their extracurricular interests, and naturally their future plans. In our case this is particularly true in regard to art majors and minors as well as other advisees assigned to us. Such personal familiarity helps, for example, when students inquire about graduate schools; among other things, truly knowing my students, I can better discuss with them the need to feel content, fulfilled, and satisfied with where they will be living for the next two or more years, so that their studies will not suffer. And of course an open heart is most valuable when we encounter a student who is somehow truly suffering.

Summing up, a teacher's open door, open mind, and open heart really can—but can only—open the door to myriad worlds of discovery and lifetimes of learning that, ultimately, students must enter by themselves. That is the goal of education. A teacher is merely the students' enabler, a facilitator, and those three things are the tools available. It only follows, as Aristotle might have said, that an excellent teacher is one who uses those tools wisely and well, who thus opens the door for students excellently.