The Satisfactions of

How we teach is ultimately a reflection of why we teach.

Elliot Eisner

Each year, thousands of new teachers enter the field. Almost all seek deep satisfaction from the processes of teaching. Among the many satisfactions that exist, I would like to describe six.

Great Ideas
The first satisfaction pertains to the opportunity to introduce students to ideas that they can chew on for the rest of their lives. Great teaching traffics in enduring puzzlements, persistent dilemmas, complex conundrums, enigmatic paradoxes. On the other hand, certainty is closed, and closed streets don't interest the mind. Great ideas have legs. They take you somewhere.

Ideas can also provide a natural high. With them, you can raise questions that can't be answered. These unanswerable questions should be a source of comfort. They ensure that you will always have something to think about! But why do puzzlements provide satisfaction? Because they invite the most precious of human abilities to take wing. I speak of imagination, the neglected stepchild of American education.

Questions invite you in. They stimulate possibilities. They give you a ride. And the best ones are those that tickle the intellect and resist resolution.

Immortality
Second, teaching provides opportunities to reach out to students in ways that ensure our own immortality. The images of teachers past populate our minds and memories. Those teachers past sit on our shoulders, ready to identify infractions and offer praise for work well done. Their lives live in ours, and our lives live in theirs.

The immortality I speak of is private, rather than the public immortality that is garnered by only a few. You don't have to be a Mahatma Gandhi to be remembered or loved. Living in the memories of our students is no meager accomplishment.

The Performance
Third, teaching makes it possible to play your own cello. Despite the beliefs of some well-intended technocrats, there are no recipes for performance, no teacher-proof scripts to follow. Teaching well requires improvisation within constraints. Constraints there will always be, but in the end, teaching is a custom job.

We cannot separate what is learned from the manner in which it is taught. The arts teach us that form and content cannot be divided; how something is described affects what is described. Curriculum once enacted cannot be separated from the way it was taught because how it was taught influences how it is learned.

Artistry
Fourth, teaching provides ample opportunities for both artistry and memorable forms of aesthetic experience. After 40 years in the classroom, I still have vivid recollections of my sophomore high school art class in which I taught 35 adolescents—some eager and some not so eager. Those memories, in many ways, are among the most
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aesthetically satisfying and vivid I own.

Artistry is not restricted to the fine arts. Teaching well also depends on artistry. Artistry is the ability to craft a performance, influence its pace, shape its rhythms and tone so its parts merge into a coherent whole. Artistry in teaching depends on embodied knowledge. The body plays a central role; it tunes you in to what's going on. You come to feel a process that often exceeds the capacity of language to describe.

Why are these memories so vivid? The nature of long-term memory might have something to do with it, but I think there is more to it. The occasions we remember are those that were most meaningful to us. I still remember my 3rd grade teacher, Miss Eva Smith, calling my name from one end of the classroom to the other to tell me, in a voice that the whole class could hear, "Elliot, your work is getting better!" Oh, how I needed to hear that! I did not do well in school. Or Miss Purle, who displayed my paintings on the walls of her classroom in a one-person show when I was in 4th grade. As a 9-year-old boy, I did not realize that I would carry these memories for the rest of my life.

A Passion for Learning

Fifth, teaching provides the occasions to share with others your deep affection for what you teach. When your eyes twinkle with delight at the prospect of introducing students to what you love, you create a sense of contagion and convey your love of what you teach. Your passion for your subject is the sincerest and most powerful invitation you can extend.

Making a Difference

Finally, teaching provides the opportunity to discover that something you once said in class made a difference to a former student whom you happen to encounter 20 years later. Students you taught in years past recall to you an idea or a throw-away line you used so long ago that you can no longer remember it. Teaching is filled with such surprises. They reassure us that our contributions sometimes exceed those we can recall.

Great Teachers Remembered

Elie Wiesel

As a doctoral student at Boston University in fall 1987, I was fortunate to have found a place in Professor Wiesel's course, Literature of Memory: Responses to Jewish Persecution. Just the year before, Wiesel had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Although he had attained worldwide recognition as a prolific author and spokesperson for peace—he wrote more than 30 works, including the famous Night—he had put none of his books on the required reading list for the course. Further, I cannot recall a single time in class when he referred to anything he had written. I remember Elie Wiesel as a man of uncommon humility.

Wiesel's course is the only one I have ever taken that included, as a requirement, a one-hour individual meeting with the professor. We were encouraged to ask him questions. He asked questions, too, to become more familiar with us. In my hour with him, I perceived a genuine curiosity and interest in the parts of my life that I shared with him.

At the beginning of each class, Professor Wiesel entered the room from the back and proceeded to his place up front. He acknowledged the students who greeted him along the way by coming to a full stop, making eye contact, addressing the student by name, and returning the greeting.

If a student raised a hand while Professor Wiesel was lecturing, he would stop speaking to respond immediately. A careful listener, he considered teaching an act of service. More from him than from anyone else, I learned the importance and value of respecting students.

—Max Malikow
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To read more tributes to teachers from the educators they inspired, check out a special online section of the March issue of Educational Leadership (www.ascd.org/el).
Mamie Till Mobley

"Miz Mobley" was my 5th grade teacher—and the mother of Emmett Till, who had been brutally murdered years before in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. At the time of his death in 1955, the Chicago teenager was only 14 years old. Mamie Till Mobley took the brutal slaying of her son and turned it into a mission to end the ignorance that caused his death. Her son lives on in every one of her students.

Miz Mobley was more than just a teacher. She knew me before I knew myself. She showed me who I could be. Demanded that I be the best I could be. Made it impossible to do otherwise on her watch.

I remember how history came alive in her animated face. She loved teaching and learning and believed that the truth would indeed set us free. I watched, rapt, as she paced the front of the classroom, reading to us, questioning us, challenging us—loving us. I can still hear her voice, see her there in front of us, gesturing with glee as she led us to the promised land of intellectual enlightenment. Her plump brown face reflected our excitement back to us, magnified it a thousand times, creating an irresistible force.

I read ahead in textbooks, just imagining what she would sound like telling us these stories, showing us how to solve the problems, explaining how to read between the lines. I wanted her to shine on me the way she always did when she saw that I was trying, really listening.

You wanted to sit up close. You wanted to stand next to the fire. And most of all, when you left her, you wanted to take that light out into the world and shine it on everyone and everything. So the whole world could see and know and want to do better.

—Cynthia Dagnal Myron
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But the satisfactions of teaching extend beyond the academic. Indeed, the most lasting contributions come from saving lives, rescuing a child from despair, restoring a sense of hope, soothing discomfort. We remember these occasions longest because they matter. These occasions transcend academic interests. They address the human needs that all of us share.

The images of teachers past populate our minds and memories.

The Child Made Whole

At a time when schools are buffeted by performance standards and high-stakes testing, we must remember that the student is a whole person who has an emotional and social life, not just an intellectual one. And this is as true for graduate students in the grandest citadels of higher education as it is for students in elementary school. We teachers need to be more nurturing. The more we stress only what we can measure in school, the more we need to remember that not everything that is measurable matters, and not everything that matters is measurable. We need to pay attention to the whole child and address the whole child in our teaching practices. How we teach is related to achieving the deep satisfactions of teaching.

I have had the moments that I have described—and new teachers just starting out will have them, too. I envy them the journey. Oh, to be able to begin that journey once again today!

No such luck!

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