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Teaching Philosophy

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“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy
in creative expression and knowledge.”

~ Albert Einstein

Teaching and learning are analogous to medicine and healing. The doctor does not heal the patient but provides the care and best possible environment for the healing process to occur. Learning, like healing, can only be encouraged by indirect means. There is an elusive "x" factor in both learning and healing that is not under the control of either patient, doctor, student or teacher. At some point a broken bone knits itself together to become whole and at some point the student just "gets it".

Both of the two above decisive moments occur due to an extended period of preparation. Bones heal naturally, but without a doctor the break may heal crooked. Likewise people can learn on their own, sometimes very effectively. Formal instruction and expert care make sure that the healing or learning process progresses in the most optimal manner. Few things are more painful than having to re-train and break bad habits or break and re-set old injuries. Compassion and knowledge are the two most important elements some one needs from either their doctor or their teacher. Without compassion, one cannot understand what the student needs and only with knowledge and kindness can one figure out how to help them achieve it. The best teachers are those who teach us how to learn and teach ourselves. I think Mark Van Doren, the American poet and influential Columbia University professor, said it best: The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.

My father taught Landscape Architecture at Louisiana State University for many years. He prided himself on his ability to find a "D" student and in the span of one semester, transform him into an "A" student. He did this by inspiring his students to believe in themselves, work hard and instilled in them good study habits. It sounds remarkably simple, but I believe that the key to his success was his own dedication, compassion and faith in his student's ability to live up to their own potential rather than down to the expectations of others. In short, he believed in them and got them to believe in themselves. Another such person is Dr. K. Patricia Cross, a professor of education, researcher and administrator who worked at Cornell, U.C.-Berkeley and Harvard. She estimates that the: The task of the excellent teacher is to stimulate ordinary people to unusual effort... it is in making winners out of ordinary people.

I find this particularly true, some students will succeed even with a bad teacher because they are hard working, brilliant and self motivated. The majority, myself included, live on the razor's edge and our success is measured not only by our own efforts but by the teachers who inspired us. Horace Mann, an early 19th century education reformer, US Congressman and Senator, writes: A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring a pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron. Inspiration is akin to the fire in the forge, tricky to kindle and once ignited, requiring constant attention to maintain. Very much like lighting a real fire, inspiring students comes from a spark caused by friction and an accelerant quickening the flame. I use the friction of ideas and creativity with the desire for self expression, accelerated by encouragement and fueled by knowledge and technique. Both student and teacher must strike while the iron is hot, the inspiration fresh and alloy the mettle of the student with the knowledge of the teacher.