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# LEARNING TO TEACH BY OBSERVING GOOD TEACHERS

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Sometimes I feel as if I am a long distance runner participating in the world's most important relay race. The previous runners on my team have run consistently well and I am blessed with an excellent starting position. The runners who follow me are anxious that I keep up the good race so that they may have a sound start.

As a teacher of Spanish, I owe a great deal to those who ran the race so well before me. My secondary school Spanish teacher, college French professor, graduate school Portuguese professor and my major professor are in many ways with me everytime I enter the classroom. From each of these teachers I received a gift which I hope to pass on to my students.

My Spanish teacher in secondary school introduced me to the discipline I now teach. She did so with such thoughtfulness, patience, and love that she made it impossible for even the most unruly fifteen year old to ignore the Spanish language and its people. Her lessons were so rich with cultural information that we were often not aware that the painful task of verb conjugation was taking place. Verbs such as comer (to eat), beber (to drink), cocinar (to cook), were introduced and practiced while she helped students prepare typical meals from the Hispanic world. Test taking became almost pleasurable because the music of some great Spanish composers such as De Falla played softly in the background.

The ultimate gift of this dedicated teacher was a study trip to Mexico.

She arranged for all of the students to live with Mexican families. Living with a native family was probably the single most important aspect of my first trip to another country. This experience reinforced in a dramatic way all that had been introduced during the previous year, and I began to understand on a more profound level her constant admonition that we be "students of" rather than "tourists in" other countries.

From my college French teacher I learned a great deal about sensitivity to the particular needs of students and about the importance of being joyful in the classroom. By the time I started to study French, Spanish pronunciation was so ingrained in me that every time I opened my mouth in French class I sounded like a Spaniard in Paris. I was embarrassed and confused. This teacher refused to give up on me and worked with me for many hours outside the classroom.

Both in our private sessions and in the classroom she approached the teaching of French with great excitement and energy. During one of our frequent private sessions to correct my sad pronunciation, I asked her how she maintained such a joyful attitude, especially with students like me who converted her beautiful French into Spanish. I have never forgotten her response. She firmly believed that teaching was a great honor and privilege. Teaching was an absolute joy because it demanded that she leave all worries and problems outside of the classroom so that she was able to concentrate on communicat-

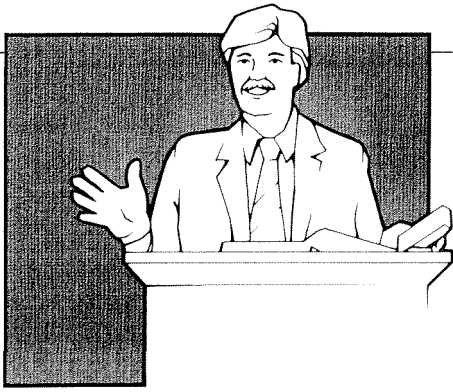
ing her area of expertise to a new learner.

I think of these words frequently as I walk down the halls of Kennesaw College towards my classroom. Many days my mind has grown dull with the details of the day, or my body has grown tired because one of my children was sick all night. But when my hand touches the classroom door I know that teaching something I love will soon cure the dulled mind and the tired body. What worked so wonderfully for my French teacher is now working for me.

My graduate school Portuguese teacher probably taught me more about specific techniques in language teaching than any other person. For twenty years he had served as director of a large institute in Brazil. From this experience he learned the importance of emphasizing basic communication skills in the classroom. He also learned how important it was that students overcome their fear of making mistakes, especially oral mistakes.

From the first day of class students were expected to actively participate in oral communication exercises. Several exercises which he developed emphasized stretching very basic language skills so that a higher level of conversation might be reached in a short period of time. His constant cry was "Communicate, communicate — do not worry about mistakes!"

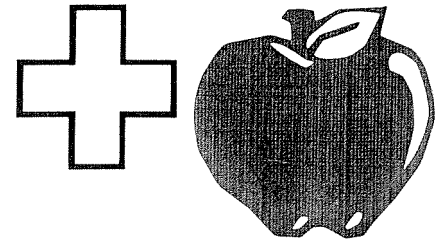
My graduate school major professor enriched my professional life beyond measure by introducing me to the relatively new discipline of



Comparative and International Education. This professor greatly expanded my world and at the same time gave me the necessary tools with which I might better understand it. He challenged me to stretch my professional life in directions I had never even dreamed would be possible.

Those who have run the race before me have most certainly given me a solid starting position, and if I am anything as a teacher it is because of their profound influence. But I cannot fail to acknowledge the influence of my colleagues who are currently running the same relay with me. My teachers insured me a good start, but it is my colleagues at Kennesaw College who keep me on the good path. My fellow teachers, both in my discipline of foreign languages, and those in other areas of study, are a gifted group of teachers. I daily learn from them, and many times with their blessings, steal good ideas from them for use in my classroom. I have often thought that my classroom activities are much more the result of a collaborative effort of my colleagues rather than my own individual effort.

Why do I run this particular race? I run it because it is a privilege to help others learn a language and a culture which I love. I run it because it is a joy to be with so many others who know how important this race is. Most of all I run it, carrying the good gifts of my teachers and colleagues, with the hope that the future will be better for all. 🍎



## POWER OF POSITIVE TEACHING CONT.

The biggest change has been in my exams. The goal is to accurately measure learning, not memorization. Thus, I allow students to prepare a study sheet to bring to the exam. This 'security blanket' lessens anxiety and it forces students to review their understanding of the material in writing. The test then focuses on comprehension, not the students' ability to remember. To further this feeling, students are allowed the opportunity to explain answers to objective questions. A correct explanation will merit points even though the student marked the wrong answer. This tactic has all but eliminated the familiar cry of "trick question!"

I also include short essay questions on each exam in order to utilize positive reinforcement to the utmost. I use women and minorities in my questions as often as males. I avoid using red ink when grading and the result has been unbelievable. Students are intimidated by the red comments and view them as negative criticism. I have found that comments in other colors are cheerfully accepted. In addition, instead of using minus signs and points missed, I use plus signs and points accumulated. I also write "GOOD" or "Well Done" somewhere on each student's paper. More importantly, I want to reward those answers that go beyond "good." Thus, I give bonus points to those students who go beyond the basics in answering a question. Rather than asking students to conform their thinking to mine, I reward students who suggest alternative answers in addition to giving the

standard response. The bonus points condition students to look for other solutions instead of narrowly viewing the question.

Another important tactic is to minimize an occasional bad grade. Many good students experience an occasional letdown, and they will become discouraged or frustrated as a result. Thus, a class policy that minimizes a poor grade (perhaps by averaging it against the highest grade and then substituting the

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**“Nobody likes to hear negative comments. Everyone likes to be told that he or she did well.”**

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average in place of the low grade) will result in continued effort by students despite a poor showing.

The underlying purpose of these tactics is to teach students to think for themselves and to have confidence in their ability to learn. In this regard, my wife always reminds me of the saying, "Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime." As President Siegel has expressed in her invitational teaching presentations, a teaching method that rewards and praises accomplishments by students will instill respect and a feeling of "I can." Negative reinforcement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. 🍎