

A Baker's Dozen of Teaching Sins

Over the years, in different schools in (different countries, I have visited a good many classrooms and watched a lot of good and bad teaching. I even spend some useful time visiting my own classroom and watching myself teach—well and poorly. The following paragraphs describe some common teaching sins I have seen and some corresponding virtues.

Sin 1

Repeating the answer.

We've all heard – and probably participated in—dialogues like this:

TEACHER What do we mean, then, by *cooperation*?

STUDENT ROBERT Well, it means people working together to, you know, get something done that they all want to do and maybe can't do by themselves.

TEACHER Right! – a working together toward a common objective.

This is a sin because when the teacher repeats the answer, the students learn that they don't have to listen to their fellow student, only to the teacher. Further, the answerers learn that they need not speak loudly enough to be audible to the entire class, only to the teacher.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Letting the student's answer or comment stand, unamplified and unrefined, as a stimulus to the next step in the lesson or discussion:

STUDENT ROBERT Well, it means people working together to, you know, get something done that they all want to do and maybe can't do by themselves.

Teacher says nothing.

VOICE FROM CLASS What? I didn't hear. I don't get it.

TEACHER Robert?

STUDENT ROBERT (Louder): It's People working.

From this the class learns to listen to Robert, Robert practices speaking loudly and clearly enough to be understood, the teacher dominates less, and the class learns more.

Sin 2

Mistaking brilliant conversation for good discussion.

Often a teacher experiences an almost euphoric exhilaration from a brilliant exchange of views involving the teacher and the 4 or 5 best students in a class of 25. Teachers allow themselves to forget the 20 who aren't taking part, many of whom are confused by the rapid-fire exchange or have stopped paying attention. CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Trying to be constantly aware of the state of mind and attention of every person in the class and – during any period – directing questions or remarks to bring out at least two thirds of the students, especially the quiet ones who need encouraging. At least once or twice during the week everyone participates in classroom discussions. If the teacher does engage in dialogue with a single student, the teacher moves away from the student so that the conversation flows across the class.

Sin 3

Talking too much.

Most teachers, including me, talk too much. We somehow believe that what we have to say is terribly important and that we must not let any aspect of any subject go uncommented upon.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Listening. Teachers moderate discussions among students by listening, observing and now and then throwing in a guiding question, but mostly by simply keeping the students talking – one at a time.

Sin 4

Giving pat answers.

I have heard teachers say something like this when considering whether or not to teach a topic: "I really don't want to go into that because I don't know what to say about it." If a student's question is not neatly answerable, teachers tend to avoid it. They limit discussion in class to those neat packages of truth that they possess and can unwrap and bestow upon their students as comforting gifts.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Considering raising questions more important than giving answers. Good teachers believe that thinking out answers is a more vital skill than remembering answers. We should teach *how* to think, not *what* to think.

Sin 5

Using the teacher's mind as a filter.

A few years ago an ad hoc student curriculum committee criticized the teaching at a well-known school by observing that too often all the ideas from students were filtered through the mind of the teacher. Because in most schools some students are brighter than some of us teachers (even a kindergartner has insights that we have long since forgotten or rejected), this is a sinful limitation on learning.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Seeing the classroom as a hotbed of new ideas, methods and approaches to truth. This does not mean that obvious and simple matters are grappled with as philosophical questions (there is the multiplication table; there is the alphabet; there are conventions of punctuation), but the more the teacher can learn *with* the students or even be surpassed by them, the better.

Sin 6

Not returning tests and papers promptly.

The sinful teacher requires the work to be in on time but allows days, even weeks, to pass before the work is dealt with – edited, "corrected," marked, commented on and handed back. The teacher forgets that the sooner the paper is returned, the greater the learning will be. Furthermore, a poor example of promptness and caring is set. CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Not procrastinating, getting the papers back in a day or two. Experience has taught teachers not to assign so many papers that prompt action on all of them is impossible.

Sin 7

Making pupils learn at home and using class time for testing.

"All right, for tomorrow learn the material on pages 25 to 32 and write a one-page essay on it" is too often the kind of assignment teachers give. Who's left to do the teaching? The parents or the poor,

struggling kids themselves. Classroom time is spent on testing whether or not the students learned whatever it was they were supposed to learn – a sterile process called recitation.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Using class time to teach. For the assignment mentioned in the preceding paragraph, teachers would preteach; that is, they would make sure there were no insurmountable difficulties in the material to be read, and they would teach or review how to go about writing a one-page essay.

Sin 8

Not helping students to understand the purpose of their work.

When students ask, "Why do we have to do this? I don't see the point," we too often answer, "Because it will help you" or "Because you should do your homework" or "Because I say so." Thus the students, if they're dutiful, go through the academic motions without understanding how the assignment is a part of a larger objective worth accomplishing.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Being constantly alert to opportunities for showing why the work is important and worth doing – even if the reward is in the distant future. We need continually to cultivate in the minds of our students an understanding of the larger context within which the specific pieces of work are done. A sense of context tremendously improves learning, and it's not enough that the grand scheme be in our minds. It must be in the minds of our students.

Sin 9

Mistaking silence for learning.

Many students, unless they are extremely honest or rebellious, discover how to put on the look of learning even though their minds may be buzzing about subjects far from the classroom. It's a sin for a teacher or visiting administrator to fail to detect when a high percentage of the classroom population is not mentally engaged. Many teachers waste months maintaining a quiet, orderly, polite, mindless class.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Learning to recognize the glazed eye, the absent mind, the false face of surface respect. Good teachers keep things open enough so

that true lack of interest can be expressed. When that happens, teachers explain the purpose (or get the students to do so), change the pace, or urge tolerance and application for the sake of later academic or aesthetic rewards.

Sin 10

Failing to distinguish freedom from chaos.

It is a professional sin not to be able to control a class – most of the time and when we really mean it. If a teacher does not get whatever help he or she needs, either from the class itself or from outside authority, the teacher is derelict. I have seen too many teachers accept the noisy, random, purposeless activity of their classes (which is not the same thing as a businesslike buzz) and rationalize it as a constructive use of freedom.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Recognizing that order is the first principle but that order is a many-splendored thing and not necessarily synonymous with silence or motionlessness. A good class, using stimulating materials and discussing stimulating ideas, often departs from a basis of strict order, but it can be called back to strict order if need be.

Even good teachers occasionally have trouble with order. They don't hesitate to require a class to go to a strictly one-at-a-time, raise-hand-and-be-called-on basis; to send for help; to remove a student; to have a talk with a troublemaker after class. During this talk they try to help the student figure out for himself ways to make his behavior more acceptable. A good teacher, of course, never uses sarcasm or public embarrassment to achieve order.

Sin 11

Allowing past performance to affect current evaluation.

Too many teachers judge their students by what they expect them to do rather than by what pupils actually do. Such teachers don't allow for the possibility that four bad papers may precede one excellent one, that the prankster of last week may not be the prankster today, that the liar of February is telling the truth in March. In short, we are not alert enough to give our students a chance to be reborn.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Never

irretrievably categorizing a student dull or bright, poorly behaved or well-behaved, lazy or hard working. If we must err, however, we should err on the side of optimism and high expectations.

Sin 12

Failing to, study student records.

A good school keeps good records that give such information as whether a child has had remedial work, whether he habitually has a midwinter slump, whether he needs extra challenge, whether he loves to act in skits or has starred in painting. Good records tell whether there was a family catastrophe last year or a final triumph over a long-term difficulty. It is a sinful waste to believe that teachers should not use the school records to find out these things about each pupil.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Finding out all one can about the history of each student and using that knowledge to help, support and encourage. Good teachers are enlightened by the knowledge, but never limited by it.

Sin 13

Playing psychiatrist.

A tempting sin is to believe that we teachers should probe into personal problems. This approach fails to recognize that our knowledge of the student is really rather superficial. Few teachers know enough to pronounce on serious personal problems.

CORRESPONDING VIRTUE: Acting within the bounds of one's information and training. Good teachers recognize that they do know something about their academic subjects, something about how children learn, and perhaps, if they've had some experience, something about how students of given ages and circumstances are likely to act. They can report on observed facts and help student and parent see things in perspective. They concentrate on learning and behavior, not on emotions and deprivations.

Wise teachers recognize when a student's problem is beyond their ability to deal with it; they refer the student to a specialist. Meanwhile, they don't give up on the student but steadily offer help and fair treatment – lovingly and consistently.

by Eric W. Johnson