

## **Are Teachers Born or Made? The Necessity of Teacher Training Programs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**The question of teachers being born or made is one that can be discussed agreeably or is too complex to be discussed amicably. This 1,500-word essay addresses this question as one that is uncomplicated. Predictably, the question is answered as follows: Exceptionally effective teachers are both born (i.e. gifted) and made (i.e. trained in pedagogy).**

**The author agrees with the late A. Bartlett Giamatti's assessment: "Teachers believe they have a gift for giving; it drives them with the same irrepressible drive that drives others to create a work of art or a market or a building."**

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**L**ike professional athletes and accomplished artists, "teachers believe they have a gift (that) drives them." And like athletes and artists, teachers have a gift that is refined throughout a career by training and performance. Perhaps you are thinking, "Oh no! It's another nature-nurture theory!" If so, you are correct. Exceptional teachers are born with personality characteristics that are developed by experience and enhanced by specific information that only education can provide.

In 1936 two psychologists turned every page of an unabridged English dictionary and found 17,953 words that describe psychological differences, or traits, among people (Allport and Odbert, 1936). To the extent that personality has a genetic component, teachers are born. Also, like exceptional athletes and artists, their genetic gifts either will thrive or lie dormant depending on their nourishment.

Before presenting four specific thoughts in response to this question, I offer this conclusion: There is no such entity as a born teacher. However, by nature, some people possess a combination of personality characteristics that are conducive to effective teaching. Further, these characteristics have been enriched by a lifetime of favorable

nurturing. Nevertheless, even the most genetically blessed teacher would benefit from a teacher education program.

(1) It is undeniable that content knowledge of a discipline is indispensable for effective teaching. Also, it is true that an individual's characteristic pattern of thinking, acting, and relating (i.e. personality) cannot be appreciably altered by an education department's curriculum. However, to assert that content knowledge and personality are the only two qualities of an effective teacher would be an untested assumption. Although personality cannot be taught, specific characteristics and behaviors can be isolated and developed. Without teacher education research, the traits and strategies of effective teachers would not be identified.

(2) History is replete with exceptional teachers like Jesus, Socrates, and countless others in professions like medicine, engineering, law, and architecture who did not study "how to teach." These are teachers who simply presented and present of plentitude of their knowledge and force of their personalities.

Although Socrates and Jesus would appear to make a case against teacher education programs, actually the opposite is true. Jesus employed parables in much of his teaching. Socrates taught using questions. There is much to be learned from defining effective teaching and analyzing the techniques of Jesus, Socrates, and others. Teacher education is concerned with identifying instructional strategies that work, and training prospective teachers in the application of those strategies.

As for medicine, engineering, law, etc., these are the technical fields. Primary and secondary teachings are different from technical education. First graders are not medical students. Further, it is reasonable to ask: "How many medical and law professors would be better instructors if they had pedagogical training?" It is noteworthy that the word "pedagogy" comes from the combination of the Greek words for "child" (pais) and "to lead" (agein). The word itself addresses the teaching of children rather than undergraduate and graduate students.

Further, medical and law students are left to themselves to deal with their learning disabilities, developmental disorders, and other problems they might have in mastering material. In primary and secondary education the student is not left to face such challenges unaided. Primary and secondary teachers are expected to recognize and accommodate to the needs of challenged students. Nobody is born with a knowledge of how to identify and respond to these students. The ability to teach adaptively requires training.

(3) The assumption that a teacher's effectiveness will improve over time with repetition is an untested hypothesis. Teacher education provides for improvement by teaching teachers how to formulate plans for instruction and evaluate the resulting classroom experiences. The repetition of ineffective teaching leads to entrenchments in bad practice, not improvement. While it is probable that lecturers will improve with repetition and research in their disciplines, teaching involves more than lecturing. Certainly, primary and secondary teachers are not mere lecturers.

Over the years I've assigned a paper entitled: "An Exceptionally Effective Teacher." Students are required to select a teacher they have experienced at any level of schooling who they consider a superior teacher. A twelve-item checklist is provided to guide the students in describing the teacher of their choice. One of the items calls for an

evaluation of the teacher's repertoire of methods of instruction. In the years that this assignment has been given, less than ten percent of the selected teachers have been college professors. Discussions with the students have revealed that one of the characteristics of their exceptionally effective teachers is their use of a variety of methods of instruction. Further, when a college professor has been chosen, rarely has it been one who teaches exclusively by lecturing.

(4) No clear-thinking teacher educator would say that all untrained teachers are incompetent. Untrained teachers are not necessarily incompetent, but neither is it professional to assume their competency. The academic community lives, moves, and has its being in research and scholarship. It is not in the spirit of the academy to assume competency of untrained teachers simply because they've been teaching.

In the movie "Dead Poets Society" Robin Williams plays Mr. Keating, a charismatic high school English teacher. (Actually, Robin Williams plays himself, showing what it would be like to have Robin Williams as a teacher.) Few, if any of us, could be trained to be as dynamic in the classroom as Robin Williams. However, all of us, no matter how gifted, could benefit from training in pedagogy, the art and science of teaching. By analogy, professional singers have voice teachers and major league baseball players have batting coaches. Teachers, not lecturers, require continuing education and maintenance. (Note that ministers, who instruct by way of lectures referred to as sermons, study sermon preparation and delivery in homiletics as a part of seminary education.)

William Butler Yeats wrote, "Education is not the filling of the pail, but the lighting of a fire" (Kelly-Gangi and Patterson, 2001). Teacher education helps make the classroom a more combustible place.

### References

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- Kelly-Gangi & Patterson, J. (2001) "Celebrating Teachers: A Book of Appreciation," Barnes & Noble, Inc. New York, NY.