

The Persona of a Teacher



As a scientist and teacher, I like to make things clear:
If a system receives inputs, certain outputs should appear;
When I put a plant in sunlight, and give it water, it should grow;
When I drop a ball and let it fall, I know which way that it should go.

On the whole, we find connections relating everything;
In isolation, we can see outcomes our actions bring.
We don't need to know the details of what makes our world respond;
As long as it repeats, we know right where it belongs.

Teaching, I'm afraid, is much messier than science.
It is built on hopes, and fears, independence, and reliance,
The way things are presented, and the way that they're received,
The things that bring us struggle, and the things that we've achieved.

Science would predict that, if a lesson finds success,
The instruction should repeat and produce the same process,
But the variables have changed with different students, different classes.
That A-plus bit of teaching is now viewed through different glasses.

I think that the profession wants to test and quantify,
To think of things as actions to check off and verify,
But the rubric doesn't score what the rubric cannot see:
A hidden, special something makes the evals disagree.

I have always been aware of the existence of a feeling
That makes some teachers magical, inspiring, and appealing.
This "it" factor of sorts cannot be learned from a book;
Sometimes it's wit and humor, or a reassuring look,

Sometimes it's being flexible when no one else will budge,
Sometimes it's holding ground when students need a steady judge,
And sometimes it is age, gender, background, race, or creed
That helps establish bonds that a certain student needs.

So what is the persona that I've crafted and presented?
Is this really me, or a character I've invented?
If I'm always intentional, does it make me less authentic?
Is a teacher's persona something more, or is it propped up by aesthetic?

When my students face struggles, I try to be understanding.
I push all my students, but I'm not too demanding.
I show them I care through dedication and through prep,
But if the plan takes a turn I'm not afraid to sidestep.

I'm quick to respond with a line or a joke.
I try hard to be "with it" or (as the kids say) "woke."
When I teach, I perform to make our lessons exciting,
But does that improve their learning or just give it nicer lighting?

The person that we are is how our students find their space.
They see the way we act, and they analyze our face,
This also shapes instruction and the style we present.
There's more to our curriculum than worksheets and content.

In a world and a school where content is king,
I think we should reflect on the persona we bring.
How do we make visible these aspects from within?
How can we define ourselves from the moment we begin?

And how do we respect that there are other ways as well
That are as (or more) effective to help students to excel?
And probably most essential, how can we quantify the hidden
So the evals are wholistic and the rubrics are rewritten?

There may not be an answer, but I think that it's all right.
My goal here is reflection and perhaps to cast a light:
We all provide our "something" and we all deserve our feature
Because we live our lives in the persona of a teacher.

Download Poem

Joe Cossette is a 2014 Knowles Teaching Fellow who teaches honors physical science and IB Physics at Minnetonka High School in Minnetonka, Minnesota. He is passionate about making science fun and spends much of his time writing science song parodies and reworking lessons to be in the form of escape rooms or murder mysteries. Joe shares thoughts and lesson ideas on his blog passionatelycurioussci.weebly.com. Reach him at joe.cossette@knowlesteachers.org.