

Zen and the Act of Teaching



A reflective journal

By David Deubelbeiss

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This reflective journal is intended for practicing or inservice teachers. It can be used as part of a course or by teachers themselves.

It is admittedly philosophical and grew out of my thoughts regarding my own teaching but also my own use of reflective writing in my teacher training courses.

Teachers are encouraged to fill out the brief journal passages based on the prompts. Discussion is encouraged. I hope teachers will grow and turn these mirrors into windows.

Happy teaching,

David Deubelbeiss



Your only competitor is yourself.

Every day we look around and feel we have to "keep up". Keep up to what? Too much of life and teaching is "flywheel" and not the real, simple substance. Why? Why are we keeping up and not thinking of "real" quality and learning. More, more, more usually equals less.

Do not look at your colleagues and think "what a poor teacher am I". Look at yourself and think - "what a better teacher I can become".

The only competition is with what you could potentially become given your inner qualities. These qualities do not match any other teacher's. They are your own and unique. Treasure them, water them and let them grow without the noise of competition..... When you have mastered this, your students will also discover it and you.



*Teach your mouth to speak
what is in your heart.*

The essence of teaching is "emotion" - the bottled wisdom and personal digestion of experience on the part of the teacher. Knowledge devoid of this is but gristle we would chew up. Knowledge imparted with this is energy and life for those receiving.

There is nothing "dry" about good teaching.



Teaching is the art of asking the right questions.

Ask the right question and only then, the answer, the "good" will appear.

In teaching, we should ask these 3 ancient questions of all our acts, all our lessons.

1. Is it true? (of the good)
2. Is it necessary? (doesn't waste time)
3. Is it kind? (personal, has "voice")

If we pass through these gates in our teaching - we are participating in the Socratic notion of "the good". Let no day pass without thinking of this good, so said Socrates when asked for his own philosophy.



First you must master all the laws, then you can break them.

Students need to master fundamentals. Then, they can break all the rules and create "their own", be "their own".

First, we must organize, plan and proceed. Once mastered, we can then lend the world beauty through creative disorder.

No artist ever drew a great painting without first learning how to hold the brush or draw a straight line.....



Teaching is the art of making the invisible, visible.

Despite appearances, all "things", all "ideas" are connected. There is an ALL. There are invisible strings that bind like to like. Language reveals this in metaphor, thought reveals it in poetry and the teacher reveals it in his or her lessons.

After all the facts are learned, the journey is only a quarter done. We must fill all the spaces that separate these stones in the endless stream of life. Only then can we bridge and travel between what we knew and what we want to know. This, we then call "understanding".

Teach so the spaces are revealed - there are enough rocks around for the students to start making the bridge.



Enjoyment is not expensive. Happiness and contentment is within and all around.

Sometimes, we think and equate "education" with money and reputation. Harvard means you are "better" than "Dodge City College". A day at the local amusement park is "better" than a walk down the local ravine. Nothing could be more "delusional".

Value is granted by the processing within. We are actors in our own lives, not heads stuffed full of straw. As teachers, we have to allow our students to see this natural disposition for "self fulfillment" and help them strengthen it. It is not that small or even bigger is better. It is not excitement or even flash that is better. What is "better" is that which awakens us, engages our minds and makes us part of the beauty of life. We teachers are "those that awaken the tao" – we are, one hand clapping....





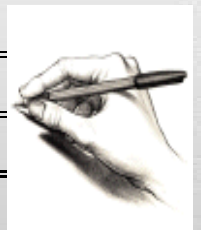
“Don’t let your schooling get in the way of your education.”

Mark Twain



What to you is, “the purpose of education”? Why did you become a teacher?

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When you don't know, say so!

A teacher doesn't "know", a teacher "is".
The greatest teachers are humble and learn
to say they don't know and in doing so, let
their students join them on the journey of
thought rather than keeping them as
spectators as the train roars "bye".

Wise teachers do not hesitate to say, "Sorry,
I don't know. Good question!"



Plans are only as good as the strength of the willingness to abandon them.

Teaching entails planning. Especially thinking through the lesson delivery and content in terms of the student's vantage point. This is the main filter through which all lessons must pass to succeed. Yet, a plan is an ideal. The real world, the enacted curriculum is messy. There are fire drills and bloody noses. There are lost notebooks and slow computers. There are those absent and those present.

To succeed one must be willing to abandon, at any moment and at any time. It is the present which is the present and not its relation to the future. As you teach, teach in that moment. Your plans are only a map - there are innumerable, real and unmarked paths to reach your destination.



What we teach is not what we teach!

In all human acts there is a mystery, a hole, a multitude of other movements. Same with teaching.

Every teacher has an objective, a target, a curriculum, a focus for the lesson. But is this what is taught? Or what is attempted to be taught?

In language (which is so multifarious like life), most of the learning is outside of the objective. You aim to teach past "ed" verbs and one student learns the word "transitive" another the phrase, "May I go to the washroom?". Learning happens not always as the teacher wishes nor as the goal presents itself...

If the spirit is correct, learning will happen. We need an objective, we need hands on the steering wheel to keep our cart on the trail, we need a destination. But more important is to be open to the experience of the journey getting there. My what a view! -- that is learning.

Create a classroom that enjoys the view -- the destination will then arrive.



There are always two ways forward.

When teaching (or learning, the flip image), there are always two ways forward. Struggle and effort, striving and "working" AND relaxing, letting go, finding flow.

When teaching seek the right moment. There are times to sweat and attack the mountain. There are times to sit on the bench and enjoy the view. Both are a way "forward".



See the BIG picture.

"The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing." - a fragment of verse from Archilochus.

When teaching we often get lost in the forest. Trees are everywhere, there are so many fires to put out, there are so many trees to chop down!

The master teacher always acts with the forest in mind. The big picture is what he/she understands and each little action is informed by it. The master teacher is not a sly, intelligent fox but a wise, slow and sure hedgehog. Focus your teaching from this perspective - HAPPINESS. It is from there that all other actions are made good.



Nothing is Something.

**When teaching, allow for space.
When teaching allow for thought.
When teaching pause.**

**So many teachers really fear
silence in the classroom - they
demand a "quick" answer. Wait
for your students to think before
discussing. The clanging bell rings
no beauty!**

**Sometimes doing nothing, is doing
something.**



The “whole” before the hill.

When one sets out on a journey, one must know in the mind, the panorama of the journey. After that, each hill may be tackled, each curve encountered.

When teaching, begin with the whole. The music before the notes, the feeling before the canvas, the idea before the thing. One must have a container before one may carry water.

Teach widely and then narrow in. Only then will the facts find a home to rest within.



Everything is Good.

When teaching, we too often see the "can't". A student can't do this and a student can't do that.... CAN'T is not something that exists, it is a phantom, it is illegitimate. There is only CAN and the manifestation of that into the world and the classroom.

Everything is good. What we view as "bad" is only our reaction to it, not the thing itself. The universe has a reason we know not of. A master teacher keeps things positive and emphasizes what WE CAN. The energy of life is that of good and we should ask ourselves as teachers, what Socrates asked so long ago..."let no day pass without thinking of "the good". Use sugar and your students will grow fat with wisdom and intelligence. When they fall down, they will learn to fall down looking up. And if you are looking up, you can get up. Teach with the good on your mind.



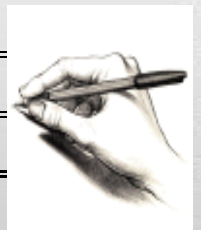


**“A teacher’s job is to help those students
who can’t help themselves.”**



**You have several students in your classroom who have
trouble learning. What can you do to help them?**

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Latent structure rules obvious structure.

It is by grace that knowledge and understanding are conveyed. We may "know" something in an obvious fashion but we won't understand it until we connect with it in grace, in spirit and in essence.

A wise teacher transmits knowledge invisibly. The simple act of a teacher reading alone at their desk teaches students far more about reading than any direct phonics lesson. A teacher's bright face when speaking teaches far more about mathematics than the obvious lines and signs on the board. It is by grace, by essence that all true knowledge multiplies (and all ignorance also...). Be a teacher who teaches as much "invisibly" as "obviously".

The wind is everywhere but who sees it?



Keep balance. Too much is the same as too little.

When teaching, spend time on what works. Keep a balance between the active and the passive. Don't do too much but rather focus on the experience and the "harmony" that enables learning. The knife that finds the middle way, never hits bone and thus, never dulls. Find the spaces between your students' needs and the curriculum. In this way your lessons will always be sharp.



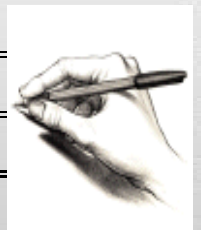


“Teaching is the art of the possible.”

How do you negotiate with students? Is this important to you? How will you find out about your students' needs?



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*The most important thing you'll ever say is,
"I don't know".*

Teachers we are told, ask and answer questions. However, the truth and knowledge stands somewhere between. There is a mystery to everything.

When you don't know - say so. It is the most glorious thing in the world, to teach your students that beyond this moment, beyond this experience, beyond this content, beyond this question and answer - there is a vast playground of unknowing which we can frolic in.

Teach - "I don't know" and you will give your students the gift of curiosity and thought.



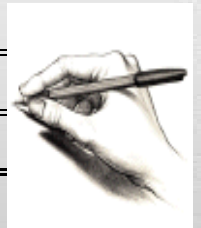


“What we want is often different from what we need”

Reflect on the questions your students might ask at the beginning of the year. What do they want to know and find out? Make a list.



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I Met a Genius (by Charles Bukowski)

I met a genius on the train
today
about 6 years old,
he sat beside me
and as the train
ran down along the coast
we came to the ocean
and then he looked at me
and said,
it's not pretty.

it was the first time I'd
realized
that.



Practice what you preach.

If you wish to change the actions of any person, do not lecture, do not tell, **SHOW**. Learning is at all times, **NOTICING**. When the class is loud - the teacher should not **SCREAM** for them to be quiet. Rather, speak in a low tone. Put on soft music. Students will notice and respond.

If you want to get your students reading - don't tell them. Sit at **YOUR DESK** and read. They will notice and soon follow.

If you want to get your students motivated -- don't give them all kinds of "candies". Act motivated yourself - your passion will soon rub off.

But always remember, "You can lead a student to the classroom but you can't make them think."



Go deep, go slow.

Be a good masseuse.

Learning, like life itself, is about the experience. Haste makes not just waste but disables us of the important ability to "notice". All learning is "noticing", noticing the world around us and noticing the connections and the change happening.

Teach so that the lesson is an experience. Still waters run deep. Don't rush to the end, there is no end. Knowledge is everywhere and infinite. Aim to dive in and not skim across the waters. All the jewels sink to this bottom. Bring your students there.....



SHOW - Don't TELL.

The world is a forest of symbols which we walk through. We perceive and are acted upon indelibly by strong and ancient forces which surround us and demonstrate to us - ways of being, acting and living. The conscious mind, that voiced, is but a very small part of "the force of the world" which acts upon us and makes us change each step through the forest.

In teaching, we are perfect when in grace, in quietude we model ways of being. Simply sitting at your desk reading and enjoying yourself teaches students much more about "reading" than any lesson voices and volume ever could. Whenever possible, show - don't tell students. This is the natural and perfect way of teaching.



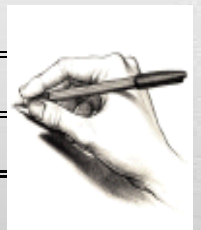


“Tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I’ll understand.”



How do you explain to students what you will do in a class? How do you model activities for your students?

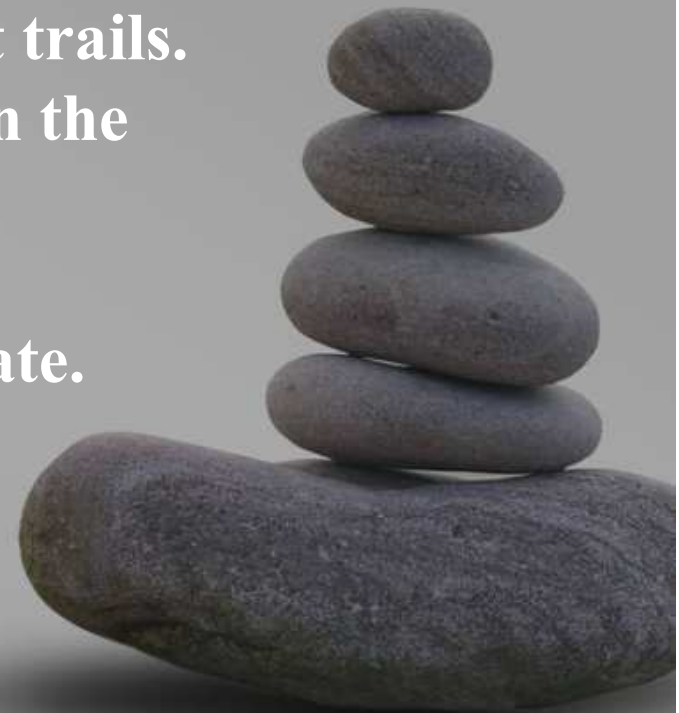
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At the Thatched Hall of the Ts'ui Family

It is autumn at the grass hut on Jade Peak.
The air is cool and clear.
Temple bells and chimes echo from the canyons.
Fishermen and woodsmen wind over sunset trails.
We fill our plates with chestnuts gathered in the
valley and rice grown in the village.
For what, Wang Wei?
Bamboo and pine, silent, locked behind a gate.

-- Tu Fu



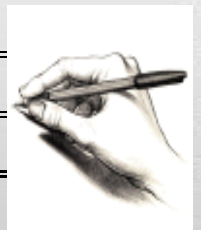


**“A good teacher is like a candle, it consumes
itself to light the way for others.”**



**Think of this poem. What does it say to you as a
teacher? Reflect and let your pen move!**

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Never try, it is the trying that gets in the way.

A great teacher doesn't try - a great teacher does. There is grace and no greed. All that a teacher wants is all that they need. No more, no less. There is no thought about "what if?" or "Suppose?", only a doing with that at hand. Teaching is the art of managing necessity and necessity is about exigency and not about desire. In our classrooms, we should find that flow which is always there for us to travel with....we should not bull against and sweat up a hill of our own making.

There is grace in all teaching that passes between a student and a teacher. A grace made of repose and contentment in doing/being and not about getting somewhere and needing some "accomplishment". The learning which would become a trophy is a learning that is a mirage - Dorian Gray's face on the blackboard.



Never try, it is the trying that gets in the way.

How might one do this? Be graceful? It all begins with acceptance. Acceptance of your situation, your task, your students and their comportment/character. Acceptance of everything, unconditionally. From that moment of faith, in that act of faith, the first step in grace can begin.

Never try, it is the trying that gets in the way. Act to create no resistance and be a knife that will always be sharp, always sharp - for it never encounters resistance and always finds the spaces between things.



Teaching is not the same as speaking.

"The dog barks, the caravan passes".

Too often we believe teaching is what we say, teaching is what we speak, teaching is made of words. Nothing could be further from the truth. What passes between teacher and student as knowledge, is not passed by way of words or "noise". Sound is the after effect. Not the cause but the evidence of learning.

Teaching is about your look. It is about your spirit and about how you stand and "be". Teaching is about a thousand small things that flow into a moment and then the next moment. It is what can't be immediately verified and thus lasts forever.

Learn to teach from your being and not your mouth and you will learn to teach well.



What you can't record can still be measured.

The wind is everywhere but who can say how much there is? In teaching, we many times think there is no progress. Students don't get good results, they repeat the same mistakes, they can't speak a correct sentence, they

We grow frustrated. But just because we can't see or record the growth does not mean it isn't there. Sometimes, like the lotus, it will all come to bloom in one great swoop of beauty. A river may look still but underneath, there is always a current moving forward. Students are ALWAYS learning - this is a condition of being human.

Be patient and keep going ahead. With faith, you will one day measure all that which you were unable to record. You will measure it in a student standing before you who knows, knows more than knowledge but how to get knowledge. Those that are impatient and who want to measure what can't be recorded, will be left at the side of the road.



What you teach is not only what you teach.

A teacher works with human clay - not just knowledge or subject. Every day we encounter the human spirit, the mystery of existence that asks us to participate in some great plan we know not of.....

Teachers must remember this. Seek for that which is permanent. Education is what remains after all else is forgotten. Aim for this "green forever" and you will succeed.

*"The whole country devastated
only mountains and rivers remain.
In springtime, at the ruined castle,
the grass is always green. "*

-- Tu Fu



We always learn 2 things.

Teaching is about helping others learn. People learn both the obvious and that which isn't obvious – the thing and its shadow. The iceberg above and below the water.

When we learn "freedom", we also learn about what is imprisoned. When we learn to count, we also learn what can't be counted. When we learn how to make coffee, we learn about our need for coffee.

The teacher must be aware of both the visible curriculum and that which is not visible. We never just teach one thing but should attempt to teach that which appears and that which is behind.



Pick Your Battles.

The wise teacher knows that the way to accomplish anything is to choose the weakest point and go from there. Do not meet power with power or butt heads - strength to strength.

Choose your battles - the ones which will make a difference. Be blind to all others. Conserve your strength and attack at the weakest point. Here, a student can be "got" and a lifetime of learning/being lit. Do not win battles but win the war.

Everyone has a crack - that's how the light gets in.....



Seek your own demise.

A teacher, like any artist, seeks to disappear. If one does their job perfectly, there is only learning and no teaching. If one does their job gracefully, long enough, they will no longer be needed. Just like the mother who alone must shed a tear and let her child go out into the world, so too the teacher.

This is our goal as teachers - to seek our own demise - and be happy about that. Do not cling to your ego as a teacher, but let it go and let the students find their own corners of learning.



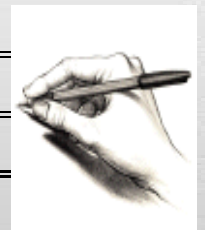


“Be the guide at the side, not the sage on the stage.”



What are some ways that a teacher can “disappear” and be less of the focus in the classroom?

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Everyone is a teacher.

"What one learns from me, one can't learn from someone else."

Every teacher brings a unique manner, a unique spirit to the table of learning. The content may be the same, the administration may demand objectives but something else is taught, is transferred. It is this which flavors learning and makes it alive.

Every teacher, teaches something different. It is this which makes our profession a "human" art and gives it flavor. It is this which is our salvation.



What is IS.

One day, a teacher came to see a retired principal to get some advice.

He asked, "I'm really happy where I am teaching. I love my job and think my students are wonderful. However, I have a great opportunity at another school. I'm wondering what to do? What will I find at this new school - maybe I'm getting myself into a bad situation?"

The principal took a drink of his coffee then answered, " Oh, for sure, you will find even better students and even be happier than you are now!"

(cont.....)



What is IS.

Next week, the principal had another teacher visit. He had a question and needed advice.

He asked the principal, "I'm really sad and depressed at my present school. The students are horrible, I hate teaching them. I've applied for a transfer and will move schools soon. However, I'm really worried about what I will find there. What do you think?"

The principal's eyes lit up and he smiled. He answered quickly, "Oh, for sure, you will find even worse students and be even more depressed than you are now!"



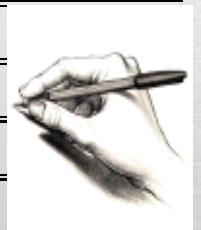


**“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”
Winston Churchill**



What was the principal’s wisdom? Reflect on its meaning and what it means to you and your teaching.

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He who knows, does not know.

A teacher that "knows" how to teach, does not know how to teach. All knowledge is in flux and cannot be grasped. All teachers are learners, all alive is in the process of being alive. Nothing stands still and can be seen. Each class, each day is new and must be learned again.

As the Buddha said to a follower who said they understood - "He who knows the Buddha, does not know the Buddha". Wisdom can't be pointed at or stopped. It can only be felt, tasted, touched, loved.....



The Memoirs of Jesse James

(by Richard Brautigan)

I remember all those thousands of hours
that I spent in grade school watching the clock,
waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.
Waiting: for anything but school.
My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James
for all the time they stole from me.



Keep what you Give.

The secret of teaching hinges upon one's ability to keep what you give. Teachers give a lot. We give of ourselves, in time, in emotion, in knowledge and understanding. The trick lies in being able to get energy from this, to be constantly renewed by ones giving. To NOT have energy sucked from oneself but to be constantly reenergized by the act of teaching.

You have to keep what you give. How? In letting go. Just letting go and being immersed in the process. To stop counting what you get and give. To swim in the ALL.



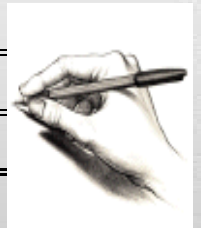


**“Teaching is the greatest act of
optimism.” – Colleen Wilcox**

**Reflect on your life outside of teaching. What renews
you? What do you do to recharge your teaching
batteries?**

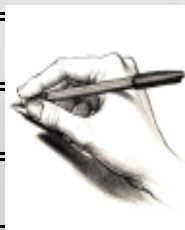


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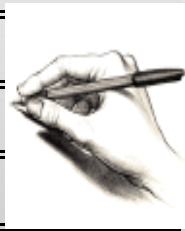


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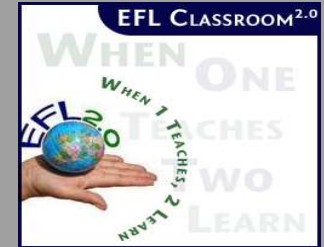
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The author is a veteran teacher trainer, author and speaker with over 20 years teaching experience in numerous countries around the world. Find out more about David at his portfolio site – <http://eflclassroom.com/david>

