Critical Elements in Effective Teaching in the New Millennium

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These are my views derived from a long career teaching in the P-12, system as well as a decade spent preparing teachers at Augsburg College. The areas that are critical for effective teaching include the ability to: build and maintain relationships; show an excitement about learning; make learning meaningful and relevant in the classroom; build the skills of learners by planning, facilitating, and assessing learning; establish the importance of service by connecting with families and the broader community; and finally, inspire students to be global citizens.

Building relationships has always been at the core of effective teaching. Teachers' ability to relate to the students, to understand them developmentally, and to understand their cultural context all lead to their ability to make connections that make a difference in the day-to-day learning environment. The teacher qualities of caring, warmth, empathy, and compassion help to build the trust that is necessary to create and maintain relationships. Each day, every moment, the teacher is establishing connections not only with students, but with their families, other teachers and staff, and the larger community that supports students' learning in the classroom. How does one "connect" in today's world? When face-to-face communication is not possible, relationships can be strengthened through online communication. Class Web pages can help families to feel included in the daily life of the classroom.

Learners are unique; they have many likenesses, based upon their needs as human beings, but conversely, they have very diverse needs. The impact of culture and, thus, family values, language, and world view, as well as disability, gender differences, and sexual orientation demand that teachers have fundamental knowledge in each of these areas that set learners apart. These differences demand that today's teachers be able to "connect" with teachers and staff such as special educators, and staff in community agencies who are experts in areas that help support students' learning. Information that is available online can be instrumental in helping teachers to understand and support students. Today's teachers must care enough to go beyond the school hours, and the school walls, on behalf of students.

The skills of teaching, the ability to create a learning environment that is responsive to both individual and group needs, interests, and learning preferences, defines the role of the teacher. Assessment of prior knowledge and skills serves as the foundation for "moving forward." Planning standards-based learning that is centered on student inquiry, and building knowledge based upon these questions (while encouraging and providing opportunities for critical thinking and problem solving), lead to the development of key skills that are needed in adult life. To accomplish this, teachers today can use online content that is validated and community organizations, professional associations, and other trusted purveyors of truth. Opportunities for cross-age learning as well as intergenerational opportunities can help teachers to link with others and prevent their classrooms from being sterile and disconnected places. In order to respond to the current accountability-focused political environment, millennium teachers will need a solid teaching philosophy derived from proven, research-based teaching practices—to help defend against the barrage of expectations that often do not align with the inquiry-based, learner-centered instruction that is supported in the research. Further, using a variety of assessment and evaluation techniques will help to ensure that teachers get a full picture of what students can do. For example, the use of digital photography to document learning events, use of the many ways available through technology to store and analyze data, programs that allow students to showcase their work to their classmates and to the broader community—all add to the teacher's ability to assess the learning experiences of students.

Showing relevance for learning is best accomplished through connections with real people in real places. Service Learning is one teaching strategy that can provide this framework for learning. Online communication and information can help to identify community needs, build working relationships through the process, and

document student projects for sharing with families, the school, and the broader community. Fostering the ability to identify community needs is a life-long skill that can lead to more fully involved adults. The goal of the fully engaged citizen will come about through first-hand experiences in the community, learning about real-world problems from the stakeholders. Teachers linked to each other through professional online learning communities help provide them with information, share expertise developed by others, support their decisions, and help them meet the challenges in the complex life of the 21st century classroom.

Millennium teachers need personal qualities of honesty, dedication, perseverance, a sense of humor, and a caring disposition. Strategies for promoting learning and skill development require skills of problem solving and collaboration. Technology has opened the walls of the classroom and has eliminated the boundaries of learning for teachers and students. The millennium teacher needs to take full advantage of the myriad of ways that technology can enhance learning. The teacher's knowledge, skills, and disposition to use the technology that is available (or, if not available, to advocate for it) to improve the learning opportunities of the students and the professional development of the teacher is essential. Today's students need teachers who will advocate for their best interests and continually learn about research-based best teaching practices. Never being satisfied with the status quo is a key quality of an effective teacher: continuously "on the march" toward improvement. Teaching is a vocation, a calling. More than ever before, today's teachers need a global perspective provided by classroom curricula and, even, informal learning times that include insights about schools and learning in other places, very unlike their own. This will be mandatory as teachers welcome students from many different places, representative of our global community. Students deserve a teacher who is truly interested in their lives as learners and in their lives beyond the classroom. A teacher that truly loves teaching and learning will foster these important dispositions in their students.

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