

Valuing Values

I was greatly taken with Anne Watson's piece on values in the last MT. Talk about your values, and you inevitably reveal much about your true self. You make yourself vulnerable, something that I can imagine professors usually shy away from in the dog-eat-dog world that is academia. I asked Anne if I could post a reply, and she kindly said 'Go for it.'

Thinking back over my working life, I have also felt most me in a maths classroom. My first career was in music, and towards the end of that time I stood on stage really not being me at all, and it was painful in the extreme. I remember being in Cannes for a festival performance (something many people would dream about), yet walking the streets in a depression and longing to be somewhere else. That night I promised myself to remember that walk whenever my teaching was going badly. As a result I have never been nostalgic for the band days.

I remember my first full-time teaching job; the students were running riot. In desperation I asked a student one day in the playground, 'Why is it, Stephen, that you do everything Mrs Smith asks, but nothing that I ask?'

He looked at me, genuinely trying to help, even though my question was clearly an unusual one, and possibly even unfair. 'It's just that she keeps the act up, sir.'

Was Stephen saying that a truthful teacher act supplies you with a power that non-actors don't have? Anne raises the question, is teaching an act at all? If it is, I would say it is not an act that asks me to be someone other than the person I truly am. Maybe it asks me to be doubly who I am. I often felt the need when I started teaching again after the holidays to flick an inner 'Turbo' switch. Maybe teaching is less of an act and more of a performance, and maybe good teaching is a truthful performance?

We've all had the experience of becoming frustrated with a student's unhelpful behaviour and then tackling this in a way that makes things worse. I spent the vast majority of my teaching life teaching A Level in a sixth form college. This sounds idyllic, but there could be discipline problems even here. I formulated a system that I eventually applied fairly automatically. Bug me once, I warn you. Bug me twice, I move you. Bug me three times, I say goodbye (and students hated being sent out) which led on to a tutor meeting. Strangely, once I had this system, I found I didn't need it; nobody went out in my last years. The system, largely perceived as fair, became something for my students to negotiate, a game that wasn't personal. At least, that's how I like to remember things; there were still conflicts from time to time.

I sometimes hear a student described as 'thick', and that makes me feel cold. Might it not be at least partly your fault that they are 'thick', on tasks that you have chosen and which they haven't? Might they be in fact mightily intelligent if you measure intelligence in a different way? Most students' facility on a mobile phone makes me look thick indeed.

But 'a waste of space'? I agree, there's a problem here, for such a verdict on a student could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet I read of a soldier in Iraq running to rescue his friend who had just had his arm blown off by a roadside bomb. As he dragged him clear, he asked, 'Can I have your watch?' It is this kind of gallows humour between fellow-professionals that enables people to get through in stressed situations, and staffrooms can be such places. Maybe a teacher's greatest asset is a wicked sense of humour, because you can bet your young proteges will have such a thing at their disposal. Such hopefully benign wickedness became a part of my daily teaching values.

Anne quotes a report. "Getting X to do any work is like stirring cold porridge." I too have run into teachers prepared to write reports like this. The more modern way to write a report is to address it to the student; would this teacher honestly write, with parents looking on, 'Getting you to do any work is like stirring cold porridge'? One hopes they would feel some shame.

If it's your vocation to be a maths teacher, you won't be able to live out your deepest self and its values unless you teach maths. My attempts to run away from my vocation failed! Your students will pick up on the authenticity of your calling, and respond. Every sentence you say, every movement you make, every face you pull, they will pick up on, and if you are not acting with integrity, they will let you know.

Anne wonders if she could have met her students half way more. I have a metaphor for this; writing upside down. If a teacher needs to write on a sheet of paper to help a student across the table, writing upside down meets them halfway. The teacher is slowed, even handicapped, and the student is placed at the centre of the learning (and is usually laughing at the teacher's mistakes). Like Anne, this topic makes me regretful. When I wrote on the board, did the maths subtly face me? Could I have written instead so that the maths faced my students, even if that made it look strange from my point of view?