

PREFACE

The Gift

I loved being in Dr. Benn's English 301 class. Sure, we were learning pretty boring stuff – past participles, nominative predicates, and the like; but, something about the way he parsed a sentence seemed, well, *profound*. It was as if he were unlocking the very secret of language itself. I'm not kidding. We would sit in his class in rapt attention for ninety minutes straight. Sometimes, I think I even forgot to breath.

It wasn't just the way he explained some obscure phrase in a poem that did it. No. He made us feel *smart*. He had a way of asking questions that led us to the discovery of the answer ourselves. Years later, I realize that he was using Socratic questioning; but, as a college freshman, I just thought he had it. He had the gift.



Five minutes into talking to Sarah and I knew she had “the gift.” It was more than just her enthusiasm – I'd seen that plenty of times before. It was that she literally vibrated with a love for teaching. I watched her eyes light up as she shared how she got to know each of her students individually and learned to tailor her instruction to their needs. Her voice quivered with excitement as she talked about the growth her students made by the end of the year. The interview went on for 20 more minutes, but I had already decided to hire Sarah. She had the gift.



From the moment I entered Laura's classroom, I was excited. It was contagious. At first, I couldn't understand why. It seemed like a typical history class -- she was showing slides of the artwork of the renaissance -- but something was different. I watched as she put the next slide on the screen. As if on cue, students jumped out of their seats to hold an 8.5 x 11 white board up to the screen and highlight what they noticed about the picture. They were explaining to the class how what they noticed indicated something about the renaissance -- the society, the social norms, the way of thinking. The students were having excited discussions about the influence of the renaissance on modern thought and making comparisons between the Italian and English versions of the renaissance. Laura asked a few probing questions and changed the slides every so often, but she largely remained quiet and let the students drive the discussion. She has it, I thought to myself as I left the classroom. She had the gift.



If you asked me to define “the gift” back then, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. I just knew it when I saw it. I’d walk into a classroom and see a teacher completely engaging a class full of squirmy 9th graders and I knew that teacher had “the gift.” I’d read a book written by one of those master teachers, those legendary ones who make you want to be a teacher yourself, and I wanted to touch the hem of their garments and see if it rubbed off on me. The gift.

When I first became an educational consultant and worked with districts to improve the quality of teaching in their schools, I began to wonder if the mythology surrounding teaching was true. What if “the gift” really was some innate talent, some rare, mysterious, divine endowment? What if it couldn’t be taught? If so, I was in the wrong business.

Clearly there are some people who are born with it. They have a natural propensity to be master teachers. But, is there hope for those of us who weren’t so lucky? If “the gift” were something that was bestowed upon the blessed few, what, I wondered, would become of the rest of us?

But, after years of working with teachers and school leaders, I now know that “the gift” is not some mysterious birthright. In fact, it’s not really a gift at all. Being a master teacher is the result of a critical understanding of the principles of good teaching. It’s a mindset that anyone can learn and by learning this mindset, you too can become a master teacher. True, some people come by this mindset naturally, but the rest of us can develop it too.

This book will show you how.

My Story

When I first started teaching, I faithfully applied all the theories I had learned in my methods classes to my students. I didn’t smile at them for the first month. I wrote lesson plans every day. I faithfully followed the book. I used proximity when they were talking out of turn and followed that up with a rigid set of consequences. I posted and enforced my classroom rules – all 10 of them. I created elaborate differentiated lessons designed to tap into each student’s learning style and multiple intelligences. I used technology. I used collaborative learning, cooperative instruction, inquiry-based learning, multiculturalism, you name it. But, it wasn’t working. They, and I, were simply going through the motions.

The problem, I thought, was that I needed new strategies. So, I expanded my repertoire. Sometimes the strategies worked, sometimes they didn’t. Either way, I was working awfully hard. In fact, not only was I working much harder than my students, I was starting to see diminishing returns.

The assignment I was so excited about, the one that took me two weeks to plan and prepare for, didn’t excite my students as much as I had hoped. That really cool strategy I picked up at a conference didn’t work as well as the presenter had promised. Although I was acquiring a large repertoire of skills according the text books and my evaluators, I wasn’t seeing the big pay off in the classroom. My students still struggled, they were still bored, and to be honest, I wasn’t sure that they were learning anything.

Finally, I decided that perhaps I just needed more time, smarter students, more supportive families, stronger leadership, and more money. But, after beating my head against

that brick wall for a while, I realized that I had better chances of winning the lottery -- and I don't play the lottery.

Still, I knew that there was a fundamental difference between much of what I was taught to believe about teaching and what I was experiencing in the classroom. So, I spent the next year reading everything I could get my hands on. I poured through books about teaching. When I heard of a school district or a teacher somewhere making a difference, I called them and grilled them on what they were doing that worked. If I read a really good research article about teaching, I hunted down the author and asked follow up questions. I attended conferences. I observed successful teachers and tried to uncover their secrets.

Then, I tried out what I was learning on my students. I raised my expectations. I started an online community to help build their capacity and independence. I created tiered assignments. I looked at the data. I took them on trips to expand their experience. I even baked them cookies if they registered to take the AP exam in the spring. Sometimes, these things worked really well. Other times, at least I did no harm.

What I eventually learned was that there was no magic in the strategy. It wasn't so much what I did that made a difference; it was how I thought. I started to ask myself why certain techniques worked and others didn't. I soon noticed that when a strategy was wildly successful, it had more to do with the fact that I honored a principle than the strategy itself. When a strategy was less successful, that too could be directly related to a principle I violated. Almost without realizing it, I was slowly incorporating principles of effective instruction into my practice.

As I began to pay attention to the principles rather than the strategies, I noticed a powerful shift in the way that I thought about teaching. Before, teaching for me had been a matter of applying the right strategy in the right way at the right time. As I studied effective teaching however, I began to focus less on what strategy or technique I would use, and more on why I was doing what I was doing. Instead of trying to acquire more or better strategies, I worked on understanding the principles that under-gird good teaching.

Paying attention to the principles also forced me to look at my disposition towards teaching and my students. I realized that much of what I was doing in the classroom was designed to serve my own ego needs rather than help my students learn. I wanted my students to do well because their doing well meant that I was a good teacher. I wanted my students to grow up to be famous and give Oscar acceptance speeches that ended with, "And it was all because of Dr. Jackson. She turned my life around." I wanted to be the teacher they made a movie about. This is why I was so frustrated because a lesson didn't work or my students didn't achieve as much as I wanted them to. It was about my needs.

Once I understood that the problem wasn't my students -- that it had more to do with the way I thought about teaching rather than their inadequacies -- I was free to look at my students differently. I shifted my focus from trying to manipulate my students to learn, to showing them how to learn and helping them see the value in learning. I moved from trying to find just the right strategy, to making sure that I faithfully applied the principles of effective instruction. Concentrating on the principles rather than the strategies and my own ego needs freed me up to actually teach.

As the school year passed, I began to notice a radical changes happening in my classroom. Because I no longer used my teaching to meet my own ego needs, I was free to enjoy my students. When they faltered, I didn't take it personally. Instead, I focused on helping them understand why they failed and how to correct their mistakes. My process was much messier, but much more successful.

I noticed that my students began to relax. They asked questions and tried to understand not just what we were doing but why it was important. They came to class prepared to do the work and when they were in class, they worked hard. I believe that they could see in me the shift -- that now, I was focused on their success. I saw them as fundamentally capable and therefore stopped trying to protect them from the messiness of learning. Learning is frustrating. Mistakes will be made. When they saw me take risks in my teaching they learned that they too were safe to take risks. They learned that learning was the hardest, most demanding, and ultimately, most rewarding thing they could ever do.

It wasn't magic. You wouldn't be able to make a two-hour Hollywood movie about the changes that happened in my classroom. There were days when the messiness of learning was, well, too messy for us. We didn't always arrive at closure by the time the bell rang. There were days that my students and I left the class frustrated. On those days, I would remind myself and them that the frustration was a natural part of learning. I kept coming back to the principles, and held onto them even when it looked like they weren't working.

It made all the difference in my teaching. Suddenly, I too had the gift.

The Master Teacher Mindset

There are many books out there that break teaching down into discrete behaviors or offer a laundry list of strategies that, if you just try them, will make you a good teacher. This is not one of them. Instead, I believe you don't become a master teacher by simply doing what a master teacher does. You become a master teacher by thinking like a master teacher thinks.

All of us know the facts of teaching. What separates master teachers from the rest of us is that they know how to think about teaching. They have integrated the facts of teaching into their thinking and as a result, they do things automatically. From the outside, it looks like they have the gift. But on the inside, it is simply a matter of rigorously applying a few simple principles to their teaching.

When it comes to good teaching, I think we pay too much attention to the strategies, without fully understanding why those strategies work in the first place. What would happen if we didn't focus on the facts and behaviors of teaching? How much better might our teaching be if we focused on developing a mindset towards teaching instead?

I think that if we did focus on developing our teaching mindset, teaching would become fun again. Rather than worry about the next state-mandated test or the next round of evaluations, we would focus on helping our students understand the magic of a cell or the possibility of the written word, fully confident that no matter what test they faced, they would pass it. If we were to master this mindset, we would stop being batted around by the latest trend

and focus instead on what makes the best sense for our students. If we shift our emphasis from what we do to how we think about what we do, it would dramatically alter the way that we diagnose student difficulty, assign homework, design tests, plan lessons, grade work, and see ourselves as teachers. In short, this mindset would take our emphasis off the minutia of teaching and put it back where it belongs – on our students.

That is my hope for you as you read this book. I believe – and I hope you will come to believe it too -- that the gift is not the exclusive domain of a blessed few. In fact, it isn't really a gift at all. It is instead, a mindset, a disciplined way of thinking about teaching. And, with this mindset, the gift is ours, all of ours, for the taking.