Giving Students Respect: One of the Great Soft Skills of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract The importance of soft skills is described for achieving teaching and learning outcomes by educational instructors. The introductory discussion briefly explores the variety of attributes that different scholars classify as soft skills. The emphasis here is on the intangible human qualities that create outstanding learning opportunities, rather than viewings soft skills as simply teaching process in contrast to hard skills of knowledge and performance. Two examples of teaching scholars are considered in elaborating how they achieve high quality learning outcomes: Four principles from Wlodowski and Ginsberg in delivering intensive block courses are outlined. Five principles from Bain's research into '*What the Best Teachers Do'* are also described. In each case these teaching exemplars show the importance of soft skills in the craft of teaching. In the last part of the discussion the soft skill of respect is put forward as a fundamentally important, but often under-theorised and underutilised, pedagogical self-discipline and resource for excellent teaching.

Keywords: Classroom management; Practical pedagogy; Respect; Soft skills; Teaching practice

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is a conversational reflection on many years of tertiary degree teaching and other kinds of teaching. In one sense it is not so much biography as auto-ethnography[14]: What makes teaching work? What makes teaching go well? When does the teacher struggle? Of course, circumstances vary. We are not all as capable or as comfortable at all kinds of teaching, or in one teaching context compared to another. Yet there are some commonalities we assemble across different experiences, since each teacher has some measure of

expertise and acts as a common element in the teaching and learning mix, even in varying circumstances and differing teaching environments.

Much emphasis in teacher training is placed upon the content and quality of the material taught, the physical (or increasingly electronic) resources of books, laboratories and other facilities, as well as attending to the administrative and curricula frameworks and sequences, perhaps state or nationally set. Similarly, within individual schools and teaching institutions these structuring parts of pedagogical practice are often the rubric and measure of teacher competence and compliance. But how complete are they as substantive metrics of and predictors of actual learning or effective education that enables students to gain the widest vision and broadest possible competencies, linking the specifics of one or more classrooms with the whole of life and career educational competence and mastery, and hence contribution to society? These are all important parts of achieving consistent delivery of large-scale, even, levels of graded broad education.

I have no argument with or antagonism towards these necessary components of the educational apparatus in contemporary societies. As the relative importance of teaching and education at all levels becomes greater in the urbanising and technological world, each aspect of the pedagogical process needs to be turned over and inspected for its continuing relevance. How does it, for example, fit with other changes in the teaching and learning environment? How each element might be reaffirmed or re-positioned depends on the field or discipline and the educational level under consideration, as well as the needs and strategic design of senior levels of educational departments and curriculum boards concerned with the governance of the education domain under their care.

My concern is that the formal enunciation of such required or recommended teaching and learning elements seems to me to be a very truncated account of how learning takes place. It is almost inherent in this necessary cycle of re-evaluation of what is working in the teaching process and what could be better—could be improved or upgraded—that committees and official reports speak of the structural, explicit and material aspects of the educational world about which they are reporting. I am sympathetic to this tendency, but it is one that educators and education systems must see through to the actual objectives and deeper strategic purpose of what they are engaged in delivering for students individually, their local communities and for the good of society as a whole.

One unexceptional response might be to counter this concern as being a false worry, impugning the motivation and clarity of educators setting out the field of learning at appropriate institutional levels, and of the vast amount of time and effort that goes into constructing state and national curricula.

As evidence of this rebuttal it is possible to point to the substantial efforts in teacher training emphasising professionalism. That is, it is not just left to the structural setting out of the learning field, but the practice of teachers and front-line instructors is also attended to; and recognised as important. Mentoring newly graduated teachers, in-service training, refresher courses, post-graduate or specialisation courses, teacher development conferences and so on all contribute to front-line teacher performance and excellence.

Again, I have no quarrel with any of these positive activities and beneficial programs that both support teachers themselves as well as addressing the education system's need to have a current, effective and engaged teacher workforce. What I want to do, however, is ask, "What is inside the black box of professionalism?" It is easy enough to say the words: profession, professionalism and professional. It is possible to devise courses and training around these concepts. As a sociologist constantly studying professions and professionalism, I will leave aside theorising possible assumptions that undermine the axiomatic goodness or desirability of these ideas of professional competence and capabilities. This is not the problem of any one country or culture. Examples can be multiplied from many societies. Here are three brief illustrations:

Let me first pick a recent report on Chinese education—China's national system is currently producing about eight million university graduates a year, about twice as many as that of the United States. But it may be that sheer numbers are only part of the story of what is needed from educational outputs. Getting the 'Wrong types of skills' can be a problem, as Stapleton argues[47]:

> Despite the rapid increase in the number of university graduates, Chinese companies complain of not being able to find the high-skilled graduates they need. The main deficit is in so-called 'soft skills' such as strong communication, analytical and managerial skills. According to research by McKinsey, there is a short supply of graduates with these assets.

The English newspaper *The Independent*[22] identified seven necessary graduate skills, some more obvious ones such as communicating ability, but the softer competencies are much more difficult to ingrain. For example, competencies like 'Attempting to understand others' way of thinking or experiences is a hugely important factor' yet for all the lip-service given to such ideas as wanting the technical knowledge as well as social intelligence, the latter is much harder to identify, let alone train, generate and sustain.

The United States *National Association of Soft Skills*[32] similarly lists what it considers "The top ten skills for success', and even with variations, the general message is the same. Technical skills somehow get created more

easily, graduates come with specific skills-sets but the soft skills that fit them for the workplace, enable them to work with others, including difficult others, in complex and varied situations, are much harder to find, harder to create and make hiring even aspiring and ambitious young graduates, problematic for their contribution to the organisation employing them.

A synthesis of some of these points can be made by suggesting an hypothesis. The discussion that follows in this article invites quantitative researchers to think of ways they can operationalise the ideas as measures and thus confirm or disconfirm the efficacy of such soft approaches that it is argued here go beyond top-down teacher-centric pedagogy[13,20,37,41]. This scholarly attitude of being professional, not solely about one's starting discipline or field of expertise, but also in one's teaching of that area of expertise to students[18,25,35,45], is an important performance measure of academics' value[7,16,33]. Not everyone of course is a skilled communicator and depth of research knowledge has its own compelling quality. It is too easily an admission of teaching inadequacy to refuse to pay attention beyond the many necessary but formal/structural aspects of teaching and learning, from curriculum, to courses, in order to engage in classes, groups and in one-to-one interactions and response[48].

Professional, engineering and applied fields can add great additional value to the content of their training by improved teacher proficiency in their teaching and learning skills and practices. It is very much the case that discipline or occupational experience is of great worth. However, so too is respect and orientation to what the student needs in order to 'get' the points being taught, and make them his or her own. Every country suffers from practicing graduates who have merely mechanistic understanding of the threshold concepts of their fields. Rote learning is only one part of a fluent and broad capability to act professionally in most fields. Good teaching is a contribution to national wellbeing that persists a long way from academic institutions themselves[6,9]. Consider these examples: nursing[4,15], accounting[10], learning trades[19], psychiatry[21], the history discipline[23], inter-professional maternity work[24], social work[26], geography[27], business disciplines[28,42], education[34,39,44,46], public health[36], medicine[40], sociology[29], community development[43].

The proposition being discussed in this article may be expressed as a question: what makes for good teaching? Or more specifically, does/how does respect, as an active and intentional teaching practice and behaviour, change the learning or retention outcomes of students? Alternatively, the proposition may be expressed in the traditional form of a scientific hypothesis: that respect in teaching results in better outcomes. Whichever mode the research inquiry is expressed in, work is needed to define the variables—what measures count in assessing initial lack of knowledge and learning, and what counts as repeatable intervention for as

complex a thing as teaching practice that shows a specific soft skill such as respect, along with the technical or content, within a given subject or course.

2. PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

Three questions that arise for me from these reflections are the following:

1. Are we modelling in our teaching these soft skill characteristics that employers say they want?

2. Are we training teachers inside the envelop of subjects or courses we call professional practice, professional development, work readiness, or similar names, the *actual* skills rather than the officially labelled skills of professional education and professional educators?

3. What do we think can be done to help our teaching colleagues, men and women, in their applied fields—engineering, nursing, medicine and so many others—achieve a similar task in their respective fields? That is, how to ensure their technically trained protégés entering their various fields and disciplines have, or can rapidly show development of, the soft skills that make their work more effective or less injurious (in care fields) to the recipients of their services. If these teachers see themselves primarily as engineers or social workers or applied professionals, what soft skills do they themselves lack?

As a sociologist teaching subjects for applied students I sometimes find resistance from some students—'Why should we learn this stuff?—we are going to be in x, y or z profession'. 'Well', I say, 'If you want to do well in your profession, you will find when you look at the capable people in your field, your leaders, that they commonly show these soft skills in their leadership. That's why they are leaders'. I often go further in enlisting my students' interest and willingness to get on top of these ways of conducting themselves: 'It is not a matter of doing sociology. Many of your leaders have learned these things in other ways, in other settings than ours here and now. But these characteristics and ways of approaching problems are the things that mark them out as above being good, competent practitioners in your field—as the leaders they are. 'That's why', I may add as a rider, 'Your professors have directed you to take this subject. They see the value for you. It is not me saying you must do these subjects!'

Two things stand out as interesting from a teacher's perspective about these exchanges. First, some students do 'get it' and readily absorb these soft

skills as part of their overall training and do well in this as they do in other subjects. Second, and perhaps even more interesting is the following point. I have found that what the now-retired professor before me said, is indeed true. He reported that on occasions when he would come across former students several years after they had been in his sociology of health class, they would frequently make statements like, 'I couldn't see the relevance of your subject back then. But now it makes sense to me', and some would add, 'I wish I'd paid more attention'.

A principle for further reflection from this vignette could take the conversation in a different direction but this is worth mentioning in passing here: how much is it possible to 'put old heads on young shoulders', as the saying expresses it? This is a major dilemma for many areas of applied tertiary training and professional life, not just in the caring or person-oriented fields and professions. This aphorism expresses an irony that faces western tertiary university education at present. Despite a rapid current corporatising of university administrations in Anglo-western countries to be more efficient and meet government funder targets and requirements, there is a corollary strategy on training students to be 'work ready'. This latter emphasis includes placements, work experiences, practicums and field work. It should be analysed on another occasion than here and now for the *instrumental* focus it imparts rather than fostering the *intrinsic* value of learning and education. But here the irony I am pointing to almost suggests a circling back to apprenticing learners, in-place learning and similar reconnections to previous models of disciplinary learning and apprenticeship. Enough of this digression, however; it is time to return to further reflect on soft skills.

3. THE SOFT SKILL PILLARS OF TEACHING

In this section I want to introduce two thoughtful examples of vastly experienced teachers and researchers who have investigated ideas about soft skills. Their work invites us to consider their proposition that effective teaching is entirely reliant on soft skills, irrespective of the field, from physics to philosophy. The provide rich and interesting examples and accounts. Raymond Wlodowski and Margery Ginsberg[51], the first of these two examples, outline four soft skills that are much more rigorously soft than the kinds of articles and websites identified above. One review summarises their argument as follows[11]:

> *The four motivational cores that need addressing the authors posit are the following: establishing inclusion, developing a positive learning attitude, amplifying meaning, and engendering competence. For each of these they suggest a pair of measures (p. 25), 'that indicate, from the learner's*

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perspective, that the condition is present in the learning environment' …
The two criteria the authors suggest in gauging inclusion are the sense of
general respect, and the feeling of connection. (p. 134)

To visually focus on these teacher skills, they are extracted from this quotation and listed as bullet points below. In doing so, the so-called softness of each of them is foregrounded for consideration and reflection. Paradoxically they are *nothing* to do with content, disciplinary knowledge and hard skills, yet simultaneously they are *everything* to do with how hard skills—anything in fact—are learned and understood.

- establishing inclusion
- developing a positive attitude
- amplifying content
- engendering competence

To academics in teaching and education departments, this recognition is justification for their faculty function and roles.

But why these soft skills are important is in expressing or specifying the more profound and underlying truth in at least two ways. First, this is how people learn new things, shift their paradigms and comprehend principles they will then be able to extend to other aspects of what they think they currently know—revising or challenging it in new learning. Second, and surprisingly if we are too focused on the formal process of classes and assessments in conventional education is the following: as is sometimes said colloquially on television, 'here's the kicker': not only are the soft skills fundamental to *learning*. They are also fundamental to the subsequent *implementation* of these disciplinary skill sets for the utilisation and societal benefit of their professional harder skills. Expressed more formally, the duality of the function of the soft skills is in enabling both learning individually and in organisational/ workplace/ societal settings.

One of the reasons I commend Wlodowski and Ginsberg's text to colleagues contemplating teaching block subjects that are compressed in time is because of the vast experience that seeps from the pages of their book. The soft skills principles they articulate that I have listed above do not replace content but enable learning and rich understanding about those content areas to take place. I consciously purchased the book when I was preparing to teach my first block subject; what a privilege to get authors with such depth of insight and rich examples. In the years since I have these four principles attached to my office door so that each time I return I am reminded of them afresh.

A second reason why I find significance in what Wlodowski and Ginsberg write is that they are specially discussing 'intensives', their word for block mode teaching (the terminology varies country by country). Instead of a subject being spread out over a term or semester of 12-14 weeks, the teaching and learning is concentrated in perhaps only two or three weeks, or two or three weekend periods, of intensive class interaction. Further, they observe that such teaching and learning is often used by adult learners with employment and family commitments who are time-poor and for whom poor teaching is fatal to their learning success.

This background story and professional practice has the effect for me when I read their examples and advice of compelling my attention. What can be 'got away with' in mediocre teaching in longer semester time periods cannot be accommodated in the urgency of teaching intensives. Hence, their principles of soft teaching and learning skills stand more starkly and usefully in their exposition in this text. This is something to be read, pondered and returned to again and again, even by active and engaged teachers, to absorb the wisdom of how to bring about rich learning for students. Such 'deeper' learning is terminology used by Ken Bain and colleagues in the second example discussed here. These principles, tempered in the heat of intensive teaching, can be applied to the full palette of teaching opportunities and situations.

Bain's text is based on years of research directed positively at the question of his book's title: *What the Best Teachers Do*[1]. Perhaps even more than Wlodowski and Ginsberg's text, the range of stories and accounts of student engagement from fields spanning science to the humanities makes for absorbing reading. Such a narrative provides learning spaces for teacher-readers to re-imagine and aspire to how they might to show such virtuosity and excellence in enabling their students' learning. This is a book that every education department or faculty would benefit in having copies in their library for several reasons.

Bain's research reports students and colleagues identifying who the best teachers they know were or are. These admired teachers are interviewed by Bain and reflect on their craft and their rules used to guide their teaching. This has parallels to Dweck's 'not yet' learning precept[52]. It is always interesting to have exemplars of a skill being discussed. It is fascinating to see these excellent teachers cited by Bain explaining what and why they do certain things. Having such a text acts as a kind of always-on-hand mentoring for teachers and teaching students and discipline-focused educators to dip into and refresh their understanding or the balance of what they are currently doing in their teaching. Bain and Zimmerman[3] continue the elaboration of Bain's book starting from early research that identified surface, deep and strategic learners.

The first and last of these three types of learners tend to be more resistant to shifting their understanding. Again, this article alludes to numerous examples that provide fertile insights available for individual teacher appropriation and adaptation.

The soft skills described in these accounts are by no means uniform between teachers in their performance, humour, empathy or passion. These soft skills are what bridges between students' varied needs and commitments to the areas of instruction to maximally assist their learning. These skills do not constitute a particular fad or methodology of teaching. Combining authority with entertainment, wit with wisdom, abstract knowledge with contemporary examples in students' purview, are broad professional competencies that nevertheless are uniquely constructed teacher by teacher. The shocking account Bain and Zimmerman give (p. 3) of dedicated physics teachers finding how students who had successfully passed their subject, had actually changed their thinking very little. This is a real challenge to any concerned educator. Any teacher reads such a true story with a kind of fascinated horror—me, my teaching…?

Bain[2] addresses such healthy concerns, explaining 'several common principles'. The first, he says, 'is, by far, the most important'. Yet again the important thing to notice in terms of the discussion here about soft skills is that the intangibility, the invisible 'softness' is central to the magic that such abilities confer on the teaching and learning exchange.

1. The setting:

    'Create a natural critical learning environment. 'Natural' because what matters most is for students to tackle questions and tasks they *naturally* find of interest, make decisions, defend their choices, sometimes come up short, receive feedback on their efforts, and try again'. 'Critical' because by thinking critically, students learn to reason from evidence and examine the quality of their reasoning, to make improvements while thinking, and to ask probing and insightful questions' (p. 1).

2. The relationship:

    'Guidance in helping students understand the significance of the question'. As young teachers with concerns about our own knowledge and competence we often focus our attention on the rightness of answers. With greater experience we relax a little, are not so serious in establishing our authority; we grow into being more comfortable with partially right answers, with emergent truth or understanding. I sometimes tease classes from whom I've extracted a series of minimally correct statements and examples, 'Collectively, we're quite bright, aren't we!' to encourage this

developing, emerging, sense of *effort* in the process as safe and interesting (p. 2).

3. Encouraging thinking:

'The natural critical learning environment engages students in some higher-order intellectual activity, encouraging them to compare, apply, evaluate, analyze and synthesize, but never only to listen and remember' (p. 2). An example they use is about the professor wanting students to feel they have solved the problem at hand themselves, almost like the great scientists did. In an increasingly instrumental world of formal learning this is an ongoing issue engaging educators' attention.

4. Students doing the solving:

Such a learning environment 'helps students themselves answer the question' (pp. 2-3). This involves the intangible skills of permission, holding back a moment, allowing a half answer, supporting a half answer, getting students to contribute a thought that pulls the discussion along, how could another response be clearer or more specific; even spending a little time in cul-de-sacs to see the limits of a train of inquiry. This requires teacher self-confidence, patience, and rather than asserting one's knowledge, using that larger breadth of understanding to nudge, suggest and question what might the meaning of elements of the puzzle be?

5. The bigger picture:
The great learning environment also 'leaves students wondering: 'What's the next question?' and 'What can we ask now?'' (p. 3). Over a number of years I have found my most successful classes, both in terms of students subsequent grades, and most enjoyable, in terms of students wider understanding, have come from classes where a mixture of specific questions are coupled with 'shooting the breeze' of much wider imagined possible solutions or consequences of what we have been discussing. The teacher's job in such circumstances is often not to teach in a conventional sense of that word, but rather a task of permission-giving to students to say, to entertain, and safely cross-challenge each other, but not dominate. Enabling them to vouchsafe, to own, to 'chance their arm' deepens the learning from the superficial memorising or shallow strategies of getting grades. This deeper learning may come more slowly, perhaps not even in the duration of the months the class runs, but is education at its most mysterious and profound[12].

Wlodowski and Ginsberg[51] and Bain[1] are valuable examples of contemporary teaching excellence in applying soft skills to achieve great learning outcomes.

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The salience of soft skills is, in one sense, a cultural universal, the balance and interaction of personal, occupational and disciplinary traits, But even before questions of social standing, gender and other dimensions of instruction are considered, soft skills will vary from culture to culture and country to country. Even other Anglo-settler societies find British or United States cultural inflections do not always apply in the same way in their societies, even more so with the passage of time[5,38].

4. RESPECT—THE FIRMNESS OF THE SOFT SKILL

Thus, to return to the auto-ethnographic perspective noted at the start of this discussion, the concern here with the efficacy of soft skills for effective teaching is not intended as a memorialist celebration, even if that is a perfectly respectable genre. Instead, still building on personal experiences but with the intention of testing wider application, involves a more 'gritty' or empirical report on experience that has, or may have, relevance in some form in other contexts. My own context, then, is the antipodean world of Australia and New Zealand[5]. Without explicating this socio-cultural context in any detail, simply observing that these are countries with characteristically western-modern-Anglo economies and cultures. But they have—hence the term antipodean—a hybrid experience of being first-world in some respects but nationally insignificant in other ways relative to the policy-making, theorising, decisions and actions of geo-political centres of the world in Europe and north America, even as those realities are changing today. This consciousness develops certain acuities that are useful in reflecting on power and management in the microcosm of classes and student learning. As an example of the wider family of soft skills, respect serves as a key principle of guiding and taking control of one's own career project of teaching.

Figure 1 indicates one way of framing these teaching and learning relationships. On the one hand this summarises a lot of discussion. Yet it is also the case that clarity can obscure important aspects of the relationships between the parts. For instance, the apparently clear boundaries between each of the quadrants in the central sphere of the figure are, in fact, porous or interleaved in important ways. Sometimes learning arises from appreciation of the content or the grind of teaching intention and focus, but at other times the 'allowing' aspects of the soft skills creates the learning moment.

In many cases, of course, experienced teaching does content and process together, there is a completeness in how and the material is taught that is insightful and enabling of student learning. Describing Ken Bain's research into many examples of excellent teachers, earlier in this discussion, moves beyond teachers learning about learning, to seeing it in teaching practice. In
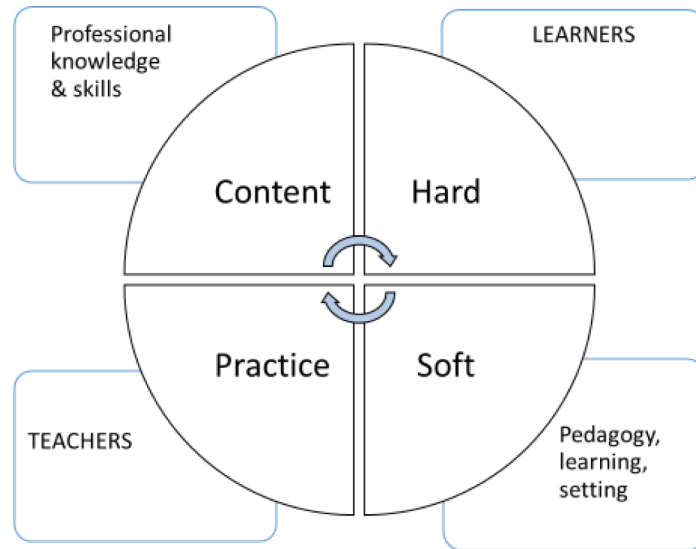
Figure 1: Pedagogy and professional knowledge/skills.

terms of Figure 1, this brings the left-hand side elements into combination with the right-hand side corners, around the core of teaching and learning.

For many academics who have completed advanced degrees and gained appointment to high-status positions this meets long-held ambitions and is the culmination of years of hard work. Well done, but... this can at times yield an unhelpful effect and disposition undermining the whole point of *enabling* learning in the newer cohort of students. Rather than asserting, even if only implicitly, this achieved status, as individuals in any culture may be tempted to do, I suggest the model of the mother tiger and her jumping, somewhat unruly cubs is the model to follow. Her status and position is such she can be indulgent, gentle and forgiving boisterous behaviour of her young. In saying this, however, I recognise that there are important gender differences for men and women in tertiary teaching roles. Men teachers often have little idea of the extra layers of effort to command respect that women instructors have to make that male gender confers on men without much thought. Taking this matter a step further, even for male teachers, growing into the authority of one's position does not come to all with equal facility. Teaching skills for many must be learned and crafted over time.

I want to make a different point about respect, perhaps less conventional, but in my view fundamental to education. Indeed, as I have noted in the

point about antipodean experience above, this is fundamentally valuable in proceeding through life more generally. It is important to respect every student. 'But I don't know every student!' Of course: but every student should meet the in-principle attitude of respect from their professors and teachers when they see and hear them, and if they meet and exchange words and ideas directly. Sometimes the opposite experience of students responding to Wlodowski and Ginsberg's precept of 'establish inclusion' is sadly achieved by an attitude of disrespect or disregard, creating a sense of disconnection or exclusion. Wlodowski and Ginsberg's argument is that there is an enormous positive power in a general approach of respecting students. Because this may seem counter-intuitive it is worth a little elaboration why this is so.

It might be asserted: '…students are pretty ignorant, some have bad attitudes or poor work habits, they don't read, they attend irregularly, assignments are handed in late… Give them instruction, yes, but where is the need for respect in all that?' Reasons can indeed be multiplied for not deserving respect. Here, however, are some reasons why an attitude of respect is not about our students primarily; it is about you/me the teachers, first in our relationship to students but more profoundly in relation to how we handle power and position in life. By focusing on a broad approach of acting, speaking with respect, being respectful, we gain considerable mastery over our own selves, practice and pedagogy.

If they, the students, knew what we know, they would have no need of our services. It is fundamental to the teaching relationship that by some criteria we have something to offer and assist them in their journey of education, career or whatever trajectory they are on. Otherwise, largely, why would they be in our class? Yes, there are exceptions, but I am speaking of our general practice and self-positioning. Firstly, we can say to ourselves students need me respect them, at least in an overall sense because, in an instrumental sense, without them I would not have a job. Then we can address the necessity to be respectful by thinking through their *potential* if we skilfully impart at least some ideas, facts, perspectives, that these lives could have in bettering their families and communities and making a contribution to the world around them. Third, as I noted in conclusion after analysing one of my first-year classes' exercises (Burns, 2016), a teacher never, in the final analysis, knows what is learned, when it is learned—perhaps in the class/teaching exchange—but perhaps not until years later does the full 'penny drop'. Examinations, essays and other assessments can only tell us so much about the inherent magic and richness of learning.

Further, we can offer, in an *intrinsic* sense, not simply relying on an *instrumental* argument, an openness to the wonder of another human being, proceeding through life. Regarding our students, this respect is for the fact that

they come past our lives as teachers, in a still-formative stage, at this point in their lives. To generate respect as an act of will on our part, we need to look for ways to construct respect from even the flimsiest or most abstract philosophical ideas. It will shift our pedagogy, and over time the effort will become more real in how we conduct our exchanges with students, respond to their questions and find value in what they say even when what they say is wrong, aggressive, or lacking effort. We will become better teachers regardless of the individual class or cohort characteristics of our students. A mystic colleague once told me that for him, everyone has something to teach us—no-one in life is wasted—*at the very minimum* we see an example of what not to do, a path not to take. There is lots to respect.

Many times I have seen working-class students from less advantaged socio-economic circumstances begin to shine in the soft glow of being encouraged and respected in the process of debate, discussion, disagreement, as they have to change and learn. Similarly, women students used to environments in which they are ignored, patronised or minimally regarded for their questions and ideas, when treated with a professional respect, are able to achieve much more than was previously believed possible. Sometimes films and books about heroic teachers that capture the public imagination might be re-read as illustrating the power to lift and elevate, that respect confers on the recipient. This is not because they are worthy, and deserve respect in every way, but because the giver of respect has created something new by offering that gift because of who they are themselves as a teacher.

A final story in this section illustrates effective teaching based on respecting students and their current limits. A colleague of mine, then a trainee secondary school teacher, and not very good at mathematics, shared an apartment with an engineer who was, by contrast, very good at mathematics. On one occasion as she struggled to complete an assignment, she asked him about how the operation she was attempting should be done. He at first derided the question saying dismissively. 'Oh, that's easy. Any nine-year old knows that'. But she persisted since she knew she needed help. At first he was puzzled about what she had asked him to help her do, since to him it was so obvious. Then, on further pressing, he wrote down a flurry of numbers, and again she had to slow him down to explain the steps to her, something which he clearly found quite irritating and confronting. Eventually he explained enough for her to get the solution. She tells me she carries that understanding to this day. Knowing is not the same as teaching.

She had coerced his respect, and although in the 'student' learner role, she had extracted from him enough respect that her problem was a serious one to her, that he had eventually fallen into line and explained sufficiently for her

need. Her recent observation to me was that people who are good at something have often forgotten how, when and where they learned it. It may be that their respect for people who still have 'not yet'[17] achieved that learning has faded. It may also be that they never developed respect for the difficulty of that item of learning or knowledge in that field, because it was not hard for them. Respecting the effort that may be required, the threat of being treated as ignorant or feeling stupid, the transfer of knowledge to this new area, are each and all valuable starting points for being an excellent teacher by respecting and enabling deep learning in students.

My exhortation of teachers who aspire to be and do what Bain described as, 'What the best teachers do', is to scrape up some respect from within yourself, ask a mentor, make sure you find respect, prop respect up on your mental mantelpiece—admire it, look at it regularly, pay deference to the concept. It is a profound bulwark again the many things that teachers can miss and thereby fail to produce the excellence in communication and teaching for their students. It is not easy to create respect in these ways in one's teacher professionalism and make it central to one's teacher identity. There are many buffets and eddies from the institutions we work in, student themselves, colleagues and the physical circumstances of teaching spaces. But this is something we can work on and achieve mastery even within the cross-pressures of life as professional educators.

CONCLUSION

Respect is not the only important soft skill in teaching. In a larger monograph on this subject it would be important to devote space to *kindness* and how that functions. What are the traps and what are the imperatives? What is being friendly without being friends? Again, culture by culture and teaching system by teaching system, these vary within socio-cultural rules and norms. Thus, it is not a matter of proposing absolute statements but seeking how this might apply in each national or regional locality. That larger monograph would also explore the soft skill of *curating or managing* a class, beyond simply structuring the class. This is a subject often taught in teacher training programs and courses, as indeed it needs to be.

In watching experienced and excellent teachers at work there is always a mixture, an interplay, of hard or structuring skills and soft enabling skills that mean the structures make sense and the softer skills blend into the performativity of the teaching and learning. The intangible skills of enabling students' learning is the point being highlighted here. It only starts to become evident once the basic capacity to safely manage a functioning teaching environment for the time-period required. As young university teaching assistants gain in experience and get more confident, it is very evident that they 'lighten up' on

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their hard content focus and develop softer skills in attending more to what students are doing, or not doing, with the content. What don't students yet understand? It is the soft skills managing the interaction, misunderstandings and threshold concepts in the minds of the students that rightly become their first focus in enabling learning.

Taking these ideas beyond policy and discussion, applying scholarship of teaching and learning research approach to this topic could be applied in several ways[30] and across any discipline whether academics wished to test and improve their delivery[31], as noted in the references listed for in the first section. The normal scientific practices of pre-test-intervention-and post-test could be applied. This would involve specific preparation of the pre-and-post-test measures, as well as creation of relevant interventions in terms of demonstrating respect in the student-teacher-class interaction. This would be different in classrooms, laboratories, fieldwork or small tutorial groups. It would nevertheless be highly interesting and valuable in those varied teaching and learning environment and different disciplines. How does it play in these different settings?

Another variation of empirically testing respect or any of these soft skills is to use a 'natural experiment' method. In this approach researchers identify the presence or absence (devising the appropriate survey/focus group/interview or other research instrument to achieve a measure for use pre-and post the semester. It may not be a whole semester, but a specific learning activity or process that is of interest. This may introduce—deliberately or simply from

Table 1: Methodology elements testing soft skills.

Research element	Teaching & Learning Application
Variables	Identify and define
Pre-test	Respect (or other phenomenon)
Intervention	Teaching & Learning activity – class, film, exercise, lab, fieldwork
Post-test	Do measures show change?
Two-groups	Control group or 'natural experiment'
Pre-test	Both (or all) groups
Intervention	Different activities (as above) or absence
Post-test	Compare group differences on measures
Repeat research	New contexts, places or institutions
From empirical data	Are results same or different?

the circumstance of what is already happening—the control group idea. That is, if the intervention ('showing respect' in some format or another) is present or absent, what effect or effects does that have on measures such as learning and grades, or perhaps retention or perhaps rating of a positive learning environment by students. Just as for any other research, there are always limits and constraints, but at least some empirical and measurable insights are generated. These methodological suggestions for soft skills research are summarised in Table 1.

There are other soft skills that can be important contributors to and productive of excellent results. Finally, I refer to the noted social theorist Pierre Bourdieu[8] who addressed the tacit aspects of any human social exchanges as *practice* rather than able to be fully theorised conceptually as categories or types. His book, *The Logic of Practice*, makes these not-fully-formulable dispositions and attitudes central to social theory and action in society. In education, too, this is an empowering way of conceiving of the teaching and learning function. Though an earlier generation of scholars believed his ideas were about reproducing the social order, it is now recognised[49] that Bourdieu was describing individuals actively struggling with times of social change and being prepared and able, or not, to engage with the demands of the contemporary world.

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