

IN 2009, WHAT IS “A GOOD TEACHER”?



SOPHIE DOUCET
Journalist and Future
College History Teacher

Over a lifetime of teaching, doing research and writing, Denise BARBEAU has had the same quest: to understand how and why students learn. Currently teaching future college teachers at the Université de Montréal, she has written several articles for *Pédagogie Collégiale*, notably on motivation in school and the classroom as a reflection of teachers and their practices. She graciously granted us an interview on the theme: What makes “a good teacher”.



Denise BARBEAU holds a doctorate in Psychopedagogy from the Université de Montréal. She is the author of many articles and works, and has won many distinctions. They include the 2002 *Prix d'excellence* from the *Association québécoise de pédagogie collégiale* for her body of work in the college network, and the *Prix de la ministre* in 1994 for a study done on motivation in schools. As part of the Université de Montréal's *Microprogramme de formation à l'enseignement postsecondaire*, she teaches a course called *Processus d'apprentissages en enseignement supérieur*, on learning processes in higher education to future Quebec college teachers.

SOPHIE DOUCET:

We see a lot of “good teachers” in the movies. There is the marginal Keating in *Dead Poets Society*, the sensitive and engaging Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*, and the sympathetic François Marin in *Entre les murs...* But in real life, for you, Denise Barbeau, what is a “good teacher”?

DENISE BARBEAU

First of all, a good teacher is someone who has extensive and detailed knowledge of the subject matter being taught. That is an obvious and very basic requirement. Assuming this to be the case, for me a good teacher is someone who, before starting to teach, seeks to answer two fundamental questions. The first question is: Where do I want to lead my students? That is to say, what is it that I want them to understand and be able to accomplish by the end of the period we will be spending together? Teachers must have a very clear idea of this final objective, otherwise they risk missing the mark. Once this objective is clear, the second

question they ask is: How will I be able to guide them in developing both this knowledge and these competencies? In other words, what exercises, activities and teaching methods should I favour in order to bring students to read, reflect and do what they must learn to do?

This philosophy is drawn from the competency-based approach that you use extensively in your college and university teaching. You seem to have a strong belief in this approach which is still not unanimously accepted.

db I believe very strongly that it is only through their own reflections, their own effort and what *they do* (their own actions) that students learn. I first noticed this in my own student journey. The courses in which I learned the most were those in which I was most *active*; that is to say, the courses in which I did the most reading, reflecting, analyzing and producing things based on what I had learned through my readings. In the competency-based approach, we are

concerned with developing knowledge (including social skills and know-how) which for me is fundamental. This approach has been criticized, and I find this irritating because I believe that those who criticize it the most have not fully understood it... They say, for example, that knowledge is no longer valued in the competency-based approach – that is not true at all! It is also false to say that we level down. On the contrary, we are actually aiming higher, our goal being to push learning even further. That being said, we in the educational field are to blame to some degree. We have not been able to properly explain the major paradigm shift that this new approach represents. Journalists have not really understood it and teachers have not either, I believe. I think that the MELS (*Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport*) did not provide the necessary funding to enable people to integrate this approach in a comprehensive manner.



We must admit that the competency-based approach represents a radical change relative to the traditional teaching approach. For example, the teacher is no longer considered a simple lecturer or communicator.

db That's true! When teachers display their knowledge, we can admire them and say, "Wow! What an excellent lecturer! What a great communicator!" That's fine! But... this is not what is expected of us as teachers. Our job is not to showcase our own knowledge, but to guide students in developing theirs: to help them to integrate knowledge well enough to be able to transfer it into real life situations outside the classroom. In the competency-based approach that I favour – and please note that I am not saying it is the only effective approach – the teacher is not the most important element. The teacher is simply a tool for guiding students in their learning. Teachers are just accidental occurrences along students' learning journeys! They are the spark that can inspire students to learn, to try new things and to take risks!

In your book *Tracer les chemins de la connaissance*¹, you compare the teacher's role to that of a theatre director rather than to that of an actor on stage. What do you mean by this?

db In every teacher there is the soul of an artist. It is not a matter of silencing the artist, quite the contrary! It is rather a matter of putting this artist to work for pedagogical purposes, but in a new way. The teacher is not the one putting on the show. Rather, the

teacher is the one who must prepare a group of amateur actors to perform on stage, for it is they who will be giving the performance (demonstrating the acquisition of knowledge). From this perspective teachers are very present with the students. It is they who decide what play to perform; they are the ones who propose analyses of the text, who organize rehearsals and supervise the actors as they learn their roles... The students cannot be content with simply being spectators in class. They must be active, learn their lines, work and rework them in order to integrate the play so completely that they can perform properly in real-life situations. For me, this is the best metaphor to explain the new concept of the teacher's role. I admit it is a 180-degree about-turn.

Our job is not to showcase our own knowledge, but to guide students in developing theirs: to help them to integrate knowledge well enough to be able to transfer it into real life situations outside the classroom.

You also use the gardener metaphor...

db Yes. Much like the director, the gardener is not visible. We look at the garden and are amazed by it (by the learning acquired by the students). When we garden, we plant the seeds in the ground and, at a given moment, we see the shoots push through. But this takes time, it is a slow process, just like students' learning. One must be patient and wait. It may be tempting to pull on the shoots to make things go a little faster, but pulling on shoots will break them. One must let time do its work.

You place a lot of importance on the affective aspect of teaching, on the teacher-student relationship.

db Yes. For me, the emotional dimension is like fuel in the engine. Even in the classroom, teachers must have an individual relationship with each student because learning is an individual and personalized act. One must take the time to learn each student's name and give the proper importance to establishing visual contact with each individual student. The "good teacher" will succeed in making individual students feel important and that their relationship to learning is important for the teacher, that it is a genuine concern. Research clearly demonstrates that when students feel their teacher is concerned with their progress, they are more motivated, they try harder and they learn more.

Moreover, teachers must always be honest and tell students the way things really are. They must let the students know if their learning is progressing well or not. They must be transparent and yes, I would even say, caring. Teachers must take care not to hurt students' feelings so that they do not block the students but rather encourage them to make progress. When students face a problem that they do not understand, certain emotions arise: anguish, fear of not measuring up to the task... These emotions are undeniable. A teacher's role is to foster harmonious contact with the learning situation and an openness toward learning. In other words, to minimize negative and counterproductive stress!

This aspect of the pedagogical renewal has been widely criticized on the basis that one cannot eliminate all stress

¹ BARBEAU, D., A. MONTINI et C. Roy, *Tracer les chemins de la connaissance. La motivation scolaire*, AQPC, 1997, 535 p.



from students' lives, because after all, stress is an inevitable part of their professional lives...

db Let us get one thing straight. For me, stress in itself is a positive thing. However, there is useful stress and there is useless stress. Without some stress, people are not motivated to learn or to achieve their personal best. To experience stress is to have a taste or a desire for something and that desire to learn creates an imbalance, a doubt. It is worrisome because we are not sure if we will succeed. This kind of stress, caused by the imbalance, is important. Having said that, for learning to happen, the desire to learn (positive stress) must be greater than the fear of failure (negative stress). This is what the teacher with a proper attitude will try and instil in students. That's what a "good teacher" means to me. Like all human relationships, it is really quite simple in theory, but somewhat harder to accomplish in reality.

[...] when I started teaching, I was basically repeating the traditional patterns I had observed. However, fairly soon I realized the limitations of what I was doing. I was displaying my knowledge but the students did not always learn.

You came to teaching by accident. You were destined for a career as a clinical psychologist, and then you fell in love with the teaching profession. Were you a good teacher right from the start?

db No! I don't think anyone can be good right from the start. But I don't think I was bad either. I was probably in the high average. In fact, when I started teaching, I was basically repeating the traditional patterns

I had observed. However, fairly soon I realized the limitations of what I was doing. I was displaying my knowledge but the students did not always learn.

And then I started to ask myself some questions: What must I do in order for them to learn? What is learning? So I returned to my books and went back to school to work on a doctorate in psychopedagogy. The more I read, the more I worked, and the more I came into contact with students, the more convinced I became of one thing: students are at the centre of everything.

We hear a lot in the media about teachers being tired, leaving the profession or suffering from burnout. It is not an easy profession, so what is it that makes people like it? What can teachers do to remain happy and passionate in this profession?

db The classroom is a strange universe. Teachers enter and after two minutes, they get feedback on who they are and what they are doing. If we are sensitive to what is going on around us – and I think we all are – we receive immediate feedback. When you have fifteen students who are not looking at you, you know that you are not keeping their interest. This feedback is undeniable. It is always present and it is confrontational.

When I enter a classroom, I tell myself that these people have come here to learn. Sometimes they have paid to be there. I must give them something, and not just the information that they can find in books! Their time is too precious for them to waste three hours a week over the session! It is my duty to see that they learn and progress, thanks in part to the human relationships that

I will establish with them. I am not there for me, but rather for them.

It is the students who make us love teaching so much. We get caught up in the game because we like them. Even difficult students become a challenge and we feel like taking up that challenge.

In life, it seems, we enjoy giving ourselves challenges such as a tennis match or climbing a mountain. We find it fulfilling when we make an effort. As a teacher, I want my students to be proud of themselves, to accomplish things. My accomplishment will be to help them to fulfill themselves. ●

Denise BARBEAU taught psychology at Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne from 1970 to 2002. A researcher and part-time university lecturer at the Université de Montréal and the Université de Sherbrooke, she has written numerous articles and other works, such as *Interventions pédagogiques et réussite au Cégep*, *Méta-analyse* (2007) and *Tracer les chemins de la connaissance* (with Angelo Montini and Claude Roy, 1997).

Sophie DOUCET has just completed her studies within the *Microprogramme de formation à l'enseignement supérieur* at the Université de Montréal and she also holds a Masters degree in history from the same institution. After working for a decade as a journalist (*L'Actualité*, *Québec Science*, *La Presse*, *La Gazette des femmes*, etc.), she is now studying to become a college teacher. Sophie Doucet is very interested in history, particularly in the women who wrote it, as well as in China, which she has made the subject of several conference talks.

sophiedou@hotmail.com