



<b>Title</b>	Those who can, teach. 'A teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence stops'
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<b>Publication date</b>	2012-01
<b>Original citation</b>	Murphy, M. (2012) "Those who can, teach. 'A teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence stops'", <i>The Practising Midwife</i> , 15(1), pp.12-13.
<b>Type of publication</b>	Article (peer-reviewed)
<b>Link to publisher's version</b>	<a href="http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mesl/tpm">http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mesl/tpm</a> Access to the full text of the published version may require a subscription.
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# Those who can, teach

*'A teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence stops'*

(Adams 1907)

Two of her teachers have had a profound and lasting influence on her journey into midwifery and teaching, explains

**Margaret Murphy**



**SUMMARY** Teachers can have a profound effect on us all, both good and bad. In this paper the effect two individual midwives had on my evolution as a midwife will be examined. They were very different: one was formal and the other informal. The classroom was the setting for one, the clinical area for the other. Each had her own unique style and way of looking at the world. One was very different from the other in manner and in approach. However they each shared a philosophy of women centred, normal birth which they espoused in all aspects of their working lives.

**Keywords** Teacher, role model, mentor, positive influence

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**F**ormal educative processes begin at a very young age. The impact of those who are responsible for delivering these processes, leave lasting impressions on our lives. I have had countless teachers in my life, but few have made as indelible a mark on my learning, beliefs about my midwifery practice and ability and even my self development, as the two people I will discuss here.

Midwifery is a profession like no other. The unique bond that is formed between woman and midwife in the journey towards motherhood is an honour. The two teachers I describe here have helped me to identify my place in these women's journeys and to

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shape my own philosophy of midwifery and of teaching and learning.

**Passion for women and babies**

Maria\* was a lecturer on my midwifery programme. She brought a new

perspective to midwifery for me and my learning despite the fact that she had been in the profession for many years at the stage when I encountered her. Maria retained a joy and wonder in the role of the midwife. She motivated me with her passion for women and babies, and instilled in me the reality that, as a midwife, I would affect eternity in my relationships with the women I cared for. Women's birth stories become part of their families' folklore and part of their histories. Indeed my own children have often asked me: 'Tell me again, mummy, about the day I was born.'

**Effective learning**

Maria made each session with her a joy of learning with her application of

theory to practice. She helped me draw on my experiences of the clinical setting and marry these with the theories. This was problem based learning (though I was unaware of it at the time). To me it made learning real and applicable to what I was experiencing. By utilising my own experiences, the assimilation and retention of knowledge became easier. She also fostered a regard for reflection in my practice and how vital that is for personal and professional development. While I was undertaking a postgraduate midwifery qualification I had to unlearn most of my 'nursing ways' to free my mind from the illness based, medical mindset. I had to learn the social, wellness model of caring for healthy women and babies. Maria helped me to let go of my past professional ways and to embrace the new skills and philosophy necessary to become a good midwife.

### The influence lives on

I have been very fortunate to have retained an excellent and ongoing relationship with Maria. She subsequently became my boss and a mentor for me when I made the move from clinical setting to formal education in 2006. I have used my experiences of learning under her tutelage to shape my own teaching and learning. As she nears retirement her influence and passion for women and midwifery survive in all who came within her sphere.

### Active, healthy birth

Helen\* was my senior colleague in the birthing suite when I was there as a student midwife and when I returned as a Registered Midwife. Though her teaching was delivered in the less formal, clinical setting, her impact was no less distinguished than Maria's.

Before I met Helen her reputation preceded her: she was known as a staunch advocate for women and babies, who did not suffer fools gladly. It was with this in mind that I made my way tentatively to the birthing suite. I

## As she nears retirement her influence and passion for women and midwifery survive in all who came within her sphere

found there someone who had many years' experience in facilitating women to achieve active, healthy births. She was indeed a staunch advocate for women, admirable in so being, even though her efforts sometimes brought her into conflict with colleagues from within and outside the profession. Her unwavering belief in women and their bodies' ability to birth naturally instilled in me, the novice, a faith and belief in this normality also.

### Inspiring teacher

Had I not been fortunate enough to learn under Helen I may never have discovered that belief in myself. She was a truly inspiring teacher and was influential in my unearthing my own belief and philosophy of childbirth.

I learned from Helen that it was the relationship with the women I cared for that was paramount. Birth was the woman's experience and a positive experience resulted in her empowerment. My role was to facilitate, teach and protect, not to talk of 'my deliveries' or 'my women'. This was a light bulb moment for me; Helen showed me that I could do more by doing nothing and allowing women to get on with the business of giving birth.

### Facilitating learning

My experiences of these two teachers have profoundly shaped my beliefs and philosophy of teaching and learning.

My role now as a lecturer practitioner is still not about me; it is about students. My responsibility now is no different from when I worked alongside Helen in the birthing suite. My function is to facilitate student experiences and learning and to help them make sense of their professional world. My mission statement, therefore, is 'It is not about me and is all about them.'

I apply this philosophy to my teaching practice through my passion for midwifery and my advocacy for women. I acknowledge the importance of expert practice and theory in my teaching. In staying true to the beliefs underpinning my practice as a teacher and a clinician, I continue to model these beliefs for my students. I understand the necessity to motivate students and to meet them where they are in their learning.

### Lifelong influence

I have always acknowledged the debt I owe to Maria and Helen and have been aware that they have both positively influenced my own teaching and learning beliefs and philosophies. Putting these thoughts to paper has affirmed the impact that these two teachers have had on my own practice and that I am, too, a work in progress. It is the responsibility of us all to be aware of the formal and informal effects that our teaching, role modelling and mentoring have on the students and junior colleagues we work with. Though we may not always be aware of it, what we do today will affect the women, babies and midwives of the future, perhaps long after we are gone. **TPM**

**Margaret Murphy is a lecturer practitioner in midwifery at University College, Cork**

\*Names have been changed

### References

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