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# Preface

I wrote this book for teachers, because, outside of students and my own family, I like them more than any other group of people I have ever met. I like their curiosity, their idealism, and their stubbornness. I like the wide-eyed beginners and the curmudgeonly veterans. I like them—teachers of every stripe—and I worry about them. They are too damned busy, and they are too damned conscientious. When the busyness mixes with the conscientiousness, a kind of panic ensues. We’ve all felt it. In teacher’s lounges, on Sunday night, at six a.m., five minutes before class, or when we look across the table at our nonteaching spouses and try to explain for the millionth time that this weekend is going to be *really* busy . . . We’ve all felt the panic of never quite being able to catch up with our school work.

Teachers, I offer this book as a steadying force. Applied over the long haul, it will, I hope, help you catch your breath. It will help you to become more deliberate and more decisive, a steadying force for some other teacher in need of support. And it will help you make lasting contributions to your schools and the lives of your students.

I started teaching high school fresh out of a graduate program in English. Most of my pedagogical moves originated on the commonsense, gut level. I plundered my enthusiasms, planning lessons and writing tests based on what felt right. What felt right then was simple: Students would love the same books I loved; further, they would appreciate such things as the simple beauty of a Hemingway sentence, the convoluted logic of a Faulkner character, the impeccable economy of a Shakespeare couplet, the soul-stirring elegance of a Rilke sonnet. I know now that what felt right then was wrong, or at least partly wrong. These aesthetic principles were not self-evident. Enthusiasm was not enough.

I started learning this lesson—that “the gut is not enough”—early in my first year as a teacher. My department chair told me to pick a book for my second semester seniors. She didn’t ask me to defend my choice; she simply told me to pick a book I liked. So I picked what, at the time, was one of my favorites, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Choosing Kerouac led to

one of the worst months I have ever spent in a classroom—my own, or others. It stunk, I stunk, the kids stunk. I expected the book to teach itself. The students couldn't understand why the plot seemed to repeat. I expected the narrator's romantic pilgrimages to inspire my students. They couldn't understand why the narrator kept leaving his home or why on earth he was so excited. I remember asking them over and over again, "Can't you see the beauty in this book?" and I remember them saying, over and over, "No, and we're not really interested."

Their lack of "seeing" was directly related to my fundamental grounding as a teacher. When people asked me what I taught, I listed the books and the concepts. When people asked me about my classes, I told them about the books and the concepts.

Looking back on my early years as a teacher, I notice that one mistake rises above the rest. I spent my early years in the classroom trying to convey my own personal encounters with texts. As such, I was a translator, not a teacher. I was interested in my experience, not the experience of my students. I figured that charisma and enthusiasm could pull me through. And, in all honesty, these qualities did help me. Students liked my classes, and I received great reviews from my supervisors. A few students from those days still keep in touch with me and tell me how much I helped them. After some reflection, though, I realized that any "success" gleaned from my early teaching falls into the category of luck. I made an impact on the teacher-proof kids, the ones no teacher can help or hurt very much. And the other kids, the kids who met me head on, the kids who were ridiculously advanced for their age, probably enjoyed arguing with me and probably even learned a few things. But when I think about the rest of the students in my first few classes, the great unwashed, I have no idea what I did or didn't do for them. If I did something useful, I wouldn't know it.

Now, when people ask me what I teach, I answer more simply, and I hope, more humbly: I teach kids. The change has been slow and sometimes difficult. I have been fortunate to discuss the craft of teaching with great mentors, to observe some masterful teachers, and to take part in some enlightening seminars. These experiences forced me to explore my motives for being in the classroom and to adjust some of my most deeply ingrained habits. They transformed me from a solitary reader talking *at* classes of kids to a teacher, a guide, someone as interested in how students learn as in what he can teach them.

Professional educators make deliberate choices in order to reach desired ends. Although they do not always predict every outcome or destination, they understand how to shape the journey. They can tell you, in no uncertain terms, where students started and where they ended,

where they need to go and where they should be able to go. And they are effective, knowing the best way to get to the best end, even if that end is just another starting point.

In an effort to become an effective professional, I have studied best practices in the field of education, such as backward design, brain theory, and differentiated instruction. But I have also learned to embrace things that used to make my skin crawl: business models, statistics, data, and a range of analytic habits. Why? Because I realized that teaching does not begin and end in the classroom. Things that happen outside the classroom (the other work mentioned in my subtitle) can have a huge effect on what happens inside the classroom. Just ask the students of a deeply unorganized teacher how their learning is going; ask the students who are not receiving timely and thoughtful feedback on their assessments; ask the students who meet with their teachers outside of class but do not get much out of the meetings because they feel like their teacher does not really know them. Or look at your own teaching life. How many times have your best intentions for planning a great lesson been thrown off course by a frantic parent phone call or a request from an administrator? How many times have you attended a meeting without being prepared? How many times have you failed to follow up on an important student concern? As my friend and colleague Gray Smith once said, "In order to be a good teacher in today's schools, you have to be able to do *everything* well."

The bottom line is both simple and challenging: Working in the 21st-century school engages every aspect of a person's professional and personal character. To learn to cope and ultimately thrive, we need to be capable of teaching one minute, writing an incisive e-mail the next, managing a website after that, then working with a parent to develop a solution for his child, then finding ways to generate community buy-in for an important club or initiative . . . and we must learn to keep our balance while we turn from task to task.

When I was in middle and high school, I shared a love of basketball with my father. We watched a lot of games. After a few minutes of watching a game, regardless of the level of play, my father would identify the best players on the court. After a few more minutes, he would identify the single best player on the court. Then he would pose a simple and direct question: What specific actions made the best player better than the other players who were also good? During these discussions, he would not allow me to generalize. Slowly, I learned the finer points of the game and that, often, the difference between the best player and the second-best player was miniscule. The best player jumped an inch higher or a second faster. He passed to where his teammates should have been instead of

where they were, leading them instead of simply responding to them. He didn't use his eyes to telegraph his passes. He had instincts to do the right things supported by skills to execute the right things effectively.

Years later, I am not surprised to find that Jim Collins (2001) has written a book called *Good to Great* wherein he systematically explores the difference between good and great companies. It seems like a natural question to ask of all enterprises worthy of attention.

In my book, I will combine my insights from watching the game of teaching with the insights I have gained from scrutinizing the thinking of other professionals who tread similar ground. My imperatives were developed from the bottom up. I did not develop a theory and then seek examples to support it. In an attempt to survive and thrive in school, I relied on ideas gleaned from teachers, educational research, management texts, and interviews with successful professionals. Along the way, I catalogued the ideas that worked, pitched the ones that did not, and then developed seven natural groupings to categorize them.

Although I have intended the book to be read in chronological order, each chapter can stand alone. In the spirit of time and busyness, you should jump around and read those chapters that match your immediate needs. With that said, each chapter title is clearly indicative of the text that will follow.