

Jessica Schocker, Philosophy of Teaching

Teaching well is a radically vulnerable endeavor. One of my favorite scholars, Paolo Freire once wrote, “The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.” It has taken nearly two decades of teaching to recognize the surreal privilege that is creating classroom spaces where students pursue not simply class content, but their own humanity.

A couple of years ago, I started adding a version of the following statement to my syllabi: *your education is about more than learning your subject; it's about learning what it means to be human*. I'd been teaching for a long time; I was confident in my content knowledge, my skills as a teacher, and my experience engaging students in the classroom and online. But then, 2020 happened, and my students needed me to animate my class content – which always includes some combination of race, class, gender, politics, history, education, participatory citizenship, etc. – in ways more urgent than I could have imagined. I began to experience the power of teaching, not through the passing of knowledge or even by inspiring students to act in their communities (both of which are remarkable on their own, and what I had once thought were the hallmarks of my career). Rather, I saw the true power of teaching as encouraging student vulnerability, so they can know and act in deeply meaningful ways. I explicitly teach my students that being vulnerable is the willingness to show emotion and risk being hurt; it is letting people know what you care about and who you are.

Creating a classroom environment where students are willing to work hard and take risks requires teaching some specific participation (or what I like to call classroom citizenship) skills. I define classroom citizenship explicitly for my students as the intersection of preparedness, contribution, and listening. The combination differs based on student personality and experience. I encourage students to self-evaluate and reflect on their classroom citizenship over the course of the semester.

I am a white woman who often teaches about the power and place of race in America, which means I've had to be a vulnerable learner myself to become a great teacher. My most important job as a teacher of this content is to create a space where students, especially my students of color, trust me. I know from the scholars whose shoulders I stand on (looking at you, bell hooks), that there is no such thing as a true “safe space” classroom. I have also found that it is not grades that most motivate students to work hard; it is encouraging them to be authentic with their peers. By applying this philosophy, I've witnessed students intellectually (and emotionally) discussing the murder of George Floyd and, later, the trial of Derek Chauvin. I have seen students make real connections with strangers, *while in breakout rooms on ZOOM*. I've seen students who are under perhaps the most societal pressure that has existed in my career somehow make the time to read complex texts and come to class with pages upon pages of notes, eager to share their reactions and questions. The power of the teacher is *creating the space* for that knowledge to percolate among members of a collective.

In the last year, I have had several opportunities to mentor my colleagues. For example, I co-organized a webinar series called “Critical Conversations: Race 101,” coordinating a panel of undergraduate students and faculty to model what it looks like to engage in challenging conversations with an intellectual lens, a disciplinary vocabulary, and empathy. I've also had colleagues ask to sit in on my classes, and I always have an open door (or an open Zoom room). Being in this phase of my career, where I have accepted that I am a “veteran” teacher (who still has so much to learn), I have found that I sincerely enjoy mentoring my colleagues. While I certainly share my pedagogical strategies, tried and true lessons, and research-based methods, I also reveal myself as a human who makes mistakes and sometimes feels insecure. This hasn't always come easily; I used to feel like I must always be (or fake) confident to be a good teacher. To the contrary, I have found that my colleagues respond most to hearing about my honest processes of *coming to know myself as a teacher and a learner*. I am humbled when my colleagues trust me with their questions, fears, and hopes for their own classes. Knowing that my peers seek to learn from me pushes me to work harder and continue to grow as a teacher of students and a teacher of teachers.

The world we live in is loud, intoxicating, beautiful, tragic, busy, and puzzling. I work hard to make my classroom a place where students take respite in learning, laugh a little, read and write a lot, develop and share their humanity, and become empowered by their vulnerability.