

An Overture

The Secret to Success in Teaching

Spend a few hours in any school. It won't take long to find out who are the most effective teachers. They tend to surface from the masses, though they may not be the most physically attractive, youthful, or carry the most impressive academic credentials. Students know who they are. Other teachers know who they are. The one characteristic these highly effective teachers have in common is personal enthusiasm.

It's a vibrant, animated, love-of-subject, love-of-people, love-of-life, magnetically contagious kind of enthusiasm. It can cause other people to feel good. More importantly, it can increase students' learning.

Most of us know an enthusiastic teacher when we see one, but researcher Mary L. Collins developed an operational definition of the construct consisting of eight indicators:

1. Rapid, uplifting, varied vocal delivery;
2. Dancing, wide-open eyes;
3. Frequent, demonstrative gestures;
4. Varied, dramatic body movements;
5. Varied, emotive facial expressions;
6. Selection of varied words, especially adjectives;
7. Ready, animated acceptance of ideas and feelings; and
8. Exuberant overall energy level.

Use of these behaviors by enthusiastic teachers can be a powerful force in stimulating student learning. Gesture, variation in voice and facial expression, and eye contact seem to be potent means of arousing students' attention, thus enhancing their learning. A study by W.L. Wyckoff (1973) compared teachers in an experimental group who used mobility, dramatic pauses, and gestures to teachers in a control group who avoided these behaviors. Secondary students of the enthusiastic teachers scored significantly higher on recall-of-information tests as compared to students taught by the control group teachers.

Enthusiastic teachers exude a great sense of involvement and commitment to the subjects they teach. By participating in the ongoing activities of their disciplines, they exhibit a personal enjoyment that is a model to their students. In the realm of science, these teachers are tinkerers, inventors, story-tellers, hobbyist-experimenters—doers rather than talkers. They enjoy what they do and it shows.

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References

- COLLINS, M.L. 1976. The effects of training for enthusiasm displayed by preservice elementary teachers. Doctoral Dissertation. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University.
- WYCKOFF, W.L. 1973. The effect of stimulus variation on learning from lecture. *Journal of Experimental Education* 41(2).