

A TRIBUTE TO TEACHING: *PUTTING IT ON THE LINE*

Ronald A. Berk
The Johns Hopkins University

Three years ago I retired from teaching after 37 years. I taught elementary and junior high school for several years before completing a 30-year stint at Johns Hopkins University. I have always loved being in the classroom with my students. They energize me, inspire me, humble me, and teach me in so many ways. I've learned so much more from them than they have from me. You may have guessed: Teaching is my passion. It may be yours as well.

Why does teaching seem different from any other profession? If you do it well, it requires an incredible amount of work, as you already know. When you try to turn each class into a Broadway production, as I attempted to do in my last 10 years of teaching, the preparation is enormous. Obviously, there is something special or unique about teaching. *Teaching is more of a calling than a chosen job.* It draws on our gifts and intelligences, cognitive and emotional, our personality, and even our quirks, and applies them in creative ways in the classroom.

Reflecting on all of my experiences in the classroom, I thought some type of “timeless” metaphor that represents my passion for teaching and its significance as a profession would be worthy of this essay. It is my tribute to teaching. Hopefully, those of you who share that passion now or in the past will agree. If you are contemplating a teaching career, maybe this metaphor will affirm your decision and inspire you to follow that career track. At the other end of the career line, if you are a professorsaurus who is still teaching, perhaps the metaphor will reaffirm why you continue to teach into your 60s

and even 70s, while many of your colleagues have chosen to retire. The implications of this metaphor for teaching practice and your self-assessment are discussed.

Putting It on the Line

My search for a metaphor for teaching brought to mind a musical that opened on Broadway 33 years ago and then again two years ago: *A Chorus Line* (original in April 1975; revival in October 2006). That show was all about *putting it on the line*, literally and figuratively. A white tape line was placed on the floor across the width of the stage, downstage (near the front), on which the dancers auditioning for the show (within a show) were told to stand. The musical is all about dancers (the gypsies who go from show to show) and the sacrifices they make mentally, physically, and emotionally when they walk onto that stage and put themselves on the line in every performance. They bare their mind, body, heart, and soul before a live audience every day, sometimes twice on Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. Every part of their being is being tested. There is no where to hide.

Putting it on the line could be a metaphor for other careers and even life in general. The show's creator, director, and choreographer, the late Michael Bennett, didn't realize the symbolism in this line until it was drawn on the stage before one of the out-of-town pre-Broadway try-outs. The significance and meaningfulness of that line became apparent as members of the theatre audience communicated how the line related to their occupations and lives.

Consider for a moment how our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, police officers, and firefighters put their lives on the line every day. Many other professionals put their skills on the line in a variety of ways by the manner in which they execute their jobs.

Examples include physicians, nurses, lawyers, writers, athletes, bank robbers, and Jack Bauer on 24.

The “line” has had personal significance to most anyone who saw the show. He or she could relate to that line and what it meant through the songs in the show:

- *MIND*: (“I Can Do That”; “At the Ballet”)
- *BODY*: (“The Music and the Mirror”; “One”)
- *HEART*: (“What I Did for Love”; “The Music and the Mirror”; “Nothing”; “One”)
- *SOUL*: (“Nothing”)

Application to Teaching

Do professors *put it on the line*? They must or the preceding paragraphs are totally pointless. The parallels between Broadway dancing and teaching in the classroom are striking. What is it that they actually put on the line? A professor bares his or her mind, body, heart, and soul before the students in every class. In what other professions do you reveal that much of your inner and outer self over and over again? Consider each of the following:

- *MIND*: your knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in the course content and your professional reputation as a teacher, scholar, scientist, researcher, and/or clinician
- *BODY*: your physical appearance, which sets an image or standard for your students, ranging from Oscar to Felix or casual (T-shirt, shorts, and sandals) to dressy professional (coat and tie or dress/suit) and everything in between, and your body language that transmits different messages

- *HEART*: your personality, professionalism, and civility are conveyed through your words and actions, which reflect your passion, enthusiasm, and excitement for what you teach as well as your leadership, honor, integrity, respect, accountability, understanding, compassion, caring, kindness, patience, and sense of humor
- *SOUL*: your beliefs, including spiritual, moral, philosophical, and emotional, that may permeate all of the above despite any desire we might have to maintain scrupulous impartiality in what we say and do

Implications for Practice

Those four elements of your being are laid out before your students to see, class after class; just like a dancer, performance after performance. That's what you are putting on the line. Although many of us concentrate only on the "mind," we are having an impact on our students in so many other ways that we may be unaware. We need to be cognizant of all four elements and how those characteristics define us as teachers and persons.

It's possible that *how* we teach has a more profound effect on our students than *what* we teach. At least they can always retrieve the content we cover in print and online. Mehrabian (1981) conducted experiments on communicating feelings and attitudes. He concluded with the "7%-38%-55% rule," which meant that a message is communicated through 7% words, 38% tone of voice, and 55% body language; in other words, style, expression, tone, facial expressions, and body language account for 93% of the meaning inferred by people. Although we are not always dealing with emotions and attitudes,

perhaps, more attention needs to be devoted to our nonverbal cues from our body, heart, and soul.

As far as the “on the line” metaphor is concerned, there are significant distinctions between you and a dancer. First, we only get a glimpse of a dancer on stage for maybe about two and a half hours; our students are exposed to us “on stage” for possibly 45 hours or more depending on the requirements for the course. In other words, our students can learn a lot about us in that time, for better or worse. They take notice of our demeanor; preparation; responses to students, faculty, and situations; enthusiasm; compassion; and many other behaviors.

Second, more attention is given to the “body” of a dancer as an instrument of communication or art form; some of us have bodies that are in the category of abstract art, which may have little bearing on what we teach unless it involves physical skills, coaching athletes, or art. However, our appearance can have an impact. Are you *The Odd Couple*'s sloppy Oscar Madison, preppy Felix Unger in a tie and blazer, the stereotypic prof of yesteryear in corduroy jacket and jeans, provocatively dressed like a pop singer, or the business suit-type like a Wall Street banker? What image do you want to convey? What message are you sending? What matters is the message the students are receiving from your apparel.

And finally, you provide a role model for students to emulate; a dancer plays a role as an actor, which can also be an inspiration to emulate. Our students watch our every move, just like our children. After attending our classes for a semester, they may delight in or even pick up characteristics of our personalities, especially any quirky behaviors or gestures. They can probably do hilarious impersonations of most of us.

Finale

The next time you walk across that doorway threshold into your classroom, consider all that you are putting on the line. How much of your mind, body, heart, and soul are you giving to your students? How much are you receiving from them? When class time rolls around, what are you thinking? “Teaching is such a nuisance” or “I can’t wait to get to class.”

Self-examine what you are contributing to the profession, in your teaching and to the scholarship of teaching. Can you give more than you are currently giving? Are you applying your unique gifts, talents, and creativity to your teaching? How much time do you devote to research, service, and practice?

I challenge you to be the teacher you are capable of being. At the end of your career, you might have a monster-size vitae with a long list of publications, but it would be a shame also to have a lot of regrets that you wish you had put more on the line for teaching and your students when you had the opportunity.

References

Mehrabian, A. *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981.