
The Six Essential Elements of Good Teaching

Cotsen Foundation draws on the observations of mentors to help journalists identify what works.

By Richard Lee Colvin

Journalists who visit schools should sense a “buzz in the classroom,” says Julie Clark, a teacher who mentors her colleagues at Roosevelt Elementary in Santa Monica, Calif. Another suggests that visiting journalists should see students who “just can’t wait to get going on something.” A Southern California mentor teacher says teaching is “a joyful dialogue ... like a dance between teachers and students.” Learning, she adds, shouldn’t be a “tug of war in which the teacher wants the students to pull in a certain direction.” Excellent teachers inspire their students to do the challenging work that learning requires and are inspired by them.

Those descriptions capture something journalists should always keep in mind while observing classrooms. Teaching and learning are not isolated from one another, with the teacher teaching and the student learning. Teaching methods, philosophies and styles range widely. On one end of the methodological scale is direct instruction: The teacher is teaching children how to do something, by describing the steps, providing important knowledge, giving directions. On the other end is what is termed discovery or exploratory learning, which at its most extreme involves children engaging in activities and drawing their own conclusions with guidance from the teacher along the way. [See related article p. 7] Journalists will cover disputes about the apparent conflict between those philosophies. But the reality is that excellent teachers use both techniques as well as many others when they are appropriate, guided

by their judgment and their knowledge of research and their students.

The Cotsen Family Foundation of Los Angeles was founded by businessman Lloyd E. Cotsen to promote the “art of teaching.” The foundation selects schools to work with based on applications by their teachers. A mentor from each school is chosen to work full time with his or her colleagues. That mentor spends numerous hours observing other teachers and is involved in selecting new schools to participate. In a group interview, several of the mentors discussed what they look for and what journalists should look for as well.

Cotsen has drawn on the many observations of mentors to identify six essential elements of good teaching:

- **Physical environment.** Classrooms are environments and can be a teaching tool, with examples of good work, progress indicators, and lots of materials and books.
- **Social environment.** The relationships among the teacher and students also can be a learning aid, providing support for learning or squelching it.
- **Instruction.** This is what first comes to mind in regard to classrooms, but it’s complex and can be hard to capture. In good classrooms you’ll see lectures, group activities, discussions, practice, and so on. Variety is key.
- **Content.** What is being taught is as important as how it is being taught. Is it challenging? Does it meet state standards?

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

ADVICE FROM THE MENTORS



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— Bonnie Houck



There isn’t a formula for good teaching.
— Cathy Nguyen



The first thing journalists should do when they go to classrooms is look at the kids.
— Sean Lindsay



Ask the teacher to tell you about the lesson. What came before? What follows?
— Graciela Barba-Castro



- **Assessment.** All good teachers assess their students' progress, against classroom, district, state, and national standards. Teachers also adjust their teaching based on results.
- **Effects on student.** What students have learned is the ultimate test of good teaching.

In conversation, mentors come back to these elements over and over. But they also stress repeatedly that good teaching is not following a recipe. "There isn't a formula for good teaching," said Cathy Nguyen, a mentor in Lawndale, Calif.

Sean Lindsay, a teacher mentoring colleagues at Alvarado Elementary School in Long Beach, Calif., says, "The first thing journalists should do when they go to classrooms is to look at the kids." Are they happy and engaged? Do they know the classroom routines?

Are students talking about the content of the lessons – the importance of place value in math, say, or the intricacies of cell division – as well as the details of the assignment? The term you will hear educators use over and over is engagement. Are the students present mentally as well as physically? Are they thinking? If they are, you'll see it – they're smiling, enthusiastically sharing ideas among themselves, asking questions and discussing ideas, using classroom terms.

Bonnie Houck, a mentor in Cypress, Calif., said reporters should be able to identify the point of the lesson. "If you can't identify it, the students won't be able to either," she said. She also suggests paying attention to whether students of different ability levels and languages are given chances to learn. A math lesson can be

easier or harder based on the numbers the teacher chooses to use. Easy or hard, students can grasp the concept.

But Houck and others said effective teachers have to be flexible and sometimes set their lesson plan aside, seizing on what educators call the "teachable moment." She said to look for "looseness within a structure." Graciela Barba-Castro, a mentor in Santa Monica, remembers watching a multiplication lesson. One child raised her hand and said multiplication was like addition. "No," the teacher said, "this is multiplication." The child was right, of course, but it didn't fit with the teacher's plan.

Here are some other tips for journalists from the mentors:

- "If journalists see kids asking the teacher all the questions, then the teacher hasn't taught them to be independent learners. Is the teacher willing to be challenged?" – Sean Lindsay.
- "Go back to the objective of the lesson and ask the students those specific things." – Bonnie Houck.
- "Consider the culture of the school. Do you see collaboration among teachers? Opportunities to improve? Support from the school leader?" – Cathy Nguyen.
- "Ask the teacher to tell you about the lesson. What came before? What follows?" – Graciela Barba-Castro.
- "Have the kids been taught to use what's in the classroom? There might be a colorful 'word wall' of new words they've encountered, but do students know how to use it?" – Cathy Nguyen.

Often, the mentors said, journalists write about teachers as heroes battling the odds. They are directed to the classroom of the "best" teacher, one who colleagues see as the most visible, articulate or colorful. Schools also like to point out flashy projects by students. But these mentors suggest seeking out quiet, reflective teachers who are constantly trying to improve on what they're doing. In fact, Barba-Castro said, "It is the teacher's daily interactions with a child in a way that makes them smarter or think in a different way that represents the very skilled part of our job." ■

