

# Foreword

Yes—as the title says—teaching matters. But, we also know how easy it is for this to become rhetorical rather than reality-based. We are learning all the time—even if the teachers are not always clearly visible. Our teachers come in many forms—including some that we probably view as undesirable. Even the way we organize schools “teaches” us something—requiring silence is a message, no excuses sends a message, but so does chaos. The arrangement of chairs and desks, what’s on the walls of a classroom are teaching—whether intentional or not.

It’s hard to remember this—maybe especially for teachers who have to spend so much of their time facing (often literally) groups of twenty to forty for forty-five minutes to five hours a day. It sometimes even seems to us that standing back for a few minutes and observing our students is lazy, wasting time, not doing our job. We try to plan while also knowing that the most powerful teaching arises out of connections kids make or don’t make to our plans. As no two children are alike, nor no two teachers, the best of all plans often go astray unless we know how to observe closely, be flexible, and respond mindfully.

It’s an impossible task, but to my surprise it can be transformative over time, especially so if the school as a whole reinforces the habits of mind and heart that are part of the best classroom. And that the classroom is thought of more broadly—as a school as a whole and the larger society within which it sits. Since we want students to keep learning when they are out of our sight, we need always also to be looking for ways to hook our teaching to their lives.

But students, like teachers, spend a lot of their psychic energy hiding from judgment. That’s a fact of life in any hierarchal system where power rests overwhelmingly on one side. Yet feedback is essential. Ways of “seeing” ourselves as teachers through the eyes of others—whether it be video or commentary—is always startling. It can create higher walls or increased openness.

Looking at the work in this book reminds me though that what the authors are describing is time consuming. It's hard enough to find time to plan ahead at all, with awareness that *x*, *y*, and *z* need quick attention before the learners turn off. And then even if the lessons went perfectly, who knows what will remain in the students' repertoire by tomorrow? How can the homework prepare for tomorrow and reinforce today? And when will I read it all? And when will I comment on it in general and to each of my 30–150 students.

But as McCann, Jones, and Aronoff make clear, this is a mere surface measure of time. In fact, we need time to see each other at work, to read about the work of others, to study the research in our discipline as well as our teaching field, to respond to critiques from outside, to look over past records and documents to see how students are progressing and how their work in my room fits into their work elsewhere . . . and when will I find time to talk with *x* (former teacher, colleague, student . . . and maybe a family or two)?

My daughter told me when she went from being a part-time teacher for seven years to being a fulltime teacher that “it's not possible,” she moaned. The standard she had set for herself required at least an hour of preparation, review, and more for every instructional hour.

I kept wishing I could be back in school while a group of teachers digs into some of this stuff and reads out together some of the examples offered of real teachers in action. That's where the task of improving teaching begins, and where we actually learn a lot about what a good teaching/learning environment is, not only for teachers, but also for students. I appreciate the authors' recognition of this connection between our task and theirs.

This book is important in laying out any number of ways for our thinking about what counts most during the time we spend with our students, and it raises simultaneously the questions of how we might reorganize schooling to make these important models doable and effective. To start with, it means providing teachers themselves with a front row in discussions and plans for school organization—better yet—for seats on the stage as designers as well.

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