

Beginnings - My Teaching Career

Are you like me when you think back to your school days? Do you think of them as a rewarding challenge that broadened your mind? Or do you see them as years of wading through endless amounts of fluff to find anything that was relevant or meaningful to you? As Paul Simon put it in his legendary song “Kodachrome”:

*“When I think back
On all the crap I learned in high school
It’s a wonder I can think at all.
And though my lack of education
Hasn’t hurt me none
I can read the writing on the wall”*

Do you feel that your teachers were dedicated individuals genuinely interested in their students’ progress? Or were they a bunch of stiffs, more interested in their own welfare than that of their pupils? The fact is that we tend to have vivid memories of our school days and as we grow older, we tend to develop strong feelings about the role of education in modern society. And of the people whose livelihood is dependent on its existence.

I tend to remember my teachers, especially in the high school years, as kindly but ineffective. They were older gentlemen (I went to boys’ schools) who regaled us with stories of their exploits in the armed forces. When it came to teaching about quadratic equations, deponent verbs, or rhyming couplets, many of my teachers appeared to be of limited ability. When we think in these terms, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that teachers have a good gig – a steady paycheck and a loose system of staff supervision.

But thinking in these terms sidesteps factors that are easily ignored. In reality, the average teacher is overwhelmed by constantly changing curriculum, and by broader social change. As an example, teaching students about the law of sexual consent was, until recently, considered unnecessary until the mid-high school years. Now, sexual education is taught from grades one to eight. While parents can opt out of this education for their children, staff must teach what is prescribed through the Ministry of Education. But while conversations may be stilted, we surely have to accept that these topics are better taught in the classroom, not just the streets.

I became a teacher because I had concluded that I could do better. No more memorizing of the dates of European queens and kings. Instead, I would try to foster understanding of historical figures and the challenges they faced in their lives. Fortunately, at the time of my entry into the teaching ranks, there was a general feeling of optimism. Teachers were encouraged to interpret government mandates about education in a liberal manner, to take risks in instruction. I sometimes shudder when I read about the restrictive nature of present-day curriculum development, and the lock-step within which teachers must meet the “Learning Outcomes” specified for each course.

How do we become an excellent performer at any job? For those who wish to improve their professional skills, it takes considerable time and effort. As they mature as individuals, most teachers acquire more knowledge and experience, and develop an individual style that suits their personal approach to their subject area.

Most teachers find out that it takes longer than they might have imagined to become completely comfortable in the classroom, fully capable of handling any unusual situation that might arise. Many of the things that can affect one's daily life are entirely unpredictable. A new principal or department head may mean a change in some of the parameters of your job. A change in government of your province or territory will almost certainly mean changes in educational curriculum, together with new targets to shoot for, new ways of helping students to aim for those targets, and new ways of summarizing and communicating student learning.

The young people in these stories, though they have fictional names, were real students and all of them helped shaped my development as a teacher. I still think of them from time to time and wish each of them well.

Chapter 1 - Mitch's story

It was the last day of my first practice teaching session. For three weeks I had worked under the tutelage of Mitchell, or "Mitch" to his cronies in the staff room.

He was a long-standing veteran of the teaching profession. During my practice teaching practicum, he acted as my advisor and coach, and was officially called my "associate teacher".

Mitch was somewhat bored with his job and cryptic in his conversation, but there was no doubt that he had once been an excellent teacher, although his best days were behind him. Since the day I had arrived at the Countryville-Westland Secondary School, I had tried to emulate his style of teaching.

Mitch was not the type of professional who gave lots of feedback to student teachers. He took a more "sink or swim" approach with them. But the Practice Teaching Office at my teacher's college was eminently clear on the matter: it was the student's responsibility to request frequent feedback. This would give the student teacher time to attend to any deficiencies identified.

I had asked Mitch to identify weaknesses in my teaching, but he appeared reluctant to do so. "Oh, it will all come together one day," he would respond. "You'll make a good teacher, but be patient. Don't try for perfection on your first day out."

Good advice perhaps, but how could I ensure no overcritical or unfair critical remarks on my summative evaluation unless I had been given an opportunity to address them? I couldn't. I just had to rely on trust.

It was Friday afternoon. Somewhat anxiously, I tried to get Mitch at least to give me a verbal summary of what he intended to write. No dice.

The bell announcing the end of the school day had just rung. Mitch told me to go along to the staff room. He'd be there in a few minutes and we'd go through my evaluation together.

I got to the staff room and gosh, it was filling right up with teaching staff, even though it was a gorgeous fall Friday outside. Everyone seemed in a good mood, as they grabbed a coffee or tea from the vending machine.

After a few minutes, Mitch appeared at the staff room door. A seat seemed to have been reserved for him at one end of a series of tables and I was directed to sit beside him. The hubbub in the staff room quietened fairly quickly. I suddenly realized that this was a movie that many of the staff had seen before. They all knew the ending. But I did not, although I was sure I'd be in the very last scene.

Mitch pulled out a blank evaluation sheet and made something of a pantomime of starting to fill it in. Suddenly he said in a louder than conversation voice, "Colin, would you mind getting me a black coffee from the machine? And one for yourself if you'd like."

The vending machine was situated beyond the tables, meaning that I'd have to walk in front of all the teachers sitting there. I stopped to get the first coffee. At that precise moment, when he

and I were at maximum distance apart, Mitch called out to me “Colin, are there one or two ‘m’s’ in ‘crummy’?”

Spontaneously I shouted back, “Oh no Mitch, you’re supposed to write the evaluation about my teaching competency, not yours!”

The audience’s response was ecstatic. Wild cheers of approval, hooting, table banging and fist-pumping erupted in response to my clever comeback.

Or, at least that’s how I would have liked to have responded. But I had been carefully set up for this moment. I mumbled an unintelligible reply, looking deeply embarrassed, which I was.

In the end, Mitch gave me a strong evaluation (he had written it the night before). But why did he have to set up such a mean show, likely to cause embarrassment and hurt? And why did so many of his colleagues turn up to see the drama?

Perhaps schools were rougher places in those days. Certainly there were lots of WWII veterans employed in the teaching ranks, and they were not genteel in their approach to life or school discipline.

The whole incident shows how expectations have changed. Today, anything resembling what Mitch did that day would be regarded as seriously problematic behaviour. If word spread to the principal’s office and especially if Mitch’s behaviour that day were seen to be part of a pattern, he might well lose his job over it.

These are welcome changes. In order to have safe schools, we must ensure that there is no room for bullying, victimizing or similar hostile acts.

Chapter 2 - Lois's Story

Lois was a modern languages teacher in one of the secondary schools in town. She and her husband were excitedly anticipating the birth of their first child. Some months before Lois' due date, she wrote a letter to her school board, requesting three months of paid leave to accommodate the baby's post-partum welfare. Lois's principal advised her not to place too much hope on getting her leave. A number of other female teachers had investigated the situation and come to the same conclusion. Much of the discussion about Lois' request was held *in camera*. This means that no members of the public were allowed to attend the meeting and to hear what was said. Eventually the school board turned down Lois's request for paid pregnancy leave.

Next, Lois approached her teacher's federation. Her representative told Lois that paid pregnancy leave had never before been granted in her school board. But the federation was keen to take the matter to court. If the government would not recognize pregnancy leave as a legal right, perhaps a judge might.

In the short run, Lois never did have her leave granted. She took one day off school to give birth and returned to school the very next day! At the next payday Lois was deducted one day's pay. She then applied retroactively for paid leave, but the school board never provided any compensation.

The school board took the position that (a) it was not required to pay Lois for the one day, and (b) the money could not be paid from their sickness and injury fund. Pregnancy was not an illness.

Some years later, the law was changed so that all pregnant mothers were eligible for pregnancy leave.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about Lois's story is that it did not take place in the mid-19th century.

It took place in 1976.