

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

Volume 5, Number 6, 1993-94

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)).

## Of Gurus, Gatekeepers, and Guides: Metaphors of College Teaching

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**Metaphors Matter** Intimidator, ship's captain, judge, entertainer, preacher, gardener Ñ these are some of the metaphors of teaching used by high school teachers to describe their roles (Tobin, 1989; Tobin and Ulerick, 1989). Such metaphors are more than literary devices: according to a growing body of research, they function as the lenses by which we perceive and conceptualize our experiences (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Shon, 1979). Because metaphors underlie the way we think about teaching and what we actually do when we teach, observers can witness them at work in our classroom interactions. "Minding our metaphors" (Munby and Russell, 1989) is thus a powerful way to uncover our basic beliefs about teaching in order to reflect upon and improve teaching practice.

From what the students tell me, in their experience there are three common metaphors of the college teacher. (Of course there are many more.) While we may disagree that these are the images that guide us, the students' viewpoint is nevertheless instructive, if only to remind us of the difference between what they perceive and we intend. My purpose here is to look through the students' eyes to explore what these metaphors reveal, especially in terms of their "collateral lessons," as Dewey called them: the implied concomitant messages students may draw from them.

**The Guru** When colleges were more exclusive institutions than they now are, gurus predominated. Some flourish still, especially in graduate programs. Wrapped in mystery and majesty, loftily aloof, the guru labors to keep the sacred discipline unsullied from congress with the common. Gurus maintain distance from students and other forms of earthly worry. Their place is in the eyries on the summit, where their wisdom is reserved for other gurus. When they teach, if at all, they are inclined to lecture behind a lectern, atop a dais, speaking in tongues the impenetrable language of their particular priesthood. Students are expected to listen in silence, to interrupt neither for questions nor clarification. Such matters are left to monks (teaching assistants) whose main duties are to intercede between gurus and students, handling office hours, discussions, and the grading of tests. The consequent chasms of misunderstanding that widen between gurus and students are, of course, the students' fault. These are their responsibility to remedy by climbing the glass mountain to commune with gurus in their own rarified air. The steps of the journey from the students' total lack of knowledge to the gurus' surfeit of the same, however, gurus are content to keep mysterious. It is left to students not only to find their own way up but also to provide a motivating reason for doing so. Because of this, the guru attitude is most fitting towards graduate students who have already demonstrated their ability in and commitment to the field, and know enough about it to deem it worth the struggle to learn more. But consider: how could a typical undergraduate in a survey course discover the value of the discipline with the "why bother?" question thus left unanswered?

**The Gatekeeper** Like gurus, gatekeepers are discipline guardians. They conceive their discourse communities like foreign countries where they function as immigration officers. Casual travel is discouraged: gatekeepers are interested in those who intend to take up residence - namely, those who major in the subject. The steps to mastery the guru omits are the gatekeeper's forte; but these steps are often steep, uneven, and treacherous. To the standards of the institution and the discipline, gatekeepers add their own private measures of proficiency. Tests and more tests, papers, and projects are used to winnow wheat from chaff. Unending proof of mastery is required. Often gatekeepers are as proud of the numbers they reject from their fields as those they accept. Unlike gurus, gatekeepers are

sometimes effective communicators in introductory courses because of their interest in recruiting converts to their fields. Less capable students or those already committed to other areas, however, seldom keep their attention. The gatekeeper's best effort is reserved for those who intend to pursue their fields professionally and for life. One unfortunate result of this attitude is the message that knowledge of the discipline they defend is of little use to those who wish to learn it in order to become broadly educated to enrich their lives.

**The Guide** Where gatekeepers are like immigration officers, guides are like travel agents seeking to attract visitors rather than residents into their discourse communities. Guides take students on tours through their disciplines, pointing out highlights, showing them what to look for, and helping them to talk intelligently with the natives. The goal is for students to gain the ability to come and go on their own. Guides often relish cross-country excursions, exploring where student interest leads them.

The lack of distance guides maintain between themselves and their students distinguishes them markedly from gurus and gatekeepers. They stand before students as those who have been further down the path, who have returned to guide the students' way. Students and guides travel together. Often students are infected by the guide's enthusiasm. By seeing it through the guide's eyes, students learn to appreciate the discipline.

Because of the close relationships they maintain with students, guides are often powerful teachers by example: who they are speaks eloquently of the benefit of their studies. In this way they serve also as ambassadors. Their signal excellence is their ability to enrich their students' futures with the broad appreciations that define a liberal education.

**Some Implications** These characterizations are rough and oversimplified, to be sure, but it is interesting to note how each metaphor reveals a preference for a single dimension of the complex duties of college teaching. The guru's virtue is research and the teaching of graduate students; the gatekeeper's strength is the teaching of upper-level majors; the guide excels in the survey class. In this choice of audience elitist, purist, and populist are revealed. Beneath prowls the

perennial dilemma of the demands of the discipline versus the demands of the students.

These three types also differ in the degree to which they further the ultimate goal of student autonomy and self-direction. Gurus, awaiting the arrival of the fittests, merely presuppose independence. Gatekeepers, because they impose their own standards rather than eliciting, strengthening, and developing the students' own, ironically hinder the very autonomy that distinguishes professionals. The guides' journeys provide students with the exploration prerequisite for informed choice; but if such treks go only on paved paths, they fail to offer the challenges that invoke the students' (or the discipline's) best. Here it is well to heed Joseph Schwab's remark that we fail to educate our successors. Place-holders, substitutes, and cloned shadows, these we can create with ease. To educate truly, to be vital agents of human improvement, we must teach to be surpassed.

### **The Sherpa: Educating our Successors**

A metaphor of teaching that honors these challenges is offered by Thomas E. Kelly. The sherpa, he says, rather than "flattening the terrain" or "obscuring alternative paths to the summit," helps students to "master and preserve a challenging topography" (1986). Sherpas go part of the distance with their students; they help them to assemble the tools they will need to climb on alone; they allow them to explore their own tracks; and they help set up the climbs that may well result in being surpassed. This image seems both to preserve some of the virtues of guru, gatekeeper, and guide while reducing their deficiencies.

We often seem to assume that, if successful, our students will end up where we are now. But the 21st century promises *terra incognita* fraught with unprecedented perils, unlike any we have confronted. If they are to survive, our students simply must surpass us.

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