

Teaching Philosophy
Brian Jacobs, Operations Management
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“Do you have 20 years of experience, or one year of experience repeated 20 times?”

– Joseph Juran

My teaching philosophy has been shaped in large part by the above quote I heard from Dr. Juran during a quality conference in the mid 1980s. Over the years, Juran’s comment has resonated with me as I felt that I was constantly dealing with many “experienced” people of that description. Given that others now look at me as an “experienced” person, I use the quote to remind myself that it’s not the years that matter, but the quality and variety of experiences, and what was learned from them. Currently three years into my doctoral program at Georgia Tech, I have been a full-time student for 21 years. I also have 22 years of work experience in the military, automotive, and primary metals industries. Perhaps most importantly, I have been married for 21 years and have three teenage sons, including a sophomore at the University of Notre Dame. I look back on my roles as a student, an employee, a boss, and a father to see how they have shaped my approach to the classroom.

In all my roles, a universal principle I’ve learned is that people – including instructors and students – have the need to be respected and treated professionally. I don’t believe, however, that respectful conduct requires classrooms to be formal and stiff. Students like teachers to know them as people with names and outside interests and, similarly, they want to know that their teachers are people too. I’ve been in too many classrooms, particularly at the graduate level, where the instructor walks into the session and immediately launches into a lecture with no introductions, no rapport-building, and an instant drop in student interest. On the first day, I introduce myself and I let the students introduce themselves as well; I also collect information cards to help me remember them as individuals. I make an effort to use their names whenever possible. I don’t do this to be “nice” but to demonstrate that I respect the students. One prerequisite for respect in the classroom is mutual honesty; just as I desire honesty from the students, students also expect honesty from me. Admitting ignorance on specific topics or mistakes made is challenging for a perfectionist like me but it’s a demonstrable way of respecting the students’ intelligence.

An important lesson I learned from being an employee of a start-up company was that people in a new environment, even high performers, crave organizational structure. If a structure isn’t quickly given or developed, people will create their own system, often with sub-optimal results. Students in particular don’t like uncertainty. As a student, I’ve found that if the teacher clearly outlines reasonable rules and structure, it’s one less thing

to be concerned about and eliminates a potential barrier to learning. I thus try to ensure that my syllabus is not only clear but available on the first day of class.

My work experience as a manager included the hiring, supervising, and development of several engineering coop students and new college graduates in various roles. I think that puts me in a unique position to help undergraduates learn what traits are valued in the workplace. While academic accomplishment can help them get their foot in the door of a company, their GPA is quickly forgotten after they're hired. What does matter to employers is attitude, effort, and the ability to work with all types of people. I believe that rewarding those behaviors in the classroom via feedback and grading helps prepare them for the performance reviews they will receive in the workplace.

As the father of a college student, I have some appreciation for the culture of today's young adults and how radically different it is from my own undergraduate experience. While they're eager to learn, the 24-7 stimuli from telecommunications and electronic entertainment that young adults live with have made it challenging for teachers to break through with the message that their course material is important and relevant. While some instructors counter by adopting a glitzy multi-media lecture approach, I think the more salient point is to ensure the students understand the practical uses and applications of lessons. I think I bring credibility to this approach with my practical experience.

Although my role as a teacher is to help students learn the required course material, I also believe I can at least subtly influence them with some important life lessons as well, lessons that have been passed to me by all manner of people – especially my family. To me, the most important of these lessons are the value of relationships and the need for balance in all things. Too many young people, particularly the exceptional students, are focused on achievement to the exclusion of all else. While lessons such as these must ultimately be learned for themselves, I hope that I can at least demonstrate behaviors that give them pause to consider.

As a non-traditional student with a full professional and personal life in addition to my educational roles, I try to draw upon all my experiences as the underpinning for my teaching philosophy. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to draw upon these rich and varied experiences, and to put them into practice in the classroom.