

The 12 qualities great teachers share

[Valerie Strauss](#)

It's the question of the year: What makes a great teacher?

Here's one effort to sort out the qualities that all great teachers have. I suspect that any effort to create a definitive list is doomed to fail because great teachers are as different as the students they teach.

But here's a list to start, and please write what you think is missing. This was written by Chris Lehmann, the founding principal of the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia. A version of this [appeared on his website, Practical Theory](#). He wrote this some years ago when he was teaching at Beacon School, a progressive public high school in Manhattan.

By Chris Lehmann

What makes a great teacher?

Sort of an important question, right?

I've seen teachers who worked for hours on their lessons, who were scholars in the field fail miserably, and I've seen teachers who, if you give them five minutes before they walked in to glance over their material, they could run a class for an hour on any topic under the sun.

In the end, what makes a great teacher? I wish I had a magic eight-ball that allowed me to figure this one out, but it's something I've really given a lot of thought to... and I think what follows are at least some interesting ways to think about the profession.

So what makes a great teacher?

1) Passion for teaching. This can manifest itself so many ways. I'm the "jump around the room" kind of teacher, and sure, that comes from a lot of passion, but some of the best teachers I've known have had a passion that students had to be quiet to catch onto.

2) Love of kids. You laugh, but it's true! I've seen people come in and talk about teaching and talk about how much they love their subject and know about their subject, but they never mention the kids. Worse, we had an interview once where the teacher clearly knew his stuff, but he basically admitted that his classroom management style was fear and intimidation. Not who I want teaching kids I care about.

3) Love of their subject. Again... pretty important. I spent four years dropping by Mike Thayer's classroom because to watch him explain physics or calculus was, for me, to understand how you could have a passion for something that was always a mystery for me. Great teachers not only love their subject, but they love to share that joy with students.

4) Understanding of the role of a school in a child's life. High school is more than the sum of the classes the kids take. It's a time to grow, explore, try on identities, find joys that might just last a lifetime. Sometimes the best teaching we do happens on basketball courts, in the halls after a class, at a local coffee shop or in a drama studio. The best teachers know that they are teachers for much more than the time they are in the physical classroom.

5) A willingness to change. This one gets overlooked sometimes, I think. I've written about this before, but it bears repeating. We talk about how schools should be transformative for kids, but I think they can be just as transformative for teachers. If you expect kids to be changed by their interaction with you, it's got to be a two-way street.

6) A work ethic that doesn't quit. It's a hard, draining job that will demand

all that you can give sometimes. You've got to be able to have some balance in your life, but there are very few teachers who can be effective by cramming everything they need to do into the hours allocated by the average teacher's contract. (And for the record, the overwhelming majority of the teachers I've met put in hours well above and beyond the contract.)

7) A willingness to reflect. You've got to be able to ask why things went the way they did... both on the good and the bad days. And you have to be able to admit when the reasons it went bad were because of what you did, not what the students did. (Equally important is the understanding that often things go right because of what the kids brought to the table, not because your lesson plan should be bronzed.) Teaching requires a willingness to cast a critical eye on your practice, your pedagogy and your self. And it can be brutal.

8) Organization. My personal Achilles heel, and one of the things I'm always working to improve. My Palm Pilot helped, really. But I hate paperwork and official looking documents, and it kills me. I am amazed at the people like Dale Lally who seem to get his papers handed back before the kids hand them in or seems to be able to put his hands on every unit he's ever taught within a moment's notice. Kids know what to expect, they know he's going to be organized and have a structure to his class... and he's still creative and spontaneous and interesting. I can only imagine how much better of a teacher I'd be if the structure of everything I did was just a little more organized.

9) Understanding that being a "great teacher" is a constant struggle to always improve. I think I've had some moments of great teaching in my career, but I also still see all the holes in my teaching -- sadly, often times mirroring holes in my self -- and I still want to get better... because I think I've got a long way to go to be a great teacher every day. And even if I get better

at everything I see as weaknesses now, I can only imagine what new challenges will face me on that day.

10) Enough ego to survive the hard days. The tough days will leave you curled up under a desk, convinced that you can't teach or the world is too hard for these kids or the work is too much or whatever the problem was that day... you have to have enough sense of self to survive those days.

11) Enough humility to remember it's not about you. It's about the kids. If your ego rules your classroom, if the class turns into "me vs. them" or if you can't understand that a sixteen year old might be able to tell you something you don't know, then don't teach. Or at least, don't teach high school.

12) A willingness to work collaboratively. Sure, there are some great teachers who close the door to their classroom and do what they want, but I think you send a strange message to the kids that way sometimes. Teachers are part of a school community, and even where that community can be flawed (and lots of schools are), a great teacher should be willing to work to make the community a better place.

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