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Enthusiasm in Teaching

Bob Schoofs

Grand Valley State University, schoofsr@gvsu.edu

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Enthusiasm in Teaching

Much has been written recently in education publications about topics like the flipped classroom and effective use of the latest technologies or web applications. In addition to these topics, instruction librarians have also focused much time and energy on how to implement the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy.

While these topics are certainly worthy of our attention, I propose that focusing on these things without grounding ourselves in fundamental pedagogical strategies will ultimately fail to hit the mark.

Specifically, I want to suggest that enthusiasm is crucial to effective teaching and that it is not merely a personality trait, but a quality that can be developed and improved with effort and practice. Even someone like me who has a laid-back personality can become a much more effective teacher by developing and improving my enthusiasm in the classroom.

Enthusiasm as an important characteristic of effective teaching has been the subject of research and publication in general education journals for years. But a search of the library literature yields few results, indicating that teaching librarians have probably not given enthusiasm the attention it deserves, when considering strategies to improve their teaching.

One frequently cited publication stands out for its focus on enthusiasm training and its effects.¹ In this article M. L. Collins identifies eight indicators of teacher enthusiasm. Using these indicators, Bettencourt et al. conducted two experiments to train teachers to become more enthusiastic, with promising results in student behavior and achievement.² Notable in these articles is their focus on enthusiasm training per se. Kunter et al. differentiate between enthusiasm for the subject and enthusiasm for teaching.³ Their research findings indicate that “teaching enthusiasm, rather than subject enthusiasm, seems to be the main predictor of teaching success.”⁴

These three articles, and many others in the literature, are focused on K-12 teaching. But others look at the effects of teacher enthusiasm on college students. Among these is an article by Patrick et al. which reports that “students who received an enthusiastically delivered lecture subsequently reported greater intrinsic motivation regarding the lecture material and experienced higher levels of vitality.”⁵ Another study of enthusiasm in the college classroom considers not just the enthusiasm of the teacher, but also the enthusiasm of fellow students.⁶ This paper describes the situation common in many classes where some students are taking the class because it is a requirement, but have little initial interest in the subject matter, while other students are very interested in the subject. This research indicates that both teacher enthusiasm and peer enthusiasm are important in stimulating motivation to learn. But teacher enthusiasm was key, not only in motivating both kinds of students, but also in holding the interest of those who were initially intrigued by the course topic.

With all of the research indicating the importance of teacher enthusiasm in student learning, it follows that if you can increase your enthusiasm while teaching you will be a more effective teacher. But what if you don't have an outgoing personality – can you still be an

enthusiastic teacher? I believe you *can* improve this aspect of your teaching, just as you can other aspects, if you are committed to make the effort and spend time practicing.

Here are some suggestions how you might do this:

- Establish a plan with someone from your institution's teaching center, or with a colleague or small group of colleagues. Consider some of the strategies below as part of your plan.
- Film yourself teaching; critique yourself for characteristics of enthusiasm, a very humbling experience.
- Ask your colleague or group to offer feedback and suggestions on how to improve your enthusiasm, by either viewing the film of your teaching or coming to your classes.
- Practice teaching: focus specifically on these characteristics (derived from Collins' descriptors):⁷
 1. Exhibit a high level of energy and vitality.
 2. Incorporate demonstrative gestures, clap your hands if appropriate.
 3. Move your whole body around, swing around, move rapidly to the screen to highlight a point, nod your head vigorously to affirm someone's comment.
 4. Vary your vocal delivery in terms of volume, pace, and pitch; highlight key points with an excited loud voice or a whisper with hand cupped around your mouth.
 5. Use your eyes to communicate: open them wide in surprise, raise your eyebrows with a questions, establish eye contact with specific students.
 6. Communicate with your facial expressions: show excitement, surprise, or other emotions.

Implementing these strategies will enable you to do as Dale Carnegie suggested: "Act enthusiastic and you will be enthusiastic."⁸

¹ Mary Lynn Collins, "Effects of Enthusiasm Training on Preservice Elementary Teachers," *Research in Teacher Education* 29, no. 1 (January-February 1978): 53-57.

² Edward M. Bettencourt, Maxwell H. Gillett, Meredith Damien Gall, and Ray E. Hull, "Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm Training on Student On-task Behavior and Achievement," *American Educational Research Journal* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 435-450.

³ Mareike Kunter, Anne Frenzel, Gabriel Nagy, Jürgen Baumert, and Reinhard Pekrun, "Teacher Enthusiasm: Dimensionality and Context Specificity," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 36 (2011): 289-301.

⁴ *Ibid*, 299.

⁵ Brian C. Patrick, Jennifer Hisley, and Toni Kempler, "What's Everybody so Excited About?: The Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm on Student Intrinsic Motivation and Vitality," *Journal of Experimental Education* 68, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 217-236.

⁶ Taehee Kim and Diane L. Schallert, "Mediating Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm and Peer Enthusiasm on Students' Interest in the College Classroom," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 39 (2014): 134-144.

⁷ Mary Lynn Collins, 53.

⁸ As quoted by Melanie M. Keller, Thomas Goetz, Eva S. Becker, Vinzenz Morger, and Lauren Hensley, "Feeling and Showing: a New Conceptualization of Dispositional Teacher Enthusiasm and Its Relation to Students' Interest," *Learning and Instruction* 33 (2014): 29.