

TO TEACH: THE JOURNEY OF A TEACHER

Second Edition

A STUDY GUIDE FOR THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

by
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To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher has proved to be a durable text for several years. Combining vivid narratives with practical insights, theoretical frameworks and philosophical guideposts, *To Teach* invites teachers and teachers-to-be to rethink the project of teaching from top to bottom.

As I stated in the Preface to the Second Edition, people are generally drawn to a life in teaching because of a concern for the young, a love of children, a hope to participate in the growth and development of the newer generation. *To Teach* offers an approach that can keep love and hope alive in circumstances that are difficult and even deadening.

Most teachers are eager to understand children better, to teach from a solid base of knowing their students. *To Teach* provides a framework to see students as three-dimensional and dynamic creatures, and then to continue to deepen and extend that knowledge in the service of more effective teaching.

To Teach posits a vision of teaching as intellectual and ethical work, an enterprise that requires a thinking and caring person at the center. And *To Teach* shows teachers ways to keep those qualities active and healthy in environments that diminish them, situations bent on destruction.

Because *To Teach* is about teaching, it is also necessarily about action. The focus here is on the action of teachers in public schools in America as we enter the twenty-first century. This focus can be a guide and a framework, but it is not a prison. Sources are more global, and examples range over a wider landscape; application is similarly unlimited.

Much of teaching is tentative, contingent, and uncertain. We learn it by living it, by doing it, and so it is necessarily ragged and rough and unfinished. As with any journey, it can seem neat and certain, even painless, looking backward. On the road, looking forward, there is nothing easy or obvious about it. It is hard, grinding, difficult work. The collective, ongoing conversation about teaching allows us to glimpse something of the depth of this enterprise, to unearth the intellectual and ethical implications beneath the surface.

This Study Guide offers a wide range of activities and projects for college students as well as practicing teachers who want to renew their interest and energy on behalf of their students. It is designed to shadow *To Teach*, although some will find it more useful to jump around.

1. The Courage to Teach

- The “Teaching Myths” can seem provocative and controversial to some teachers. Do you find them so? Take one myth and disagree with it. Write a paragraph that takes on the issue from an entirely different angle.
- Write an insightful paragraph about another myth about teaching: “good teachers are always child-centered”; “good teachers need to love the kids, but they can ignore or dislike the parents”; “good teachers always know what they’re doing”; “good teachers never sleep or have a life—they live at school.”
- Invent a myth about teaching or teachers that you have observed or imagined.
- Read Myth 2 in Chapter 1, and describe three activities or projects that a teacher education program could offer that would be more vital preparation for teaching.
- Look again at Myth 3 in Chapter 1 and describe an experience you have had that was “engaging,” perhaps, but not necessarily “fun.”
- Take Myth 10 in Chapter 1 and write a true story of classroom life, first a paragraph on the teacher’s intentions and actions from her perspective, and then a paragraph from a student who sees the matter from an entirely different angle.
- Think about something you love, something you like to do, something you care about, something that arouses your passion and dedication. Describe how you could teach that thing, how you could make room for it in your classroom, how you might expose your students to that passion and to you as a person of commitment.
- Using crayons, paper, and collage materials (buttons, beads, photos from magazines) construct a visual representation of your pathway to teaching. Where are you now? Where are you headed?
- Create a “learning agenda” for yourself as a teacher. What concretely do you want to learn how to do in the next three months? How do you intend to learn it? How will you know if you have?

2. Kidwatching

- Develop three curriculum ideas or projects or activities that might bring students into greater visibility. How could that project deepen over several weeks or months?
- Tell the story of how you got your first name. Find out about the names of classmates, siblings, cousins.
- Do the name poem with classmates. Try it with children or youth.
- Write your first name down the left side of the page, and use each letter as the start of an adjective that describes aspects of you as a person.
- Design a “treasure hunt” for children or youth involving qualities you want to explore more deeply with them. The “treasure” will be the kids themselves.
- Make a map of the community around your school, highlighting where students live, shop, play, read, eat, and more.

- Labels can be “true” and “not true” at the same time, that is, they can reveal some things and conceal many more. Tell about a time when you were labeled. Describe how it felt. Say whether the label stuck or disappeared.
- Write an “Autobiography of My Hair.”
- Create a “Visual Questionnaire”: 1. A beautiful face. 2. A landscape. 3. A wonderful typeface. 4. A background. 5. My favorite color. Lay this out on a large page, and have students complete it.

3. Communities of Learners

- Draw a map of your bedroom, living room, or kitchen. What does the environment say now? Intentionally change that environment to speak more directly and more strongly to something you value. And then make that space more of a space for literacy (reading, writing, speaking).
- Visit a nearby classroom. What does the environment tell students to do? How would you improve the environment to make it more literate, more enabling, more a space of curiosity, more aesthetic, or more an invitation to invent?
- Design a food preparation area for your classroom, a place for cool cooking. Make an oven.
- Create a space for plants, and for some animal life.
- What makes a space inviting, homey, or interesting to you? What are three elements that have to be in your classroom for it to be a place you don’t want to leave?
- What do you love to do? How can you find or build space for that love in your classroom?
- Create a map-making area. Think of 100 ways to map your neighborhood.
- Make a list of ten things you can do in any learning environment that say, “READ!”
- Make a list of core beliefs about learning (at least five) that will inform the creation of a classroom environment.

4. Bridges

- Bring a portfolio that in some unique way demonstrates your commitment to teaching and learning, your goals for yourself as a teacher and your students as learners, your starting points and your pathway toward teaching. Include anything you like: a cultural artifact, a list of favorite books, movies, plays, music; a description of hobbies or collections or favorite pastimes; places you love to visit; something you’ve created; your best piece of work in anything you’ve ever done. Have in mind questions of culture and ability.
- Design three activities for students in which the prime motivator is an audience, rather than a teacher’s grade book.
- Create a “museum of culture” in your class.
- Design a coming-of-age ceremony for students.
- Design a Step-Up Day, when students prepare to leave your class and grade, and advance to the next ones.
- Write a poem within this framework:

They asked me to write about my race,
And I thought long and hard
About detail and complexity,

Subtlety and substance,
And I wrote:

But they didn't really want to hear all that,
So I simply said:

5. Curriculum-Making

- Choose between A or B.
 - A. Select one of these familiar human emotions: fear, envy, courage, longing, joy, anger, or jealousy.
 - B. Select one of the following communities of which you are not a self-identified member: deaf, gay/lesbian, Buddhist, Hassidic, evangelical, elderly, immigrant, HIV-positive, incarcerated, or unemployed blues musician.

In a short essay, define and describe the emotion (or community) drawing on your own personal experiences as well as the experiences of others. Then render a similar definition or description using at least three of the following forms of expression: a written language other than English; a drawing, painting, or sculpture; photographs, a video, or a film; a musical composition; a short story, play, or poem; a pantomime or dance.

Select several examples (from literature, journalism, the arts, and history) of other people's definitions and descriptions of your chosen emotion (or community). These should strike you as arresting or important, even if they do not correspond with your definition or description.
- Design a theme for one year in a specific classroom.
- Write a framework for curriculum development with at least five organizing questions.
- The contexts of our work and our lives include, of course, our families, echoes of lessons so deep and so abiding that they become merely commonsense, habit, the taken-for-granted—they were in our mother's milk, in the very air we breathed, and they required no thought. To challenge or even interrogate these core beliefs is like asking if the sky is up. What are some of your family lessons? What do they tell you about race, freedom, and seeing the world as if it could be otherwise?

6. Values and Assessments

Eight teachers settle into child-sized chairs in room 201 of the Gwendolyn Brooks Academy, a struggling public school on Chicago's near west side, as Carla Jordan, the host teacher, begins to pull the meeting together. "Has everyone got a snack?" she asks. "There are more donuts and apples on the side table. Cider... Coffee... Everyone OK?" She pauses and smiles, arms open and welcoming.

"Okay," she continues. "Why don't we bring our chairs forward, a little closer together, and let's make this more of a circle." She gestures with her hands as chair-legs scrape linoleum until a little half-hearted ring forms up. "Good. Let's begin."

Carla welcomes her colleagues to her second-grade classroom and reminds them that they have only forty minutes together today and that five minutes are already gone. "The house rules allow for two minutes of complaining," she laughs, "but I'm dispensing with that so we can

plunge right into the heart of things. You can complain on your own time.” Everyone laughs as Robert Thompson, a sixth grade teacher and the group comedian, pulls a mock frown and says, “I’ve been waiting two weeks for a chance to offer a major whine, and now you’re bottling me up.”

“Tell it to your therapist,” Carla jokes.

Carla Jordan sets a small portable oven timer for ten minutes, places it on a nearby desk, and begins presenting a portrait of her classroom—her environment for learning—and the rhythm and routine of her day. This is the eleventh meeting for this group of teachers, and they are by now comfortable with each other and familiar with the format: They always meet in a group member’s classroom; the host teacher provides a modest (or elaborate) snack and chairs the meeting; after a two-minute period allowed for gossip and complaint, the host teacher spends ten minutes describing the classroom, emphasizing the choices she or he has made and the thinking behind each decision; the group then talks back to the presenting teacher for eight minutes expanding on some points, seeking clarification, critically reflecting, and describing practices to amplify or intensify aspects of the environment; during the following ten minutes the host teacher presents a student to the group through the lens of that student’s work; the group then talks back to the presenting teacher, offering critical advice for future work with the student; the final two minutes are devoted to calendar, future meetings, details, and business. Forty minutes. Out the door.

Carla Jordan has been teaching for four years, neither a novice nor quite yet a veteran. Of the eight teachers gathered here, two are first-year teachers, five have been teaching from between four and ten years, and Robert has been teaching eighteen years. Each teacher has hosted at least one Teacher Talk; this is Carla’s second round, and she highlights changes since the last meeting in her room. “I took seriously the suggestions about the importance of displaying student work as you can see,” she says, gesturing towards a wall displaying student papers, a clothesline stretched across the back of the room hung with paintings, and a large table under a banner that trumpets, “Our Museum of Culture.” The reading area bristles with book reports, the place is alive with child-made art, and one large space is decorated with the results of an ongoing graphing, charting, and mapping project. The room looks denser, more vibrant and dynamic, busier and more interesting. “It’s made a difference, I think, in the pride and effort that goes into their work,” Carla says. Everyone is impressed.

“I’ve been wondering,” says Veronica Adams, a fourth-grade teacher who has consistently and increasingly argued for a stronger emphasis on pushing children to write across the curriculum, “in my own classroom about making visible the process of writing. I mean, why not display, for example, three drafts of the same paper? That might underline the point I make to the kids—how writing requires an idea, some effort and editing, and then rewriting.” One teacher thinks out loud about the importance of not intimidating beginning writers, allowing them to simply write, and another argues for the different demands made of fourth graders and second graders.

Carla takes notes on the conversation and then, when the time is up, pulls out a fat file folder and says, “Let me tell you about Rodney.” At the last meeting she had described a challenging child, and today she has decided to provide some balance. Rodney works hard and adds some zest and fun to her day. The group admires the creativity and intensity of his writing, the colorful paintings and meticulous maps he has drawn of the classroom and the school building. There are a few suggestions of ways to stretch the work with Rodney before the session comes to an end.

Teaching demands thoughtfulness. There simply is no way to become an outstanding teacher through adherence to routine, formula, habit, convention, or standardized ways of speaking and acting. Thoughtfulness requires time and focus and wide-awakeness--a willingness to look at the conditions of our teaching lives, to consider alternatives and different possibilities, to challenge received wisdom and what is taken for granted, and to link our conduct with our consciousness— to think about what we are doing.

It can be overwhelming to try to think what you are doing in a classroom of thirty students, embedded in a school of several hundred (or thousand), situated in a town or city of several thousand (or million). Each of your students has her or his own needs, skills, capacities, hopes, and dreams. The school has its own goals and plans to attend to, and society makes its own demands as well.

Although there is always more to learn and more to know as a teacher, the heart of teaching is a passionate regard for students. With it, mistakes and obstacles will be met and overcome; without it, no amount of technical skill will ever fully compensate.

Teachers need opportunities to collectively engage serious questions of immediacy and urgency from their classrooms: What are my teaching goals? How do they fit the visions/standards of the larger community? What is going on in our classrooms? What does it mean for the teacher? How are the kids experiencing it? How can we learn from one another?

It is important that teachers fight the atomization, isolation, and alienation endemic in teaching. Teachers typically find themselves alone in classrooms with too many children and too little time. When teachers talk to other teachers, it is usually a brief encounter at lunch or during a break, and the talk is rarely about the content and conduct of their work. The isolation is sometimes defended as a precious and guarded autonomy, but it can easily turn to disconnection and burnout.

The most successful teacher development projects do not rely on university people, curriculum specialists, gurus, or outsiders of any kind. Rather, they are teacher-run, small, informal, and personal. They are teachers talking to teachers about teaching. Teacher Talk.

These networks are promising because they require no special expertise or equipment or package. They are built on the needs, experiences, and collective wisdom of teachers themselves. They are close to the realities of classroom life and promise, therefore, no pie in the sky. And yet, by focusing on teachers' own concerns collectively and publicly, they assume that good teachers are always in search of better teaching practice. They allow for scrutiny, self-reflection, criticism, and support in the difficult task of becoming outstanding teachers.

The focus of Teacher Talk is curriculum, instruction, and evaluation—the content and conduct of teaching. This is itself remarkable. School staff meetings are so dominated by procedure and organization (announcements of regulations, reports of committees) that a visitor to such a meeting would have no idea what the enterprise is about. By contrast, Teacher Talk is only about students and teaching.

Teacher Talk is an initiative for and by teachers and is based on a simple principle: Teaching is intellectual and ethical work, and it requires a thoughtful, caring person to do it well. Teacher Talk is the beginning of a professional conversation, a reflective dialogue focused on the lives of particular students and the opportunities for student success in our classrooms. It points to important aspects of the teaching enterprise that teachers can control in significant ways; observing and understanding students as learners, and creating environments for learning that nurture and challenge the wide range of students in any classroom.

The message of Teacher Talk is that the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, and that only the self-activity of teachers can, in the end, improve teaching in any fundamental or sustained way. Teacher Talk unlocks the tacit knowledge of teachers and makes that knowledge public and shared—and therefore subject to deliberate and thoughtful change. Teacher Talk is a form of voluntary peer staff development and can be conceived as teacher action research, formal teacher reflection, sustained appreciative inquiry.

We hear a lot these days about accountability. Teacher Talk strives for lateral accountability--peer accountability--rather than the sort and punish top-down accountability that has been a proven failure for too long. Teacher Talk aims at professional development leading to whole-school change. It is not a model of nibbling around the margins of the school through pulling out a few like-minded teachers. Teacher Talk is a potential activity for every teacher.

Teacher Talk is more than talk--it is a way for teachers to collaborate, to support each other, to push each other as teachers. In short, Teacher Talk aims to build a professional community.

- I hate grades—hate giving them, can't stand getting them (unless, of course, I get an A+, and then I think I'm cool for a minute, until I start to feel cheap and silly).

Giving grades drives most thoughtful teachers up a tree. It's one of the worst moments in teaching—an insistent reminder that we are all cogs in a larger certification machine, that thought and care and mind and heart are not the main things about school, that hierarchy and one's place in it is more important than engaged thinking, and that schooling is largely disconnected from learning and only loosely linked to education.

Grades are distorting in many ways. They drive curriculum and narrow everyone's perspective. They mean more to some students than to others, they tend to reward obedience and conformity, they are more important to students than to teachers, they undermine trust and cooperation, they twist relationships and encourage toadyism, and they discourage inquiry, risk-taking, creativity, and much more. They are about monitoring, controlling, and punishing. They close down thinking where education is supposed to open it up.

How will you grade when you are teaching? Don't say, "I'll have to see what system they use." They'll likely use a system like the one used with you, like the ones just characterized. And remember, we all *succeeded* in those systems. So if they seemed sensible and "fair" to us, we were looking through the lenses of winners. Did they help us learn? Learn what? How? What about others? Should all kids learn? How? Why?

- Make the "Three Questions" challenge: Tell your students you will ask them three questions that you think they won't know the answer to, and that they should each write down three questions they think you can't answer, but that other kids can. They should work together. Your questions might be things like, "Whose face launched a thousand ships?" Theirs might be the names of Pokeman characters or singers, or youth slang. Make an "intelligence test" based on their questions.
- Teaching at its best requires heart and mind, passion and intellect, insight and intuition, spirit, understanding, and judgment. Teaching, again at its best, can be an act of hope and love—love for persons, love for life, and hope for a world that could

be, but is not yet. Teaching can be—must be if it is to maintain its moral balance—a gesture toward justice.

These essential, central truths of teaching are often overlooked, usually missed by teachers themselves, almost always by the larger public. Here is some casual chit-chat from a party of professionals:

LAWYER: What do you do?

ME: I teach kindergarten (or in another year—"I teach in the juvenile detention center").

LAWYER (*with a frozen, patronizing and pitying look*): Oh... That must be interesting.

Being a teacher turned out to be a conversation stopper, and after a while I tired of the whole predictable script. I developed, then, what I thought was a snappier response. The dialogue then went like this:

LAWYER: What do you do?

ME: I teach kindergarten. It's the most intellectually demanding thing I've ever done.

This always caused a head-snap as the lawyer tried to reconcile three words: *teach, kindergarten, intellectual*. But the effect was short-lived.

LAWYER (recomposing the pitying look): That must be *very, very* interesting.

Reaching for an even grander rejoinder, I tried this:

LAWYER: What do you do?

ME: I teach kindergarten, the most intellectually demanding thing I've ever done, and if you ever become bored with making six figures and want to do something truly useful with your life, making a positive difference in children's lives, for example, opening doors and minds and possibilities, growing and changing constantly in unpredictable ways, you ought to think of a career change... Join me.

I seldom got that far, of course, rarely piqued enough interest for another round. The lawyer moved on, the world turned, the words crashed to the floor, and I was left feeling a bit romantic, reprimanded, adrift in an indifferent world with my pathetic dreams of teaching.

Write a dialogue about teaching with a family member or a friend.

7. Mysteries and Marvels

- Read John Dewey's "My Pedagogic Creed." Write your own creed, or pedagogical autobiography.

- Describe in a one- or two-paragraph narrative—without reference to grades or test scores—the child you imagine emerging from your classroom.
- Write a set of notes that describes the first day in your classroom next year: What will the room look like? What will you do?
- What will be the distinctive signature of your teaching? What will you be known for?
- **Mission Statement from a new, innovative school:**

The task of public education is to help parents to raise youngsters who will maintain and nurture the best habits of a democratic society—be smart, strong resilient, imaginative, and thoughtful. It aims at producing youngsters who can live productive, socially useful and personally satisfying lives.

Democracy requires citizens with the capacity to step into the shoes of others, even those we most despise, to sift evidence and weigh alternatives, to listen respectfully to other viewpoints with the possibility in mind that we each have something to learn from others. It requires us to be prepared to defend intelligently that which we believe to be true, and that which we believe best meets our needs and those of our family, community and broader public—to not be easily conned. It requires also the skills and competencies needed to be well-informed and persuasive—to read well, to write and speak effectively and persuasively, and to handle numbers and calculations with competence and confidence.

Democracy requires citizens who are themselves artists and inventors—knowledgeable about the performances, products and inventions of others but also capable of producing, performing and inventing their own art. Without art we are all deprived.

Such habits of mind, and such competence are sustained by our enthusiasms, as well as our love for others and our respect for ourselves, and our willingness to persevere, deal with frustration and develop reliable habits of work.

Our mission is to create a community in which our children and their families can best maintain and nurture such democratic habits.

Toward these ends, our community must be prepared to spend time—even when it seems wasteful—hearing each other out. We must deal with each other in ways that lead us to feel stronger and more loved, not weaker and less lovable. We must expect the most from everyone, hold all to the highest standards, but also respect our different ways of exhibiting excellence. We must build a reasonable set of standards for our graduates so that they can demonstrate to us their capacity to meet this mission.

Write your own mission statement.