

Nine Characteristics of a Great Teacher

By: Doan Thi Le Nhung



Years ago, as a young, eager student, I would have told you that a great teacher was someone who provided classroom entertainment and gave very little homework. Needless to say, after many years of K-12 administrative experience and giving hundreds of teacher evaluations, my perspective has changed. My current position as a professor in higher education gives me the opportunity to share what I have learned with current and future school leaders, and allows for some lively discussions among my graduate students in terms of what it means to be a great teacher.

Teaching is hard work and some teachers never grow to be anything better than mediocre. They do the bare minimum required and very little more. The great teachers, however, work tirelessly to create a challenging, nurturing environment for their students. Great teaching seems to have less to do with our knowledge and skills than with our attitude toward our students, our subject, and our work. Although this list is certainly not all-inclusive, I have narrowed down the many characteristics of a great teacher to those I have found to be the most essential, regardless of the age of the learner:

1. A great teacher respects students. In a great teacher's classroom, each person's ideas and opinions are valued. Students feel safe to

express their feelings and learn to respect and listen to others. This teacher creates a welcoming learning environment for all students.

2. A great teacher creates a sense of community and belonging in the classroom. The mutual respect in this teacher's classroom provides a supportive, collaborative environment. In this small community, there are rules to follow and jobs to be done and each student is aware that he or she is an important, integral part of the group. A great teacher lets students know that they can depend not only on her, but also on the entire class.

3. A great teacher is warm, accessible, enthusiastic and caring. This person is approachable, not only to students, but to everyone on campus. This is the teacher to whom students know they can go with any problems or concerns or even to share a funny story. Great teachers possess good listening skills and take time out of their way-too-busy schedules for anyone who needs them. If this teacher is having a bad day, no one ever knows—the teacher leaves personal baggage outside the school doors.

4. A great teacher sets high expectations for all students. This teacher realizes that the expectations she has for her students greatly affect their achievement; she knows that students generally give to teachers as much or as little as is expected of them.

5. A great teacher has his own love of learning and inspires students with his passion for education and for the course material. He constantly renews himself as a professional on his quest to provide students with the highest quality of education possible. This teacher has no fear of learning new teaching strategies or incorporating new technologies into lessons, and always seems to be the one who is willing to share what he's learned with colleagues.

6. A great teacher is a skilled leader. Different from administrative leaders, effective teachers focus on shared decision-making and

teamwork, as well as on community building. This great teacher conveys this sense of leadership to students by providing opportunities for each of them to assume leadership roles.

7. A great teacher can “shift-gears” and is flexible when a lesson isn’t working. This teacher assesses his teaching throughout the lessons and finds new ways to present material to make sure that every student understands the key concepts.

8. A great teacher collaborates with colleagues on an ongoing basis. Rather than thinking of herself as weak because she asks for suggestions or help, this teacher views collaboration as a way to learn from a fellow professional. A great teacher uses constructive criticism and advice as an opportunity to grow as an educator.

9. A great teacher maintains professionalism in all areas—from personal appearance to organizational skills and preparedness for each day. Her communication skills are exemplary, whether she is speaking with an administrator, one of her students or a colleague. The respect that the great teacher receives because of her professional manner is obvious to those around her.

While teaching is a gift that comes quite naturally for some, others have to work overtime to achieve great teacher status. Yet the payoff is enormous — for both you and your students. Imagine students thinking of you when they remember that great teacher they had in college!

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