Zen and the Act of Teaching

A reflective journal

By David Deubelbeiss
This reflective journal is intended for practicing or inservice teachers. It can be used as part of a course or by teachers themselves.

It is admittedly philosophical and grew out of my thoughts regarding my own teaching but also my own use of reflective writing in my teacher training courses.

Teachers are encouraged to fill out the brief journal passages based on the prompts. Discussion is encouraged. I hope teachers will grow and turn these mirrors into windows.

Happy teaching,

David Deubelbeiss
Every day we look around and feel we have to "keep up". Keep up to what? Too much of life and teaching is "flywheel" and not the real, simple substance. Why? Why are we keeping up and not thinking of "real" quality and learning. More, more, more usually equals less.

Do not look at your colleagues and think "what a poor teacher am I". Look at yourself and think - "what a better teacher I can become".

The only competition is with what you could potentially become given your inner qualities. These qualities do not match any other teacher's. They are your own and unique. Treasure them, water them and let them grow without the noise of competition...... When you have mastered this, your students will also discover it and you.
Reflect upon your own strengths. Describe what makes you a great teacher.

“Good teachers are costly, but bad teachers cost more.” – Bob Talbert
Teach your mouth to speak what is in your heart.

The essence of teaching is "emotion" -- the bottled wisdom and personal digestion of experience on the part of the teacher. Knowledge devoid of this is but gristle we would chew up. Knowledge imparted with this is energy and life for those receiving.

There is nothing "dry" about good teaching.
“Good teaching is ¼ preparation and ¾ theatre.”
Gail Godwin

How will you “spark” your class? What are some good activities and ways to engage and connect with students? Share at least one.
Teaching is the art of asking the right questions.

Ask the right question and only then, the answer, the "good" will appear.

In teaching, we should ask these 3 ancient questions of all our acts, all our lessons.

1. Is it true? (of the good)
2. Is it necessary? (doesn’t waste time)
3. Is it kind? ( personal, has “voice”)

If we pass through these gates in our teaching -- we are participating in the Socratic notion of "the good". Let no day pass without thinking of this good, so said Socrates when asked for his own philosophy.
“The one who asks questions doesn’t lose his way” – African folk saying

What questions would you ask a fellow teacher about their lessons or teaching? List as many as you can.
First you must master all the laws, then you can break them.

Students need to master fundamentals. Then, they can break all the rules and create "their own", be "their own".

First, we must organize, plan and proceed. Once mastered, we can then lend the world beauty through creative disorder.

No artist ever drew a great painting without first learning how to hold the brush or draw a straight line.....
“Imagination is more important than knowledge”
Albert Einstein

What do you think are the “fundamentals of teaching”? What makes a good teacher or “good teaching”? 
Despite appearances, all "things", all "ideas" are connected. There is an ALL. There are invisible strings that bind like to like. Language reveals this in metaphor, thought reveals it in poetry and the teacher reveals it in his or her lessons.

After all the facts are learned, the journey is only a quarter done. We must fill all the spaces that separate these stones in the endless stream of life. Only then can we bridge and travel between what we knew and what we want to know. This, we then call "understanding".

Teach so the spaces are revealed - there are enough rocks around for the students to start making the bridge.

Teaching is the art of making the invisible, visible.
“A teacher effects eternity. One can never tell where his influence stops” — Henry Adams

Think about a teacher you were inspired by. What was special about him or her?
Enjoyment is not expensive. Happiness and contentment is within and all around.

Sometimes, we think and equate "education" with money and reputation. Harvard means you are "better" than “Dodge City College". A day at the local amusement park is "better" than a walk down the local ravine. Nothing could be more “delusional".

Value is from the processing within. We are actors in our own lives, not heads stuffed full of straw. As teachers, we have to allow our students to see this natural disposition for "self fulfillment" and help them strengthen it. It is not that small or even bigger is better. It is not excitement or even flash that is better. What is "better" is that which awakens us, engages our minds and makes us part of the beauty of life. We teachers are "those that awaken" the tao – we are, one hand clapping....
“Don’t let your schooling get in the way of your education” - Mark Twain

What to you is, “the purpose of education”. Why did you become a teacher?
When you don't know, say so!

A teacher doesn't "know", a teacher "is". The greatest teachers are humble and learn to say they don't know and in doing so, let their students join them on the journey of thought rather than keeping them as spectators as the train roars bye.

Wise teachers do not hesitate to say, "Sorry, I don't know. Good question!"
“The future of teaching is learning”

What are some ways a teacher can improve. Reflect upon how you might become a better teacher.
Teaching entails planning. Especially thinking through the lesson delivery and content in terms of the student's vantage point. This is the main filter through which all lessons must pass to succeed. Yet, a plan is an ideal. The real world, the enacted curriculum is messy. There are fire drills and bloody noses. There are lost notebooks and slow computers. There are absences and presents.

To succeed one must be willing to abandon, at any moment and at any time. It is the present which is the present and not its relation to the future. As you teach, teach in that moment. Your plans are only a map -- there are innumerable, real and unmarked paths to reach your destination.

Plans are only as good as the strength of the willingness to abandon them.
“They must often change, who would be constant in happiness and wisdom” – Confucius

What changes to education and in particular, to your job – would make things better?
What we teach is not what we teach!

In all human acts there is a mystery, a hole, a multitude of other movements. Same with teaching.

Every teacher has an objective, a target, a curriculum, a focus for the lesson. But is this what is taught? Or what is attempted to be taught?

In language (which is so multifarious like life), most of the learning is outside of the objective. You aim to teach past "ed" verbs and one student learns the word "transitive" another the phrase, "May I go to the washroom". Learning happens not always as the teacher wishes nor as the goal presents itself....

If the spirit is correct, learning will happen. We need an objective, we need hands on the steering wheel to keep our cart on the trail, we need a destination. But more important is to be open to the experience of the journey getting there. My what a view! -- that is learning.

Create a classroom that enjoys the view -- the destination will then arrive.
“The seed in not afraid of the winter.”

Teaching can be a scary proposition. Write about one of your own “fears” regarding teaching. How might you overcome them?
There are always two ways forward.

When teaching (or learning, the flip image), there are always two ways forward. Struggle and effort, striving and "working" AND relaxing, letting go, finding flow.

When teaching seek the right moment. There are times to sweat and attack the mountain. There are times to sit on the bench and enjoy the view. Both are a way "forward".
“The coldest part of the night is just before the dawn”

Anxiety is a barrier for learning. Reflect on what you might do to help your students feel comfortable in class.
"The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing." - a fragment of verse from Archilochus

When teaching we often get lost in the forest. Trees are everywhere, there are so many fires to put out, there are so many trees to chop down!

The master teacher always acts with the forest in mind. The big picture is what he/she understands and each little action is informed by it. The master teacher is not a sly, intelligent fox but a wise, slow and sure hedgehog. Focus your teaching from this perspective - HAPPINESS. It is from there that all other actions are made good.
“From small beginnings come great things”

The start of a lesson or “engagement” is very important. How do you think it can best be done? What has worked for you?
When teaching, allow for space. When teaching allow for thought. When teaching pause.

So many teachers really fear silence in the classroom -- they demand a "quick" answer. Wait for your students to think before discussing. The clanging bell rings no beauty!

Sometimes doing nothing, is doing something......
“No man can wade in the same river twice.” - Heraclitus

Think of your teaching “style”. How might you change? What little things could you improve on? [voice, stance, movement, posture, eye contact etc.... ]
When one sets out on a journey, one must know in the mind, the panorama of the journey. After that, each hill may be tackled, each curve encountered.

When teaching, begin with the whole. The music before the notes, the feeling before the canvas, the idea before the thing. One must have a container before one may carry water.

Teach widely and then narrow in.......only then will the facts find a home to rest within.
“Learning is what happens when the teacher is making other plans”

You have to teach a full semester. Describe how you would begin planning the curriculum for your course.
When teaching, we too often see the "can't". A student can't do this and a student can't do that.... CAN'T is not something that exists, it is a phantom, it is illegitimate. There is only CAN and the manifestation of that into the world and the classroom.

Everything is good. What we view as "bad" is only our reaction to it, not the thing itself. The universe has a reason we know not of. A master teacher keeps things positive and emphasizes what WE CAN. The energy of life is that of good and we should ask ourselves as teachers, what Socrates asked so long ago..."let no day pass without thinking of "the good". Use sugar and your students will grow fat with wisdom and intelligence. When they fall down, they will learn to fall down looking up. And if you are looking up, you can get up...... Teach with the good on your mind.
“A teacher’s job is to help those students who can’t help themselves.”

You have several students in your classroom who have trouble learning. What can you do to help them?
It is by grace that knowledge and understanding are conveyed. We may "know" something in an obvious fashion but we won't understand it until we connect with it in grace, in spirit and in essence.

A wise teacher transmits knowledge invisibly. The simple act of a teacher reading alone at their desk teaches students far more about reading than any direct phonics lesson. A teacher's bright face when speaking teaches far more about mathematics than the obvious lines and signs on the board. It is by grace, by essence that all true knowledge multiplies (and all ignorance also...). Be a teacher who teaches as much "invisibly" as "obviously".

The wind is everywhere but who sees it?
“The best teacher teaches from the heart, not the book.”

What do you think students value in a teacher? What is important to them and makes them excited about “that” teacher’s class?
Keep balance. Too much is the same as too little.

When teaching, spend time on what works. Keep a balance between the active and the passive. Don't do too much but rather focus on the experience and the "harmony" that enables learning. The knife that finds the middle way, never hits bone and thus, never dulls. Find the spaces between your students needs and the curriculum. In this way your lessons will always be sharp.
“Teaching is the art of the possible”

How do you negotiate with students? Is this important to you? How will you find out about your student’s needs?
The most important thing you'll ever say is, "I don't know".

Teachers we are told, ask and answer questions. However, the truth and knowledge stands somewhere between. There is a mystery to everything.

When you don't know - say so. It is the most glorious thing in the world, to teach your students that beyond this moment, beyond this experience, beyond this content, beyond this question and answer - there is a vast playground of unknowing which we can frolic in.

Teach - "I don't know" and you will give your students the gift of curiosity and thought.
“What we want is often different from what we need”

Reflect on the questions your students might ask at the beginning of the year. What do they want to know and find out? Make a list.
I met a genius on the train today
about 6 years old,
he sat beside me
and as the train ran down along the coast
we came to the ocean
and then he looked at me and said,
it's not pretty.

it was the first time I'd realized that.
“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up” – Pablo Picasso

Why do you think the author called the boy a “genius”? What does this say about how we should think about our students?
If you wish to change the actions of any person, do not lecture, do not tell, SHOW. Learning is at all times, NOTICING. When the class is loud - the teacher should not SCREAM for them to be quiet. Rather, speak in a low tone. Put on soft music. Students will notice and respond.

If you want to get your students reading - don't tell them. Sit at YOUR DESK and read. They will notice and soon follow. If you want to get your students motivated -- don't give them all kinds of "candies". Act motivated yourself - your passion will soon rub off.

But always remember, “You can lead a student to the classroom but you can’t make them think.”
“Students are no longer obligated to follow teachers – teachers must lead.”

Classroom management is difficult. What do you think is important to do so that a teacher successfully manage the class?
Go deep, go slow.

Be a good masseuse.
Learning, like life itself, is about the experience. Haste makes not just waste but disables us of the important ability to "notice". All learning is "noticing", noticing the world around us and noticing the connections and the change happening.

Teach so that the lesson is an experience. Still waters run deep. Don't rush to the end, there is no end. Knowledge is everywhere and infinite. Aim to dive in and not skim across the waters. All the jewels sink to this bottom. Bring your students there......
“Teaching is not the filling of a pail but, the lighting of a fire,” - William Butler Yeats

You are teaching about careers/jobs. What will you do to “connect” the students with the topic and make it come “alive”? 
The world is a forest of symbols which we walk through. We perceive and are acted upon indelibly by strong and ancient forces which surround us and demonstrate to us - ways of being, acting and living. The conscious mind, that voiced, is but a very small part of "the force of the world" which acts upon us and makes us change each step through the forest.

In teaching, we are perfect when in grace, in quietude we model ways of being. Simply sitting at your desk reading and enjoying yourself teaches students much more about "reading" than any lesson voices and volume ever could. Whenever possible, show don't tell students. This is the natural and perfect way of teaching.
“Tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I’ll understand”

How do you explain to students what you will do in a class? How do you model activities for your students.
At the Thatched Hall of the Ts'ui Family

It is autumn at the grass hut on Jade Peak
The air is cool and clear.
Temple bells and chimes echo from the canyons.
Fishermen and woodsmen wind over sunset trails.
We fill our plates with chestnuts gathered in the valley and rice grown in the village.
For what, Wang Wei?
Bamboo and pine, silent, locked behind a gate.

-- Tu Fu
“A good teacher is like a candle, it consumes itself to light the way for others.”

Think of this poem. What does it say to you as a teacher. Reflect and let your pen move!
A great teacher doesn't try - a great teacher does. There is grace and no greed. All that a teacher wants is all that they need. No more, no less. There is no thought about "what if?" or "Suppose?", only a doing with that at hand. Teaching is the art of managing necessity and necessity is about exigency and not about desire. In our classrooms, we should find that flow which is always there for us to travel with....we should not bull against and sweat up a hill of our own making.

There is grace in all teaching that passes between a student and a teacher. A grace made of repose and contentment in doing/being and not about getting somewhere and needing some "accomplishment". The learning which would become a trophy is a learning that is a mirage - Dorian Gray's face on the blackboard.
“The illiterate of the 21st century won’t be those who can’t read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.” — Alvin Toffler

Technology is becoming an important part of teaching. How do you feel about that? Should you use more technology in your teaching?
How might one do this? Be graceful? It all begins with acceptance. Acceptance of your situation, your task, your students and their comportment/character. Acceptance of everything, unconditionally. From that moment of faith, in that act of faith, the first step in grace can begin.

Never try, it is the trying that gets in the way. Act to create no resistance and be a knife that will always be sharp, always sharp - for it never encounters resistance and always finds the spaces between things.
“What counts is not what is poured in but what is planted.”

What is your favorite lesson or teaching recipe. Describe it and in your opinion, why it is effective.
Teaching is not the same as speaking.

"The dog barks, the caravan passes".

Too often we believe teaching is what we say, teaching is what we speak, teaching is made of words. Nothing could be further from the truth. What passes between teacher and student as knowledge, is not passed by way of words or "noise". Sound is the after effect. Not the cause but the evidence of learning.

Teaching is about your look. It is about your spirit and about how you stand and "be". Teaching is about a thousand small things that flow into a moment and then the next moment. It is what can't be immediately verified and thus lasts forever.

Learn to teach from your being and not your mouth and you will learn to teach well.
“The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery” – Mark van Doren

What makes you feel proud of being a teacher? What empowers you and makes you happy to be doing the job you do?
The wind is everywhere but who can say how much there is? In teaching, we many times think there is no progress. Students don't get good results, they repeat the same mistakes, they can't speak a correct sentence, they ......

We grow frustrated. But just because we can't see or record the growth does not mean it isn't there. Sometimes, like the lotus, it will all come to bloom in one great swoop of beauty. A river may look still but underneath, there is always a current moving forward. Students are ALWAYS learning - this is a condition of being human.

Be patient and keep going ahead. With faith, you will one day measure all that which you were unable to record. You will measure it in a student standing before you who knows, knows more than knowledge but how to get knowledge. Those that are impatient and who want to measure what can't be recorded, will be left at the side of the road.
“You can pass a test but fail in life”

What is your opinion about “marks”? Do you compare students, use standards? What is the role of assessment in teaching?
A teacher works with human clay - not just knowledge or subject. Every day we encounter the human spirit, the mystery of existence that asks us to participate is some great plan we know not of.....

Teachers must remember this. Seek for that which is permanent. Education is what remains after all else is forgotten. Aim for this "green forever" and you will succeed.

"The whole country devastated only mountains and rivers remain. In springtime, at the ruined castle, the grass is always green."

-- Tu Fu
“Teachers don’t teach a subject, they teach students”

Think of a student that was very important to you. Why? What did that student mean to you?
Teaching is about helping others learn. People learn both the obvious and that which isn't obvious – the thing and its shadow. The iceberg above and below the water.

When we learn "freedom", we also learn about what is imprisoned. When we learn to count, we also learn what can’t be counted. When we learn how to make coffee, we learn about our need for coffee.

The teacher must be aware of both the visible curriculum and that which is not visible. We never just teach one thing but should attempt to teach that which appears and that which is behind.
“A single moment of understanding can flood a whole life with meaning”

What “life lessons” do you think we can teach through the regular curriculum? Reflect on what is important for students to learn beyond the regular curriculum.
Pick Your Battles.

The wise teacher knows that the way to accomplish anything is to choose the weakest point and go from there. Do not meet power with power or butt heads - strength to strength.

Choose your battles - the ones which will make a difference. Be blind to all others. Conserve your strength and attack at the weakest point. Here, a student can be "got" and a lifetime of learning/being lit. Do not win battles but win the war.

Everyone has a crack - that's how the light gets in.....
“To someone with a hammer, everything looks like a nail” – Mark Twain

What are the challenges you face working with administration? What battles do you have to fight – outside of your interactions with students?
Seek your own demise.

A teacher, like any artist, seeks to disappear. If one does their job perfectly, there is only learning and no teaching. If one does their job gracefully, long enough, they will no longer be needed. Just like the mother who alone must shed a tear and let her child go out into the world, so to the teacher.

This is our goal as teachers - to seek our own demise - and be happy about that. Do not cling to your ego as a teacher but let it go and let the student find their own corners of learning....
“Be the guide at the side, not the sage on the stage”

What are some ways that a teacher can “disappear” and be less of the focus in the classroom?
Everyone is a teacher.

"What one learns from me, one can't learn from someone else."

Every teacher brings a unique manner, a unique spirit to the table of learning. The content may be the same, the administration may demand objectives but something else is taught, is transferred. It is this which flavors learning and makes it alive.

Every teacher, teaches something different. It is this which makes our profession a “human” art and gives it flavor. It is this which is our salvation.
“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.” – Ignacio Estrada

Cooperative learning is an important part of learning. How can teachers get students “teaching each other” more?
One day, a teacher came to see a retired principal to get some advice.

He asked, "I'm really happy where I am teaching. I love my job and think my students are wonderful. However, I have a great opportunity at another school. I'm wondering what to do? What will I find at this new school - maybe I'm getting myself into a bad situation?"

The principal took a drink of his coffee then answered, "Oh, for sure, you will find even better students and even be happier than you are now!"

(cont.....)
Next week, the principal had another teacher visit. He had a question and needed advice.

He asked the principal, "I'm really sad and depressed at my present school. The students are horrible, I hate teaching them. I've applied for a transfer and will move schools soon. However, I'm really worried about what I will find there. What do you think?"

The principal's eyes lit up and he smiled. He answered quickly, "Oh, for sure, you will find even worse students and be even more depressed than you are now!"
“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference” - Winston Churchill

What was the principal’s wisdom? Reflect on its meaning and what it means to you and your teaching.
A teacher that "knows" how to teach, does not know how to teach. All knowledge is in flux and cannot be grasped. All teachers are learners, all alive is in the process of being alive. Nothing stands still and can be seen. Each class, each day is new and must be learned again.

As the Buddha said to a follower who said they understood - "He who knows the Buddha, does not know the Buddha". Wisdom can't be pointed at or stopped. It can only be felt, tasted, touched, loved......
“Be the change you want to see in the world” – Mahatma Gandhi

What do you plan on doing in the future to keep learning and develop professionally? What is your “SMART” goal this year?
I remember all those thousands of hours that I spent in grade school watching the clock, waiting for recess or lunch or to go home. Waiting: for anything but school. My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James for all the time they stole from me.
“Learning is something students do, not something done to students.” – Alfie Kohn

Have you ever felt like the author of the poem? What implications does this have for classroom practice?
The secret of teaching hinges upon one's ability to keep what you give. Teachers give a lot. We give of ourselves, in time, in emotion, in knowledge and understanding. The trick lies in being able to get energy from this, to be constantly renewed by one's giving. To NOT have energy sucked from oneself but to be constantly reenergized by the act of teaching.

You have to keep what you give. How? In letting go. Just letting go and being immersed in the process. To stop counting what you get and give. To swim in the ALL.
“Teaching is the greatest act of optimism” – Colleen Wilcox

Reflect on your life outside of teaching. What renews you? What do you do to recharge your teaching batteries?
Zen and the Act of Teaching

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The author is a veteran teacher trainer, author and speaker with over 20 years teaching experience in numerous countries around the world. Find out more about David at his portfolio site – http://eflassroom.com/david