



“So, You Say That You Are Not a Teacher...”

“I am not a trained teacher. I’m a tradesman, never went to college or took any education classes in my life,” states the level four instructor, attending a voluntary video chat among his peers. “I worked with my hands and I know my trade backward and forward, but I don’t know how to teach a class.”

There is a simultaneous burst of agreement from seven tiny video squares, resembling the Hollywood Squares game show. The host nods his head in understanding but says nothing, waiting for the next square to speak up and repeat the theme that has persisted for the past 45-minutes.

“So let me ask you this, why did you choose to become a trade teacher? What motivated you to take the jump?” His voice is soft but focused; his eyes stare at his screen with great curiosity.

“I love my trade and I want to help the next apprentices become the best versions of themselves. I won’t be in the field forever. I hope I can leave my mark by training my students to take the reins with confidence. I want them to pass their exam!”

“I like working with the kids, seeing their reaction when something just clicks like a light switch,” adds the 30-plus year veteran of electrical work, ignoring the clichéd simile.

From a blacked-out square, video off comes, “I guess I still have something to offer. I like the feeling that comes from working with the people who will take over after I leave,”

Having heard these responses, allowing for a few seconds of silence as the panel reflects on the past few minutes, the host replies with “why do you think you are not a teacher? You just described some of the most important trademarks of an effective teacher.”

“Hey, I can show the apprentices how to do things when they are in the field. I don’t know how to create quizzes or lesson plans or games. That’s teacher college! Pull wire, install an alarm system, or work with contractors to manage an install of electrical components for a new restaurant, that I can do.”

“And yet, you chose to enter a profession that you claim to know nothing about. How long have you worked in your trade? How many apprentices have you worked with over those years? How many of those apprentices have moved forward with their careers after being in your presence? Did those apprentices learn from you?” The host notices three mute buttons turn off. “Go ahead, have a think about these rhetorical questions. A noticeable pause captures on-screen faces shifting in seats, looking with a hint of inevitable epiphany. “Gentlemen, you are all teachers in the purest form of the word. You said it yourself, you teach because you love your trade, you like working with the next journeymen, you believe that you have something to offer, and you want to see the trade continue to grow and prosper. That’s called being a teacher.” With a broad grin, the host pauses again to let what he said sink in.

This abbreviated scene plays out over thousands of Zoom chats, teacher workshops, and casual get-togethers. The very common misconception that only people who went to college to earn a degree in education echoes daily. The simple truth is many people are the most effective teachers in their fields because they care about what they do. They take pride in sharing their knowledge and experiences with others in the belief that it might matter.

When I say the word “teacher,” images that come to mind are the people who taught when they were in school. Whether those images are good or bad does not matter. Humans think about teachers and education based on their own experiences. It is safe to say that teachers’ concept has changed over the years; however, the necessary foundations have not changed. A great teacher, regardless of the era or decade, already has the skills and mindsets. Soft skills make the most significant impact and leave enduring memorable moments in the mind of students.

I challenge you to take a mental inventory of your answers to the following questions and then ask yourself if you are a teacher. You may be surprised at what you learn.

1. Do you care about your subject? Do you have knowledge that others may learn from?
2. Do you have high, but reasonable goals and standards for yourself and for those you work with?
3. Do you enjoy experiencing someone “get it” after you demonstrate or explain a topic?
4. Do you have empathy for the people around you? Do you care when others succeed?
5. Do you feel bad when a peer struggles and you wish you could do something to help?
6. Do you like problem-solving? Do you believe in taking risks and pushing yourself and others to go beyond what they think is possible?
7. Do you reflect on your own work experiences and do you learn from your mistakes?
8. Do you communicate clearly and concisely?
9. Do you have patience?
10. Do you like interacting and engaging with others? Do you enjoy social interaction?

These ten questions come directly from what experts use to describe an effective teacher. Notice that there is nothing about making quizzes, creating lesson plans, scoring, grading, organizing content, or designing content and curriculum. Those skills can be learned and developed. The most basic and vital element of being a teacher comes from the individual. It is their dedication, passion, open-mind, risk-taking, reflection, and practice that determines whether you are an instructor or a teacher.

My bet is that many of you reading this will have answered in the positive to a majority of the above questions. If so, you are on the road to developing your skills to become an effective teacher.

Don’t sell yourself short. You chose to become a teacher for your trade. You have proved the old statement that those who can teach to be true. You are doing and you are making a difference. You have affected countless people with your care, willingness to share, and hope for a better tomorrow. Take great pride in that fact. Good luck!

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