Coming Out from Underneath the Bushel

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Paul Read’s recent article titled “Hiding Our Light Under a Bushel or Are Good Teachers of Horticulture Truly Scarce?” (1) inspired me to come out from underneath the bushel and discuss with you my philosophy on teaching. I really do not know what the qualifications of a good teacher are; perhaps some are natural-born teachers, whereas others become good teachers through experience, time, and tenure; while others profess to be good teachers but never reach that plateau. Perhaps a good teacher is a good communicator, possesses superior judgment, has a knack, intuition, and a thorough understanding of horticulture or another discipline.

I have been involved in academic teaching, research, and public service for more than 30 years. Never would I have dreamed or predicted during my undergraduate studies that I would become a teacher of horticulture. Perhaps I have become one of those good teachers of horticulture through experience, time, and concern for both the student and horticulture. I have been very fortunate indeed to be the recipient of the President’s Excellence in Teaching Award at Texas Tech and the recipient of both the Southern Region and National ASHS L.M. Ware Distinguished Teaching Award.

For the past 19 years I have taught a varied number of horticulture courses to students majoring in horticulture, agronomy, landscape architecture, animal science, agricultural economics, park administration, home economics, business administration, and even engineering. My approach to teaching is not unique, only simple. As a professor, I am obligated to give the students much more than they want, or ask for; much more than they think necessary or relevant to their present interests or purposes. To maintain a meaningful relationship with my students, I teach them what I know and what I perceive to be the truth.

From the first day of class, I treat my students as professionals. Why do I treat them as professionals? Because I am attempting to develop a viable, marketable product (the student) that will reflect praise on my profession, department, and college; a person who will be an asset to horticulture and society.

During our first class meeting each semester, I discuss course objectives, course topics, outside assignments, field trips, laboratory exercises, types of examinations given, the grading system, and what is expected of them in this class. Since most horticulture courses are either lectures or combinations of both lecture and laboratory, field trips, students are exposed to varied learning processes.

During their tenure in my classes, the greatest value students get out of my courses beside basic and applied horticultural knowledge is that they:

1) Learn to become problem solvers; diagnose the problem, consult peers if needed, and provide a solution to the problem.

2) Know where to get information; to become a respected informative problem solver one has to seek this information from libraries, peers, competitors, seminars, and conferences or professional meetings.

3) Keep an open mind to change; since time changes everything, new attitudes and philosophies need to be formulated and evaluated.

4) Keep updating knowledge; keeping current in their area of interest or expertise is essential to solve the daily as well as the long-range problems that occur in horticulture and related disciplines.

I have been questioned often as to the value or use of the numerous informative handouts I distribute to my classes, which my students often refer to as “scratch paper”. I view this current informative material as updating knowledge because it supplements the textbook or subject material currently being discussed. After all, education is obtained on an installment plan throughout our educational and professional career. To augment updated information, I am a firm believer in the hands-on work ethic where possible and the use of slides (show and tell). Some of my colleagues consider slide usage as a substitute (cop-out) for a short or poorly prepared lecture, but I view this communicative tool as a valuable supplement to the lecture/laboratory exercise, because “seeing is believing”.

Aside from the degree that the student (hopefully a marketable product) will obtain, there are other qualifications or attributes I feel the student should be made aware of and possibly adopt as a requirement for serious consideration by the prospective employer. This individual should possess initiative, a willingness to take on responsibility, and become dedicated to the pursuit of excellence. To me, people become professionals when they can look themselves in the eye and know that they have been honest in all those dealings over which they have control. A person can carry a title such as “professional horticulturist” or may be termed by another title by his peers, but he or she is not worthy of the titles unless their day-to-day performance reflects true professionalism.

My students hear this “sermon” in my classes. If what I have discussed is the responsibility and the attribute of a good teacher/professor, then I have succeeded; if not, then I have failed and must change direction. I hope the light that I have kept under the bushel is now visible and that it will be a guide for my peers to follow and practice.

Literature Cited


1Professor of Horticulture and Associate Chairperson, Dept of Plant and Soil Science; Professor and Interim Chairperson, Dept. of Park Administration and Landscape Architecture.