

Why I Teach By Professor Dale Moore

My immediate reaction to the question “Why do you teach?” is “If given the opportunity, why wouldn’t I teach?” Despite being occasionally intimidating, teaching is a challenge, a joy, a privilege, and an honor.

When I was six years old, someone gave me the blackboard and chalk that I’d been begging for. I put them in my room and immediately began to play at becoming a teacher. The imaginary pupils who populated my initial classes were acquiescent and passive, and I talked at them with enthusiasm. From time to time I recruited a few real-life subjects for these early efforts by persuading friends to “play school” in lieu of some other activity. But despite their willingness to tolerate the school game occasionally, my friends didn’t really share my fascination—they preferred to leave the classroom behind whenever possible. So most of the time I played “school” on my own. Eventually I indulged my instinct to teach by taking advantage of opportunities to explain to novices the things I understood well. Perhaps I went too far sometimes, which once prompted my nephew to say, in response to his mother’s suggestion that he ask a question of me, “I don’t want to know that much about it.”

Long before realizing how much I’d love teaching, I learned to love being a student. Indeed, being able to continue one’s education is among the luxuries

afforded by a teaching career. Loving learning as a student reinforced my determination to become a teacher long before I knew I’d be a teacher of law. As a student in all sorts of schools—a little nursing school, a small community college, two large universities, and a medium-sized law school—I encountered outstanding, good, mediocre, and lousy teachers as potential role models. I was fairly sure I could do better than some, hoped I could be as good as others, and aspired to come close to the greatness of a few.

Observing many teachers showed me that those who are truly superb share at least one characteristic: they delight in their work. I strongly suspected I’d feel the same enthusiasm; and during the past 26 years, I have. Watching a student’s face when the cerebral cortex wrinkles—or the light bulb goes on—is, like virtue, its own reward. Believing that one has contributed to such a beneficial outcome helps to soothe the distress I consistently feel when grading exams. And even during the classes in which the light bulbs seem merely to flicker, those momentary sparkles provide encouragement to continue.

The challenges never go away. They change, however, in part because each class develops its own unique personality. Coping with the class personality while staying in touch with each of its individual components calls on

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skills that have little or nothing to do with the substance of the course. Being attentive to personality as well as substance is, even for an experienced teacher, an opportunity to learn something new nearly every day.

In the classroom I’ve tried to emulate my best teachers. The most memorable of the best is Clyde Summers. Great luck brought me the chance to know and learn from Professor Summers, a scholar and gifted teacher, who taught Torts during my first year of law school. I blame and bless him for my attachment to that subject. But Professor Summers could and did teach anything and everything—Contracts, Torts, Property, Labor Law, Constitutional Law, and whatever else he chose. His love for teaching was evident in all of his behavior, both inside the classroom and at his office. His love for teaching and regard for his students inspired me and others who hoped to earn the opportunity to try following his path. Professor Summers once summarized his attitude by saying (with his characteristic crooked smile): “When I retire, I’ll teach.” He did, and I suspect that I will too.