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Mr. Martin's Oopses: The Best Educators Have Struggled to Learn, Then Succeeded

A teacher must be bad at something to be good at teaching.

by Mitch Martin

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Credit: Indigo Flores

I am the worst guitarist in North America. I am also a solid and ever-improving high school English teacher. The two are related. Although some college educational programs appear lost on the point, a good teacher must be skilled in the subject he or she is teaching.

This is essential for the student -- but for the teacher, it creates a life that is conflicted, if not paradoxical. You must be very good at what you teach, therefore, you aren't nearly as good -- or as interested in -- the subject you love.

spend your life with people who often aren't nearly as good -- or as interested in -- the subject you love.

If I were put in charge of a college of education, I would attach a simple requirement to the foundation methods class: All students would be required to take a class in something they aren't good at, preferably something at which they stink.

Think about it: Many of the most skilled professional athletes make the worst coaches. Magic Johnson, for instance, was a rather infamous failure as a coach -- he couldn't relate to the lackadaisical attitude and poor execution of his charges. Many educators experience the same thing: "Why won't they simply do their work?" "I've explained this fifty times!" "What's wrong with these kids?" are familiar teachers' lounge refrains.

I have said the same things about my students; I've even said worse. But once a week, the shoe is on the other foot -- which is firmly planted on the wah-wah pedal. I always imagine Mike, my guitar teacher, somewhere in the middle of his 11:30 A.M. Saturday lesson, looking down at his watch and realizing there is nothing he can do to escape his noon lesson. The incompetence! The drudgery! The English teacher with the fumbling hands!

Mike is the best guitar teacher I've ever had.

My first guitar teacher was the opposite of me: a wonderful guitarist and a poor teacher. "Do this," he'd say. His fingers would blur up and down the fret board. I'd stare at him. He'd stare back. "You want me to play it again?" Sure, I'd say. Another blur. I lasted about six lessons, then, deeply embarrassed, quit playing for ten years.

My second guitar teacher was a fair instructor, but burned out and a little sad. He'd spend half the lesson talking about the guitar he planned to purchase, or the studio he wanted to set up in his basement. It was a little hard to blame him; I was quite a challenge.

Mike is the third bear in my Goldilocks guitar-teacher equation. In his guitar studio, a faded 1986 Stevie Ray Vaughan concert poster looks up at his secondary education diploma from Roosevelt University. He knows what he's teaching, and he knows how to teach. He breaks things down. He takes Eagles songs (the ones with the easier chords) and plays them at "therapy" tempo, or what a high school counselor might call "skills" tempo -- really, really slowly.

I do have just a smidgen of talent. After two years of lessons, I can sometimes hear a note in a song and reproduce it on my guitar -- a simple thing, but for the pitch-challenged such as myself, a revelation. I can play a few serious numbers and sing them at the same time -- "Old Smokey" and "Lyn' Eyes" for instance. This is a wonder to me.

Still, I have considered quitting at least three times this year. I have an eighteen-month-old son, a two-hour commute, and a pile of essays that is self-regenerating. I go weeks without practicing. I remind myself of the kid who shows up late with no pen four out of five days, a weary look on his face. (I am not advocating leniency here as much as understanding.)

Sometimes, I give up television for a week, hide out after my son goes to sleep, and actually practice what I was

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supposed to practice. I show up on Saturday ready to rock, and my guitar teacher doesn't even ask if I'm ready to play what we went over last week. No doubt he fails to do this because the chances of me having actually practiced my assignment are one in five. Nonetheless, I feel a bit like screaming.

It is in these moments that I gain a new understanding of what it's like to read *Julius Caesar* when you have no clue what is going on. I have actually looked out into the classroom and recognized the scrunched-up, frustrated look on my students' faces precisely because I've felt the same look come over my face as I mangle a Richard Thompson guitar lick.

They say failure is the best teacher, but I know better. The best teachers are the ones who have struggled and succeeded.



Credit: Indigo Flores

Mitch Martin is a high school English teacher who lives in Naperville, Illinois. He is also a journalist whose articles have appeared in Naperville Magazine, the Chicago Tribune, and the New York Times.

This article was also published in the [November 2007](#) issue of *Edutopia* magazine.

Teaching is an Art

Submitted by [Vijay Patankar](#) (not verified) on July 25, 2008 - 02:06.

I enjoyed reading the article posted by Mitch.

My name is Vijay Patankar; I live and work in Sydney, Australia. I am an IT professional, and an educator. I also the creator and presenter of the Study skills Program that teaches both life and study skills to high school students.

My eldest son during this troubled teenage years almost dropped out of high school. He was so tormented, so disillusioned about learning, about schooling that he never wanted to go back and finish his high school studies.

After completing year 10, he took the year off. During this time he asked me to help him prepare for the Cisco certification exam (CCNA) which requires 85% to pass.

I am an ex Cisco instructor, hence I decide to accept the challenge. I know my son was quite capable of learning and passing exams, what I was unsure was about his study techniques. After two unsuccessful attempts at passing the CCNA exam, my son approached me and asked me if I could teach him how to study. This was the opportunity I was long waiting for.

After learning how to study he went back and cleared the CCCNA exam by scoring 93.75%. Backed by these results and a renewed confidence he decided to go back and complete his HSC. This was in December of 2002.

In 2004, he completed his HSC by scoring 94.95%. This was a turning point for both of us. It made me realise that there must be many more students like my son who must be having difficulties with learning.

Instead of basking in my son's results, I decided to formalise the techniques and strategies I used to motivate and teach my son how to study effectively. I bundled all this information into the Study Skills Program. This is how the Study Skills Program came about.

Many students like my son are often stereotyped by the teachers and school counselor. These students are forced to carry negative labels such as being lazy, disruptive, having behaviour problems, having ADHD and learning difficulties etc.

Teachers have a great deal of responsibility trusted on them by the system and by parents; hence they should treat their students with a lot more care and respect. They must understand that every student is unique and every student learns differently. Sometimes students are not ready, they are not motivated that certainly does not mean they are not capable.

For more information about the Study skills program please visit www.studyskills.com.au

Feedback - [vpatankar\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:vpatankar(at)gmail.com)

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Appreciate your perspective

Submitted by [Michele Harris-Padron](#) (not verified) on December 11, 2007 - 20:33.

Have you heard of Guitars in the Classroom - it's a non profit group that has a developmental approach to teaching guitar to classroom teachers so they can sing songs with their classes - it's a great way to get started. I'm a GITC teacher and plan to share your article with my "students" - it will serve to give them perspective as well as perseverance as they learn. Learn more at guitarsintheclassroom.com

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Great insight for parents too

Submitted by Michelle (not verified) on December 10, 2007 - 07:50.

As parents we often forget what it was like to not know or not be interested in a subject because it was hard for us then or because we didn't like the teacher. With 4 kids (college, HS, JrH and elementary) I've come to understand that often when a child "doesn't like" a certain teacher, it is actually an incompatibility of learning and teaching styles. Children want to succeed and enjoy but can be easily deterred by seemingly small obstacles. This article is great inspiration for the lessons of working hard and trying hard.

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I agree with Mitch Martin in

Submitted by Annie (not verified) on November 28, 2007 - 20:00.

I agree with Mitch Martin in that teachers need to understand their students and how they learn. There is no sense continuing to teach the lesson the same way when they are not understanding. A teacher needs to be able to read her students and check for understanding. It does help students to believe in themselves when a teacher has tried and succeeded. I've gone through school being the "low student" who is struggling in reading and receiving average grades. I wasn't successful in school until I went to college. I share this with my students and tell them not to give up with learning, or listen to others who say they are not smart and can't do something. We need to be cheerleaders, encouraging our students, not giving up on them, and finding ways to help them learn. By understanding our students teachers are able to better support student learning.

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Mr. Martin's Oopses

Submitted by Anonda (not verified) on November 26, 2007 - 15:48.

Everyone who is teaching should read this article. I struggled in school, but had people who thought I should be a teacher. They were right and I am good at it. On the other hand I have a sister who is very good at school and thought about teaching. I asked her if should could teach even those in her class that did not learn like she did. She is now entering med school. She knew she could not teach those who could not learn like she did.

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