

Teaching Self-Assessment

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I am a teacher and a father. My friend, Matt Rousso, a former priest, has told me that most personal issues in our lives are issues of identity. Though I may have other identity issues, my identity as a teacher and father are clear. For years, when asked what I do, I have replied not geologist nor professor nor more specific forms of these. I say, "I am a teacher." Where I teach has varied through the years, from Africa to the Middle East to the Midwest. I have taught GED courses in math and science to middle-aged African-American women, water-resources classes to Arab men, statistics classes to Ph.D. students from Venezuela, Brazil, India, Austria, and China, and basic reading skills to my daughters. Throughout, I have seen myself as a teacher. As I've aged, my identity as a father has also become part of my teaching.

In Henri Nouwen's book, **The Prodigal Son**, he makes the case for the parable being not just a story about family and community but about the development of each of us. The younger son represents our youth, our desire to go out and experience life in all its glory and pain. As middle age sets in, we become the resentful older son. Things didn't work out like we planned. It's too late to be a child prodigy and, often, things haven't turned out as rosy as we once envisioned. No one killed a fatted calf for us, and we resent it. Hopefully, we eventually become the father, who offers forgiveness to others, who loves, nurtures, and forgives. Henri Nouwen struggled to progress to this stage, and so do I. Sulking and being resentful come too easy. Forgiveness is a tough act of will. Being a good father is damn near impossible. However, as Norman Maclean said, "...all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easily."

One can be a better-than-average father these days simply by showing up. And one doesn't need to do a great deal of preparation to be a better-than-average teacher. Mostly, both require time, making the right things a priority. Generally, the world doesn't offer great rewards for being a good father or being a good teacher. In both cases, long hours at the big money-makers are what is applauded, whether it be a lucrative job or research grants. UD claims to have different values. It's too early for me to tell if that is in fact the case. I am guardedly optimistic but concerned about the time demands placed upon many of my colleagues, particularly the "teaching specialists."

This is supposed to be a *self*-assessment, so I should say a bit about my own teaching. I'm good. That's not arrogance nor is it entirely statistics. However, I

have little doubt that it is a fact. I have all kinds of insecurities and neuroses, but if I ever give up teaching it will be because of Alzheimers or no one being willing to have me as a volunteer. When I was in junior high, I read a book called *Date Talk*. Obviously communication doesn't come naturally to me. And because of that, I've worked on it in ways a more gifted communicator would never consider—standup-comedy classes, storytelling books, and teachers workshops. They say that a natural athlete is not necessarily a very good coach. So perhaps my neurotic need to be understood and loved has been the motivation to make me a better teacher, that has pushed me to improve my ability to communicate in the classroom. Regardless, it matters to me, and I have worked hard on it, with some success.

I still struggle with some areas of teaching. I dislike grading papers—name a teacher who likes it—and I struggle with the balance between maintaining standards and adding value to students' lives. The latter is probably the biggest struggle UD faces. Does a UD education add sufficient value to a student's life to justify the cost? Does a diploma indicate professional competency? It's not clear to me yet. However, there are some areas where I can definitely make a contribution. I have an undergraduate degree in math, and much of my graduate work, teaching, and research were in quantitative fields. Our students need more math skills. I also have experience in consulting and working with government and non-profit agencies. Our students need an understanding of the political and economic context in which environmental problems occur. I can help.

I have written elsewhere [\[link\]](#) my philosophy of teaching. It hasn't changed by coming to UD. I can do a good job here if I don't get to caught up in institutional politics and the tedium of Midwestern life. I've always preferred a steep learning curve. I loved the first year of bookkeeping for my students in Kenya, of teaching myself accounting. The second year of maintaining the records was tedious. I loved the challenge of establishing myself at UNO. I received tenure after four years with no struggle. Then it got old. I went off to the Middle East for a year, then had kids. The challenge at UD will be in pushing myself to learn new things instead of depending on old skills, of creating new courses for the fun of it, of mentoring new teachers, and of making friends. This past summer was one of the least enjoyable I can recall. This coming summer looks to be much better, with a teachers course at the Audubon Center, a trip to New Orleans, a Boundary Waters canoe trip, and a wedding in Boston. Things are looking up.