

Teaching with a Passion



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Passion, I see is catching.

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

We may affirm absolutely that nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion.

—Hegel, *Philosophy of History*

SUBMIT THAT THE BEST TEACHERS ARE PEOPLE who are passionate about their subject *and* passionate about sharing that subject with others. Teaching without passion is merely information delivery and tantamount to rote or mechanical action. There can be little stimulation for learners beyond what they find intrinsically interesting in the subject. Teaching with a passion offers the potential of elevating learners' interest in the subject. Passionate teachers can create passionate learners.

Teachers manifest their passion in different ways. An expression of passion for the subject and for teaching can look very different depending upon the nature of the teacher. Consider some of the ways teachers can demonstrate their passion.

Manifestations of Passion: Four Examples

Enthusiasm. Open displays of excitement clearly signal passion for teaching. Each of us, as students or as teachers, can probably recall the teachers who brought their special brand of enthusiasm to the classroom. Not surprisingly, enthusiasm is among the most consistently cited positive characteristics of effective teachers. It may be a cliché to say that enthusiasm can be contagious, but such contagion may be the best tool for motivating students. Enthusiasm may be conveyed by animated presentation techniques, stimulating or inspirational speech, and emotional deliveries. Unbridled enthusiasm can sabotage a classroom, but, when harnessed and mastered, enthusiasm contributes significantly to a positive learning environment.

This manifestation of passion swells when enthusiasm for the subject is coupled with enthusiasm for the students. The desire to share your interests, and the joy of ignit-

ing that interest in others, characterize passionate educators. Like many, I was attracted to entomology by a wonderful entomologist who cared not only about his science but about me as an individual. Such people make a difference in other people's lives, and, because of their influence, we attempt to return the favor and perpetuate good deeds.

Immersion in the Subject. The passion one has for a subject and for sharing that subject sometimes is more demonstrable by the manner in which the teacher gets totally engrossed in what she or he does. I recall two personal experiences as an undergraduate, one in a required, lower-division, literature course and one in a required, upper-division, comparative vertebrate anatomy course. At the time, I ranked neither subject high on my list of interests, but each professor's passion for his subject left lasting impressions.

The literature professor often would sit cross-legged atop the desk in front of the class, eyes tightly closed, and recite elaborate interpretations of the day's literature assignment. His articulate recitation and total immersion in the work conveyed to me two things: this person really loves this stuff!, and maybe there is something more to this than I think! I remain indebted to this professor, who, by closing his eyes to immerse himself, opened my eyes to discover an important subject.

The anatomy professor's absorption in his subject was evident inside and outside of class, but one particular classroom lecture was memorable. While he was delivering a chalkboard lecture, in typical rapid but clear and organized style, heavy drapes suspended over open windows continually blew into his path, either partially obstructing the board or, minimally, becoming a distraction for the students. At one moment, an especially strong wind gust blew the drapes violently inward, totally enveloping his body. With only an exposed arm wielding a pointer, the professor continued his discourse, while a sympathetic student in the front row rescued him from the tangle of drapes and then closed the windows. Maintaining his staccato pace, the professor thanked the student for his

"constructive act" and continued lecturing about the beauty of comparative vertebrate anatomy. The incident was comical but illustrates how thoroughly engrossed this teacher could be in his teaching. Students respected his love of science and his desire to convey it to others. Consequently, many of his students developed greater interests in the subjects he covered.

A colleague suggested to me that perhaps passion can be measured by the extent to which a teacher is covered (metaphorically or literally) by the media she or he has been using, which conjures images of the teacher at the end of a lecture with clothes, hands, and face covered with chalk dust.

Immersion in one's subject to the exclusion of others, however, is a selfish passionate act. To be passionate about your subject, but reclusive and unwilling to share the passion with others, does not translate into passionate teaching.

Creative and Innovative Approaches. Some teachers demonstrate their passion for teaching by trying new and creative approaches, through which they seek to motivate students and to enhance learning. Innovative approaches also may reignite the teacher's interest and enthusiasm for a subject that may be taught repeatedly for many years. New approaches bring new life to the class for the teacher and for the student. Routine and monotonous methods spell boredom for students and teacher and lack the inspirational value of something new and creative. New and creative approaches carry some risk, as not all experiments succeed, but the spirit of experimentation also can lead to positive educational outcomes. These experiments and creative approaches need not involve major course overhauls to be effective. Sometimes, small efforts yield great satisfaction.

Teacher as Learner. I suspect that most people who enjoy teaching enjoyed being students. Good teachers continue to be students. Teachers keep their passion for teaching alive by remaining passionate learners. They learn from their research and bring that research to the classroom. They learn from the published literature and by discussing and reviewing the work of colleagues. They learn from preparation of new courses, course materials, and

curricula. They learn by solving problems and by making mistakes. They learn from their students. They learn by teaching. When students perceive their teacher as a learner, they may become more passionate learners too.

How Do You Express Your Passion? Take a Personal Teaching Passion Inventory

Score 1 point for each item that depicts you or your students.

1. I am enthusiastic about my teaching. It is something I enjoy and look forward to doing. It is a fun, exciting, and stimulating activity for me.
2. My students can sense my enthusiasm. They have conveyed this impression to me in their evaluations or in their personal comments.
3. I am continuing to learn. I am active in research. I read and attempt to keep up with the appropriate literature. I obtain new information from my students.
4. My students are witnesses to my interest in learning. They see me doing research, reading the literature, conversing with colleagues, participating in professional conferences, and being engaged actively with my discipline.
5. I can get absorbed in my work, but not so self absorbed that others are excluded. I am likely to share what interests me and bring my interests to the attention of others.
6. I continue to try new approaches in my teaching. The class that I have taught several times is different and better than when I began. Sometimes I try things that do not work, but these failures do not prevent me from taking new risks or experimenting with my teaching.
7. I care about my students. I want them to learn, to realize their potential, and to succeed in class and in other useful and challenging endeavors.

Your Score:

- 7 pts. Powerfully passionate!
6 pts. Proudly passionate
5 pts. Pretty passionate
<5 pts. Seek help from a passion professional!

Get Passionate and Reveal Your Passion!

As you considered this admittedly simplified inventory, did specific examples come

to mind quickly, or did you have to think hard or do some personal soul searching to characterize your habits? Are you enthusiastic about what you teach? How can your students sense your enthusiasm? What have you done new in your course(s) lately? Have you devised some new or creative approaches for conveying concepts and topics that have been taught the same way for awhile?

Think about the importance of teaching with a passion, seek ways to develop that passion, and develop ways to reveal it to your students.

Teach with a passion! ◆

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

1. Title of Publication: *American Entomologist* (10462821)
2. Date of Filing: September 1996
3. Frequency of Issue: Quarterly
A. Number of Issues Published Annually: 4
B. Annual Subscription Price: \$15, member; \$30, nonmember; \$55, institution
4. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: Entomological Society of America, 9301 Annapolis Road, Lanham, MD 20706-3115
5. Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters of General Business Offices of the Publishers: Entomological Society of America, 9301 Annapolis Road, Lanham, MD 20706-3115
6. Full names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publishers, Editors, and Managing Editor: *Publisher*: Entomological Society of America, 9301 Annapolis Road, Lanham, MD 20706-3115. *Editor*: J. E. McPherson, Department of Zoology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901. *Managing Editor*: Raymond L. Everngam, Entomological Society of America, 9301 Annapolis Road, Lanham, MD 20706-3115.
7. Owner: Entomological Society of America, 9301 Annapolis Road, Lanham, MD 20706-3115
8. Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1% or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or other Securities: None
9. Purpose: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and exempt status for Federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.
10. Extent and Nature of Circulation:

	Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 mo.	Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date
A. TOTAL NO., COPIES (NET PRESS RUN)	816	7,800
B. PAID CIRCULATION		
1. SALES THROUGH DEALERS AND CARRIERS, STREET VENDORS, AND COUNTER SALES	310	306
2. MAIL SUBSCRIPTION	7,032	6,909
C. TOTAL PAID CIRCULATION	7,342	7,215
D. FREE DISTRIBUTION BY MAIL, CARRIER, OR OTHER MEANS, SAMPLES, COMPLIMENTARY, AND OTHER FREE COPIES	34	40
E. TOTAL DISTRIBUTION	7,376	7,255
F. COPIES NOT DISTRIBUTED		
1. OFFICE USE, LEFT OVER, UNACCOUNTED, SPOILED AFTER PRINTING	784	545
2. RETURN FROM NEWS AGENTS	0	0
G. TOTAL	8,160	7,800