

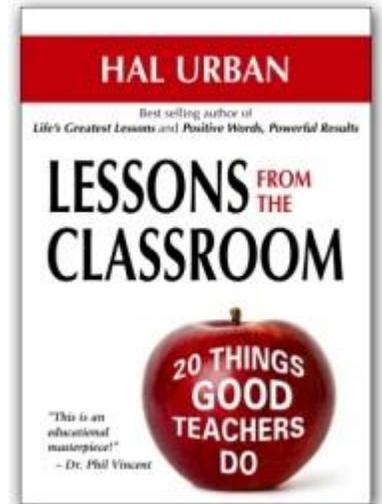
Lesson #1: Good teachers share one special quality

HAL URBAN

If I asked you to name your favorite teachers from kindergarten through graduate school, it would be easy to answer, wouldn't it?

Good teaching is as much about passion as it is about reason It's about caring for your craft, having a passion for it, and conveying that passion to everyone, most importantly to your students.

- Professor Richard Leblanc
Award-winning teacher,
York University, Ontario



Who were your favorite teachers?

If I asked you to name your favorite teachers from kindergarten through graduate school, it would be easy to answer, wouldn't it? It would also be an enjoyable question to answer because it would bring back so many fond memories of wonderful people who've touched both your personal life and your professional life. You would be thinking about **people who not only taught you things of value, but inspired you as well**. Quite possibly they inspired you to become a teacher.

My classmates and I were asked this question on my first day in the teaching credential program at the University of San Francisco many years ago. It was a great way to begin my pursuit of a career in teaching -- thinking about people in the profession who had the most positive influence on me. We were asked to write down our answers. I thought of Sister Mary Margaret and Sister Mary Anne, who taught me in elementary school. I thought of Mrs. Padgett and Mrs. Kofford, English teachers, and Mr. Kutras, a history teacher, in high school. Then I thought of Dr. Lincoln and Dr. Campbell, history professors, and Dr. Kirk, an English professor, who taught me in college. Then came this question: "What do they all have in common?" My hand went up first, and Dr. McSweeney (another great teacher) called on me. I said, **"They all loved what they were doing. They had great enthusiasm for teaching."** All of my fellow graduate students nodded their heads in agreement. One of them, to punctuate the point, said "Exactly!"

That was apparently the answer he expected. He said, "I ask that question every year, and I always get the same answer." He went on to explain that he opens with that question because it's guaranteed to get things off to a good start, and it gets future teachers to think about what separates the great teachers from the not-so-great. He said, "We all remember our favorite teachers -- the ones who had passion and

enthusiasm, the ones who loved and enjoyed what they were doing. We want each of you to become that kind of teacher. Always remember those special teachers. Make your career a tribute to them." It's a statement I never forgot once during my thirty-five years in the classroom.

Having fun while working hard

There are other words that are similar to enthusiasm and passion. They also describe our favorite teachers. Here are a few of them:

zest	excitement	energy	fervor
eagerness	enjoyment	delight	zeal
liveliness	vitality	vigor	devotion

There's yet another important word that goes with all of the above in describing the best teachers. The word is FUN! Good teachers, along with working very hard, almost always have fun. Have you ever noticed how much they smile while they're teaching? One of my greatest colleagues once said, "I don't know of any other job I could do and have this much fun. Just think, I get paid for coming here every day and having fun." Like most teachers, he didn't get paid nearly enough for what he did, but the other rewards that come from good teaching more than made up for it.

There's another aspect of fun that's equally important. If the teacher's having fun, there's a good chance the students are also. Students of all ages appreciate a teacher who's having a good time. Hard work and dedication are not exclusive of having fun. In fact, one of the valuable things I learned during my student teaching was that the harder I worked outside of class getting ready for it, the more fun I had inside the class. When students say that a teacher is "fun" or teaches a "fun class," they don't mean it's all fun and games in which no teaching or learning is going on. They simply mean that the teacher enjoys what he or she is doing, and that it becomes an important part of the atmosphere of the classroom. In the teaching profession hard work and fun go together.

I'm not claiming that every day in the classroom is going to be nothing but sunshine and smiling faces just because you come in all fired up with enthusiasm. But I am saying that you increase the odds of teaching effectively and having cooperative students every time you do. People in all professions have their bad days, whether they're in business, sports, technology, service work, entertainment, construction, education, or any other. Having a bad day once in a while is part of life. Believe me, I had my share of disappointments. But a passion for what you're doing can keep those days at a minimum.

***Enthusiasm releases the drive to
carry you over obstacles and adds
significance to all you do.***

- Norman Vincent Peale

Enthusiasm spelled out

Near the end of my career as a classroom teacher I was asked to speak to a group of graduate students in education at Santa Clara University. All of them were working toward their California teaching credential. Some were taking the beginning courses in the program, while others were doing their student teaching. I told them I was happy to be there because they had three wonderful qualities: youth, idealism, and enthusiasm. I told them the key to having a successful and rewarding teaching career would be in maintaining all three. I said, "No matter how old you get you can still maintain your youthful spirit. If you can do this, you should also be able to maintain your idealism and your enthusiasm."

I asked them if they'd met any burned out and cynical teachers yet. They all assured me they had. I asked them if they'd heard comments like this in a nasty tone of voice: "Oh, yeah, you're young and idealistic now, but just wait until you've been teaching as long as I have. Then we'll see how excited you are." Again, I was told that they'd heard comments like these often. Ignore these comments like the plague. They send a negative attitude that undermines the very purpose for our existence as teachers. Your comment back could be, "Maybe you have been teaching TOO long." I did everything I could to assure them that it doesn't have to be that way. I never lost an ounce of enthusiasm for teaching, even in my thirty-fifth year, and I had many outstanding colleagues who felt the same way. It was their continued enthusiasm for teaching that made them so successful year after year.

While preparing for the Santa Clara presentation I started playing around with each of the ten letters in the word enthusiasm, and had a lot of fun coming up with other words that paint a picture of what successful teachers do. The graduate students loved it. One of them, skilled in computer graphics, made a small ENTHUSIASM! poster, which included all the words. She printed out one for each of her classmates and sent a copy to me. Here are the other words:

Energetic - Let's face it. Teaching is a high-energy job. The lifeless need not apply. The students we spend the day with have energy to spare, and we need to be able to keep up with them. Stay in shape and take your vitamins.

Not boring - Here are the four most frequent complaints I heard from students about teachers:

1. "He has no control over the class."
2. "I'm not learning anything from her."
3. "He's so mean."
4. "She's so boring."

Teaching is not a job for sissies. We have to be tough both physically and mentally simply because the job is so demanding. There are also times when we need to be tough on the kids. Not mean, but tough. We need to let them know that we're not afraid to make them work. We need to hold them accountable, and they need to know that we will.

I'll address the issues of control, learning, and being mean in other chapters of this book. Let me address the boring issue here. Simply put, it's impossible to be boring and excited at the same time. If you're genuinely excited about what you're doing there won't be any complaints about being boring.

Tough - Teaching is not a job for sissies. We have to be tough both physically and mentally simply because the job is so demanding. There are also times when we need to be tough on the kids. Not mean, but tough. We need to let them know that we're not afraid to make them work. We need to hold them accountable, and they need to know that we will.

High standards - Good teachers consistently maintain high standards in two important areas. The first is classroom management -- establishing a culture that's conducive to teaching and learning, one that's built on a foundation of mutual respect. The other is academics -- letting students and their parents know that we take seriously the responsibility of helping the next generation acquire the knowledge they'll need to function well in society.

Understanding - By this I mean understanding what's going on in our students' lives -- developing empathy for them. It's a lot harder being a kid now than it was when we were growing up, and we need to acknowledge this. We should make every effort possible to learn what's going on in their lives, what affects their learning. It's also important for us to remember our own days as students. What was it like on a bad day? When were we distracted? When were we at our best? How did our best teachers treat us in both good and bad times?

Sense of humor - Simply put, you'll die in the classroom without one. An important aspect of enthusiasm for teaching -- as well as for life -- is the ability to see and enjoy the funny things that surround us daily. While everyone likes to laugh, it's been proven that kids laugh about ten times more than the average adult. Teachers, more than anyone, need to understand this. **Laughter makes every classroom a better place.** This doesn't mean that you have to be Robin Williams every day. It just means that you should never miss an opportunity to laugh with your kids and at yourself. **Laughter is the shortest distance between people of all ages.**

Imagination - Albert Einstein said imagination is more important than intellect. Most certainly, this applies to the teaching profession. You could have a Ph.D. from Harvard and be a renowned expert in your subject area, but **if you can't present your material creatively you'll bomb.** Keep in mind that good teaching is an art. It requires some degree of imagination and resourcefulness. Always look for new and better ways of making your material interesting. It will be more enjoyable for you and for your students.

Always prepared - Someone once asked me what the most demanding and time-consuming part of teaching was. Without a second's hesitation, I answered in one word: **PREPARATION!** Nothing is more important to a teacher. It would have absolutely terrified me to walk into a classroom without being fully prepared. In fact, I usually suggest that teachers be **over-prepared**. At the same time, we need to be flexible. Good teachers are able to capitalize on those serendipitous moments when they occur, no matter how solid their lesson plans are.

"If you want to make a point with your students, put it into a story. They'll tune out a lecture, but they'll always listen to a good story." All good teachers -- along with good preachers, speakers, and writers -- are good storytellers. Everyone loves a good story.

Storyteller - In my first year of teaching one of the best teachers at my school gave me some advice that was invaluable, and I've been passing it on for more than forty years. He said, "If you want to make a point with your students, put it into a story. They'll tune out a lecture, but they'll always listen to a good story." All good teachers -- along with good preachers, speakers, and writers -- are good storytellers. Everyone loves a good story.

Motivated - "Real motivation comes from within." That's the title of Chapter 11 in my first book, *Life's Greatest Lessons*. Good teachers understand this. **They keep a fire burning inside rather than wait for someone else to light one for them.** Motivated to teach equates to motivated to 'change and adapt'.

In addition, they help their students become motivated. This happens because good teachers are also good salespeople -- they sell ideas. They help their students understand why it's so important to pass on knowledge, and help them see education, not as an obligation, but as an opportunity to improve the quality of their lives.

Two types of teacher enthusiasm

If you took a survey among the best teachers you know and asked them what they enjoy the most about their jobs, a large percentage of them would give you two answers. I know this because I conducted such a survey during the years 2006-2007. While attending conferences and visiting schools throughout the country I informally interviewed more than two hundred teachers at all grade levels. Among the many questions I asked, these were the most important ones: "Why are you so enthusiastic about your job? What do you like most about teaching?" **Almost all of them gave me the same two answers.**

1 - Enthusiasm for the students

If you do any reading about the history and

Good teachers love their students. They may not love every kid at every moment, but in general, they enjoy being with young people who are full of energy and always on the edge of discovery. These teachers have a special knack for connecting with them, for helping them open their minds.

If you do any reading about the history and philosophy of education, you'll find that great teachers of the past all agree that learning is usually the result of a good relationship between the teacher and the student. Good teaching is personal. This was pointed out during one of my first graduate seminars in a course called Philosophy of Education. Our professor, Dr. Tom McSweeney, shared with us two of his favorite old sayings about the relationship between teachers and students. He claimed then, as I do now, that they capture the essence of effective teaching:

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"Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

You could have a bachelor's degree from Yale, a master's degree from Stanford, and a doctorate from M.I.T. You could have written a scholarly book that won the Pulitzer Prize. You could be considered the world's foremost authority in nuclear technology. The kids could care less. All they want to know is: Can you connect with them? Do you understand them? Do you really care about them? And no matter what ages they are, they'll know the answers to all of these questions after spending only a few days with you in class. Good teachers are servant leaders. **Let your students know -- and show them -- how much you care.** What matters most is that the students KNOW you care. The only way to know this is to ask them...which we do on our course evaluations.

"If you can reach 'em, you can teach 'em."

This separates the least effective from the most effective teachers.

Our students are no different than we are when it comes to wanting a basic human need met. They want to feel as though they count. They don't want to be regarded by the teacher as students who sit in particular desks. **They want to be regarded as human beings whose lives and feelings and aspirations are important.** There are many ways in which teachers can fill this need that all students have. I'll be discussing some of them throughout this book, especially in chapters four and six.

2 - Enthusiasm for teaching

Among teacher variables, enthusiasm has the most powerful and positive impact on student learning. - Toni Kempler

If you ask one hundred great teachers what their most important professional quality is, almost all of them will answer "dedication," "passion," "zeal," "enthusiasm," or "love of teaching." They won't talk

about their degrees or how much they know. They'll talk about how genuinely excited they are about their jobs. If you ask one hundred people who aren't even in the field of education what the most important quality of a good teacher is, they'll give you answers that are almost identical to those of the teachers. They remember their best teachers as the ones who loved their jobs.

In other words, we all seem to have this "gut" feeling that when it comes to good teaching, enthusiasm is the key element. But we need to remember that within the field of education there's an important group of people who keep us honest and on our toes by constantly asking these kinds of questions: Has it been researched? Do the findings support your theory? I'm happy to answer YES -- teacher enthusiasm has been researched. And I'm even happier to answer YES -- the findings do support our theory.

The results were remarkably similar. Research does bear out that enthusiasm is a special quality that all great teachers share.

Toni Kempler, quoted above, earned her PhD in Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. As I write this she's a Professor of Education at Rutgers University, and is one of those important people referred to above who conducts meticulous research in the interest of good teaching. She and two of her colleagues conducted a study in which they set out to measure the importance of teacher enthusiasm. Their results were published in *The Journal of Experimental Education*, spring, 2000. The title of their article is, "What's Everybody So Excited About?: The Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm on Student Intrinsic Motivation and Vitality."

Through the miracle we call the Internet I found more than forty other studies conducted within the last ten years on teacher enthusiasm. The research involved teachers and students at all grade levels from elementary school to graduate school. It was conducted through experiments, surveys, observation, case studies, and interviews. The results were remarkably similar. Research does bear out that enthusiasm is a special quality that all great teachers share.

It is important that teachers be able to communicate a sense of excitement about the subjects they teach.

- David Ausubel, Educational psychologist

Not as much about how excited you are, but how well you communicate that excitement to students.

Enthusiasm is contagious, however, so is a lack of.

Not only does teacher enthusiasm help make a course more enjoyable and entertaining for students and

the teacher, it has also been shown to help the learner retain larger amounts of information.

Another example of how the affective domain significantly affects student learning!

- W. D. Coats, Educational psychologist

Enthusiasm is the mother of effort, and without it nothing great was ever achieved.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

*If you love what you are doing
you will be successful.*

- Albert Schweitzer

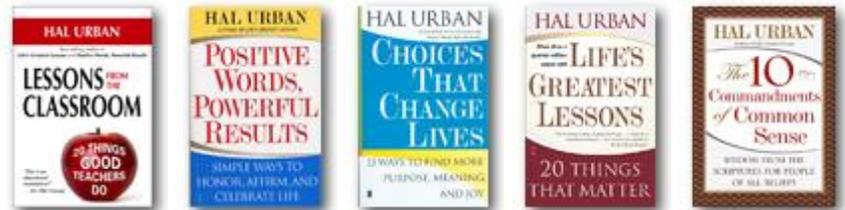
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Hal Urban is an award-winning educator and author of the best-selling *Life's Greatest Lessons*. He taught high school for 35 years and now speaks internationally on character education to teachers, parents, and students. His other books include:



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[*Honor, Affirm, and Celebrate Life, Life's Greatest Lessons: 20 Things That Matter, Choices That Change Lives: 15 Ways to Find More Purpose, Meaning, and Joy, The 10 Commandments of Common Sense, Lessons From the Classroom: 20 Things Good Teachers Do.*](#)

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