



What Makes a Good Teacher? Lessons From Ms. Ruth

We all have one or two favorite teachers who made an indelible mark on our lives—people we remember long after we've forgotten most of what happened in their classrooms. Mine was my 11th-grade Spanish teacher, Ms. Ruth. One day she said to me, “You know, you have a real knack for Spanish. I hope you will continue your Spanish studies, because you're one of the best students I've ever had.”

That praise and encouragement meant more to me than she probably ever knew. Decades later, I can still remember the moment almost as if it happened yesterday. More importantly, I did continue studying Spanish, eventually reaching the point where I could teach it to others. Ms. Ruth possessed what I now consider the most important characteristic of a good teacher: **the ability to motivate and inspire**. She also recognized differences in student ability, presented material in different ways, made learning fun and somehow convinced us that our success mattered to her personally.

Using Ms. Ruth as my model, here are some characteristics I've come to associate with good teaching.

A Good Teacher Teaches the Students, Not Just the Subject

Students differ in ability, background, interests, strengths and the ways they respond to instruction. Good teachers recognize those differences without assuming that every student must learn in exactly the same way.

Ms. Ruth varied her presentations. She explained, demonstrated, questioned and gave us opportunities to practice. Just as importantly, she continually checked whether we understood before moving on. She had the uncanny knack of asking essentially the same question three different ways of three different students. She wasn't merely presenting Spanish; she was watching to see whether Spanish was getting through.

A Good Teacher Challenges Without Leaving Students Behind

Every classroom contains a range of abilities. Ms. Ruth neither coddled struggling students nor allowed the strongest students to coast. Much of her instruction was pitched toward the middle of the class, but she found ways to use differences in ability to everyone's advantage.

During our daily speaking practice, for example, she frequently paired stronger students with those who needed more help and rotated us among different partners. The better students reinforced their own skills by helping others, while struggling students received practice without being singled out or embarrassed. The goal wasn't to make everybody equally talented, but to help everybody improve.

A Good Teacher Understands Motivation

Not every student enters a classroom burning with enthusiasm for the subject. Some genuinely want to master it. Others want a good grade. A few simply want to survive the course and move on with their lives. Ms. Ruth understood that reality.

At the beginning of the course, she made her expectations clear. Motivated students knew what they needed to accomplish for a top grade, while those principally interested in passing knew the minimum standards they still had to meet. She didn't confuse lack of enthusiasm with inability, nor did she lower the standards until they became meaningless. She simply made the destination clear and gave students a path toward reaching it.

A Good Teacher Makes Learning Interesting

Our Spanish class came at the end of the school day, when most of us were tired and already thinking about going home. Ms. Ruth knew exactly what she was up against. Going to her class nevertheless became a daily adventure because she constantly varied what we did. We often wondered, “What does this lady have in store for us today?”

One day she wanted us to learn Spanish verbs. Several students put lists of *-ar*, *-er*, and *-ir* verbs on the blackboard along with their English meanings. Then other students received flash cards and had to act out the verbs while the rest of us guessed—in Spanish. To demonstrate *hablar* (to speak), someone might chatter “blah, blah, blah.” For *comer* (to eat), another student would mime eating. Before long the room was full of teenagers making fools of themselves in Spanish. We had a hilarious time, but we also learned the verbs. **That's the part that matters.**

A Good Teacher Takes Student Success Personally

Perhaps Ms. Ruth's greatest gift was her ability to make students believe that their success genuinely mattered to her. She encouraged strong students without turning them into teacher's pets and helped weaker students without making them feel inadequate. That personal investment can be enormously powerful because sometimes a teacher sees an ability in a student before the student recognizes it himself. Ms. Ruth did that for me.

The Teacher I Tried to Become

These certainly aren't the only characteristics of a good teacher, and my list is admittedly subjective. But years later, when I became a teacher myself, I found that much of what I considered “my” approach to teaching had been borrowed from Ms. Ruth. I tried to make lessons interesting, vary the way I presented material, check for understanding, encourage students who showed promise and help those who struggled. Most of all, I wanted students to know that I cared whether they succeeded.

More than one student eventually told me that I was a good teacher. If they were right, some of the credit belongs to a Spanish teacher named Ms. Ruth, who once took a few seconds to tell an 11th-grade boy that he had a knack for Spanish.

She was right about that, too.