BIO

Greg Stephens, a 1992 graduate of Teachers College, is the mathematics chairperson for the Hastings School District, located just north of New York. Greg teaches four classes in the high school in addition to serving as chair for both the middle and high schools. In the afternoons, he coaches girls soccer. He lives in Hastings with his wife and two daughters, right across the street from the school. One daughter has already survived his class; the second one will be there in a year or two. Greg is also one of nine scattered editors of the Mathematics Teacher, the professional teaching journal of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

*In my teaching life, I’m primarily a math guy, but I’m using this soapbox to talk about teaching in general; the best and most noble profession of them all.*

First of all, congratulations. Congratulations to the newly minted teachers in the audience, most especially for surviving contact with the more experienced teachers around you. The kids are easy; the curmudgeons at the table were probably hard.

I thought my student teacher, Tanil, did a great job – but I still had to bite my tongue to let her do things her way rather than mine! I’m sure most of you had to make a video of your teaching… I’m afraid hers is full of glimpses of me fussing hither and yon and utterly failing to leave well enough alone.

Congratulations also to the many experienced teachers who so graciously shared their classrooms, their students, and their accumulated wisdom with their student teachers.

I’ve had two children and not one daughter arrived with an instruction manual. My wife and I bumbled along as best we could, trying to do the right thing. We collected advice from everyone. We followed some, ignored some, and mixed stuff up. I’m sure we got stuff wrong. We also got a lot of it right. Teaching is just like that.

You take these classes here at TC and then you wind up in someone else’s classroom as a student teacher. You are up to your eyeballs in theory … but no one gives you a map to the bathroom. Only the ‘real’ teachers have keys so you can’t get into anywhere!

Worst of all … no one tells you how to handle the extraordinary shortness of days. You have papers and exams of your own with your own deadlines. There simply isn’t enough time to do these and then also prepare lesson plans, group explorations, and pair/share activities. … Because Teaching is Hard … And there’s no instruction manual … But please ask everyone around you for help. Ask for advice. For supplies. After all, we’ve probably got half a year’s supplies squirreled away in the darkest corner of a closet. Really, ask for everything. Pester us. We love to talk (that’s how we got here). Gather the accumulated wisdom of the teachers around you and keep what you can. Toss what doesn’t fit. Keep what works and keep trying to learn more.

This is no longer the talk I drafted earlier in the week. My best teaching buddy passed away Wednesday and I have just driven here from services in Westchester. We spent Thursday weeping and our district closed early today so that we could all go to the memorial service this afternoon. It is simply awful to be in a room with hundreds of people crying, kids and teachers alike. It has made my outlook darker than before, but that will pass. There was beauty in the service, too. My friend was a music teacher and the students sang through their tears to show their love, their respect, and their loss. Teaching, in its essence, touches the lives of others. It is uplifting. Teaching establishes a connection between humans -- and in good teaching, this connection changes both of us.

This isn’t measured in the student performance index or a teacher effectiveness rating. It is something else entirely. It is an entire shadow universe of teaching – that even as we share with kids the diverse content we’re certified to teach … those very same kids are absorbing lessons from us. Lessons in respect and encouragement, lessons in empathy, in responsibility, and strength. The kids may forget today’s class by the time Monday rolls around … but decades from now they will be able to tell you a story about their favorite class or teacher.

You may wonder if this is really you. You may worry that it isn’t. But I’m not worried. I don’t see how we can help but be human as we teach. We can’t be in a classroom and yet stay separate from the people in it. That we will affect our students is a given; that we balance instruction with passion and empathy is a must.

Young teachers could be forgiven if they turned on the tv news or opened a paper and quit the profession tomorrow. I think it’s harder to be a teacher than it was. Our culture has become less respectful of teaching and we’ve become caught up in a race to ‘fix stuff:’ we want better teachers, better ratings, and better classrooms. We want more rigor, higher graduation rates, and better test scores.

Our secretary of education, Arne Duncan, told us last summer that teaching is hard. He was speaking at a conference in Baltimore. He went on to say that change is hard, but that high expectations and increased rigor are the way to go. That multiple measures of teacher effectiveness are needed (… because teaching is complicated …) and that student growth is paramount. Yes. Yes. Yes. Of course I agree. These are indeed good things, but I worry that we are dogmatically repeating that we’ll just have to do better. It’s a variation on the old joke: we’ll keep firing teachers until morale improves! It ignores that basic truth that teachers are already hard at work improving the lives of the students we touch. I worry that Duncan, like so many, has allowed his focus to fall to the exceptions rather than celebrate the rule. I hope that our will to do well by our classes and students outshines the impositions of the outside.

But that’s the dark side talking from the week I’ve had because …

I want high expectations and rigorous classrooms and curious students … but I also want a little sanity. We’re right at the end of the first week of testing in middle schools here in New York, but the curriculum modules we’re testing against came out after the school year started. That doesn’t make any sense. How the heck is the good teaching going to actually happen?

Here’s my answer. People just like you -- teachers with years in the classroom and idealistic new teachers raring to go – teachers like you are everywhere, they are in districts near and far. And we are teaching the things that are important class by class and building by building by building. And we are doing it in the ways that we think reach students the best. Teaching is hard. But teaching is also about connections. Teaching is hard, but it is also rewarding, uplifting, dynamic and inspiring. I’m sad to have lost my friend, but I’m enormously proud of him for being a teacher, and a wonderful one at that. In my heart, I think that teaching is a calling. And I look out across the room and I’m truly grateful to you all for the classrooms you’ll be in.

I wanted originally to talk about the common core state standards, but that’s too dry a topic for the week I’ve had. Instead, I’ll wrap this up with a ‘frame of mind’ and with three thoughts for you to ponder over the weekend. Sort of like homework, homework for the mind.

Here’s the mental context. I’ve said that teaching is hard, but that was never a secret. Also true is that teaching is joyful. I don’t teach mathematics because I’m sure that we need the arc length formula to survive and prosper as good citizens. Arc Length: the length of a curve is the integral of the square root of one plus the square of the derivative. Write it down. Test tomorrow. I’ll tell the truth – I’m 47 years old and this has never once come up in my world outside of class! Go figure. The beauty of calculating the length of a curved line is that the measure emerges from the collection of infinitely many small straight segments. It is an emergent property of other things. The solution comes from how we frame the question. I teach mathematics because I want my students to feel and understand the power of evidence and reasoning. To experience the interplay between the mundane and the infinite.

Our Poet Laureate from many years ago, Rita Dove, wrote …:

I prove a theorem and the house expands:

the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,

the ceiling floats away with a sigh.

Her poem, Geometry, captures what I want students to feel. It doesn’t have to be mathematics; that just happens to be my thing. Teaching is hard, but it touches the lives of everyone around you. Share your passion through your classroom.

Now to the homework:

First, what do your students need? Do they need more homework or less? More exploration or more direct instruction? Are they starving for company or privacy. Or food? These are things we need to know. Not because you can change everything … but because we can change some things. Because we need feedback and insight as much as our students need it. I love the responses that come from asking how class is going and what would help. Can you imagine my surprise that a bunch of second semester seniors asked for a bit more homework? They didn’t want to lose track of school when they weren’t in it.

If we don’t ask, we don’t give our kids a chance to answer. The homework: Get some feedback from the students. Ask some questions. Can you frame these questions ten different ways next week? Can you leave tonight asking yourself what your students need in the coming week or month and how to get there?

Second thing. How do you make your classroom part of a community rather than an island? How do take the quintessentially isolationist act of walking into a classroom and closing the door and make it … make our teaching … broader than the walls? I have some ideas but you’ll have to figure out the details yourselves.

The hardest thing I did last week was join an AP English classroom to discuss the correlations and confounding differences between mathematics and music. I teach math for a living but I was a little out of my league. The whole thing came up because I was talking – casually – with the English teacher about the changing role of writing in the mathematics classroom. His response was to invite me into his class that Friday. It was amazing. These were the same kids, the same desks, same dark chalkboards, but the whole feel of the class was different. It was wonderful and wholly unsettling. I left with my own homework: what aspects of that class do I want to see in mine? What techniques should I adopt and what do I keep because it is part of what I like about my own classes?

We experience this by reaching out and by letting others reach out to us. We see other styles, other habits, and other ways to be good. We joke in our department that all our best ideas came from someone else: the best lesson plans, the best activities and more. Ask yourself, “how can I be part of the larger community?” Connect beyond your classroom walls.

My last thought, my closing question is this: is great teaching made? Or was it born? I sorted through a hundred resumes two weeks ago looking for clues. Did this person or that person have the skills, have the experience, make the grade? Even whittled down to ten candidates, the director and I worried about the stuff that isn’t ever there on paper. Do these people like kids? Do they love teaching? Not everyone seems to. Why are they teaching math? Why choose our school? We can ‘make’ expertise, but can we ‘make’ great teachers?

Here’s my opinion. I graduated from a great school. If you listened to the bio you know that it’s also your great school. But our training and practice are the superstructure through which we let our passions burn. You need both. You need good habits and good practices, but you also need to let yourself out. Don’t just teach because you can; teach because you can’t possibly step away.

On that note, I remind you that we are the shepherds of the future and I wish you the very best.

Peace to all of you and thanks.