

The Synergy between Role Modelling and Great Teaching: Combining Science and Art

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Abstract

This is a theoretical, descriptive, and qualitative study about great teaching. Undeniably, learning to teach competently comes through training and experience. This study suggests that it can also happen through observing great teachers, i.e. through role modelling. What is the synergy between great teaching and role modelling? Can great teachers be role models to others? How much is the observation of role models effective in learning to teach? And in general, how does role modelling work? The investigation of these questions is done through analysing five role models using Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Humanism, and learning differentiation. These role models are real life teachers who have inspired the movies and whose examples have proved beneficial to many teachers, trainees, and learners. This paper describes how they teach revealing in the process some characteristics and practices of great teaching. It attempts to combine science, art, and role modelling in order to detect and uncover some similarities in great teacher models.

Keywords: Great teaching – Role modelling – Social Learning Theory (SLT) – Humanism – Learning Differentiation

المخلص

تعنى هذه الدراسة النظرية، الوصفية، والنوعية بالتعليم الجيد. إن تعلم التدريس بكفاءة يأتي من خلال التدريب والخبرة. لكن هذه الدراسة تشير إلى أنه يمكن أن يحدث أيضاً من خلال ملاحظة المعلمين العظماء أو الأكفاء، أي من خلال نمذجة الأدوار. ما مدى فعالية ملاحظة نماذج الدور في تعلم التدريس؟ هل المعلم الجيد قدوة لغيره؟ هل يمكن أن نتعلم التدريس العظيم دون أن يكون لنا قدوة؟ كيف تعمل نمذجة الأدوار بصفة عامة؟ يتم البحث في هذه الأسئلة من خلال تحليل خمسة نماذج للأدوار باستخدام نظرية ألبرت باندورا للتعليم الاجتماعي، الإنسانية، و تخصيص التعلم. تمثل هذه الأدوار نماذجاً لمعلمين حقيقيين ألهموا الأفلام. توضح هذه الدراسة كيف يعلمون مما سيسمح بالكشف عن بعض خصائص وممارسات التدريس الجيد. يحاول هذا البحث الجمع بين العلم والفن ونمذجة الأدوار من أجل التوصل إلى بعض خصائص وممارسات المعلم الكفاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس الجيد – نمذجة الدور – نظرية التعلم الاجتماعي (SLT) – الإنسانية – تخصيص التعلم.

1- Introduction

Talking of great teaching elicits role models. Many would name a teacher when asked about their role models whereas some teachers would state a movie when asked about their inspiration. There are, in fact, some good movies where considerable ink was spilled on great teachers, and more than one great mind who acknowledge credit to their teachers. Famous Oprah Winfrey¹ says: “For every one of us that succeeds, it [i]s because there [i]s somebody there to show you the way out. The light does n[o]t always necessarily have to be in your family; for me it was teachers and school”².

It is true that credit goes to teachers on many occasions. Many people confess that teachers made the difference in their lives. These teachers are inspirational icons for many learners and novice teachers. Goodwyn³, for example, thinks they are the strongest and most significant role models when it comes to displaying skills, creativity, art, and perseverance. A sameness of view is found in the words of Lopez⁴ who considers movies as a powerful learning tool with actual depiction of some of the talents teaching demands and the hardships it presents. Eventually, watching good teachers, in reality or in films, provides for vicarious experience which serves self-development, auto-evaluation, and reflection⁵. Movies such as *Beyond the Blackboard*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *Freedom Writers*⁶ reveal a pattern: they are a source of both reflection and inspiration to many teachers worldwide. One has only to go through teachers’ feedback of such movies to confirm that pattern.

There is no doubt that teachers have a lot to learn from each other⁷ whether through movies, observation, oral or written exchange of experiences. Teaching is clothed with sharing and showing. However, the movies, like fiction, might be criticised for a couple of features like exaggeration and being untrue to real happenings. About that, Cooper and Ryan confirm: “These images of teaching can prepare us for certain aspects of teaching and school life. We need to remember, however, that books, films, and television tend to portray school life at its extremes, featuring heightened situations well beyond the typical experiences of most teachers. The true drama of teaching is quiet, long term, and terribly real”⁸.

With this in mind, this work will analyse five movies using Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (SLT), humanistic principles, and learning differentiation or personalisation. This work proposes that some good teaching practices can be acquired through modelling and observation and that good teachers are role models to their observers, and aims to find out whether great teachers use humanism and differentiation in their instruction methods.

2- Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, abbreviated as SLT, is a cognitive-behaviouristic theory that explains how people learn through modelling. It was founded by Albert Bandura, a Canadian Psychologist born in 1925. After a series of experiments he conducted between 1961 and 1963, Bandura put forward that people observe, encode, consider consequences, identify to, compare, and imitate or repeat what they observed, not automatically though⁹. This is why it is a theory of observational learning, i.e. humans learn by observing others’ behaviour then doing the same or close. To set it in Bandura’s words, “most of the behaviours that people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example”¹⁰. Bandura also posited that between the behaviour observation and its imitation, some cognitive

mediation occurs in the mind which is why it is not an obligation that the imitation happens inevitably, happens immediately, or happens blindly. He named four cognitive mediational processes: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation¹¹. These cognitive stages or factors justify why not all observed behaviour is copied. Thus, observing great teachers or having them does not guarantee identifying to them or becoming like them, just like being bullied at school does not essentially make the victim become a bully. According to Bandura, for a certain behaviour to be replicated, it needs first to be noticed. The observer has to: pay attention to the behaviour, remember it, has the capacity and potential to reproduce it, then be motivated to repeat it¹².

“Individuals that are observed are called models”¹³ from which stems learning through modelling or demonstration. However, SLT cannot explain all human behaviour, and it has been criticised for that. Humans can have control over their behaviour, can adjust and modify it, as well as choose how to react and what to do¹⁴. This criticism led Bandura to rectify his theory in 1986, calling it Social Cognitive Theory, SCT¹⁵. Also, the recent discovery of mirror neurons helped confirm learning by modelling as it provides biological evidence for imitation¹⁶. Mirror neurons shoot when “the animal does something itself, and if it observes the action being done by another”¹⁷. This neurological basis is another proof for observational learning and for why this theory is used in this paper.

To put it in plain words, all good teaching is not learnt through modelling and demonstration but both ways remain valid. Great teaching, or at least part of its practices, can be acquired through modelling like the rest of human behaviour.

3- Humanism

Humanism is an educational approach that focuses on the learners’ potential and the affective atmosphere without neglecting the cognitive one. The affective-humanistic approach is one where the “class atmosphere is viewed as more important than materials or methods”¹⁸. For Gertrude Moskowitz, author of *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom*, humanistic language instruction relates to fulfilling one’s full potential, to treating the learner holistically, taking into consideration all their human aspects not just the linguistic one¹⁹, which is why humanistic methodologies tend to focus more on psychological rather than on linguistic directives. In brief, humanism, as put by Earl Stevick, is a system where human interests and potentials rule²⁰.

The highlight of humanistic education and its core are learners, their feelings, thoughts, and potential²¹. It cares about learners, tolerates their errors, encourages their creativity, pushes the teacher to know the students, to form good relationships with them, and to help them progress²². This type of education involves the whole person in the learning process not just their cognition or behaviour; that is, it is not solely about transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the learner²³. It is, indeed, about putting the learner at the centre of his learning, studying her/his needs, then answering them which eventually leads to learning personalisation.

4- Personalisation of Learning

Personalisation of learning, also called individualisation or differentiation of learning, is a fledgling pole of research. It is a method of teaching that revolves around the learners’ needs; that is, it is a learner-centred method. The thesis of personalisation, Dr. Bob Banks, a

teacher, researcher, and educational consultant, maintains, is: “that everyone is different and has different needs”²⁴.

There are people of varied colours, identities, values, and goals; similarly, there are teachers and learners of “all shapes and sizes, with a wide range of different personalities, beliefs and ways of working”²⁵. Those differences are the crux, heart, and motive of learning individualisation. The latter is a teaching method that cares about learners’ needs, takes them into consideration while teaching, and is adapted totally to them in terms of pace, way, and materials of learning²⁶. It is in contrast with the one-size-fits-all teaching and classroom which is how most traditional teaching was conducted, whereas today’s globalised world turned school and the classroom global with unique individuals, and this requires new methods²⁷. Thus, the individual needs of learners are behind the practice of adjusting means, teaching and assessment techniques, curriculums, and the classroom atmosphere²⁸. The new personalised method is also opposed to lockstep teaching which is defined as: “A pattern of teaching in which all pupils move forward at approximately the same rate, carrying out the same tasks and procedures at the same time—like soldiers marching together”²⁹.

Even learners who have almost the same needs, personalities, and learning styles would probably prefer to not march through learning the same way; it is not merely a matter of preferences and interests but mostly one of benefit meaning that students would benefit more from tailored instruction³⁰. Differentiating learning allows learners to grasp the same point from varied perspectives and through more than one medium; it allows them to teach, help, and evaluate each other. Besides, it allows them to explore, naturalise, and consolidate the learning styles and strategies they are not used to. Therefore, differentiated instruction is “responsive and proactive” unlike the standardised teaching that is “prescriptive and reactive”³¹. That is, instruction is to respond to learners’ needs, and it does not follow one inflexible prescription or plan; it is rather discerning of the differences and cautious to them. For this, Carol Ann Tomlinson (1995, 1999)³², who has been researching personalisation since the 1990s, suggested a framework for differentiated instruction. Tomlinson’s Framework mentions that instruction ought to be framed and guided by learners’ academic readiness, interests, and learner profiles³³. Furthermore, she elucidates how learning content, processes, and products may be modified so as to fulfil needs³⁴.

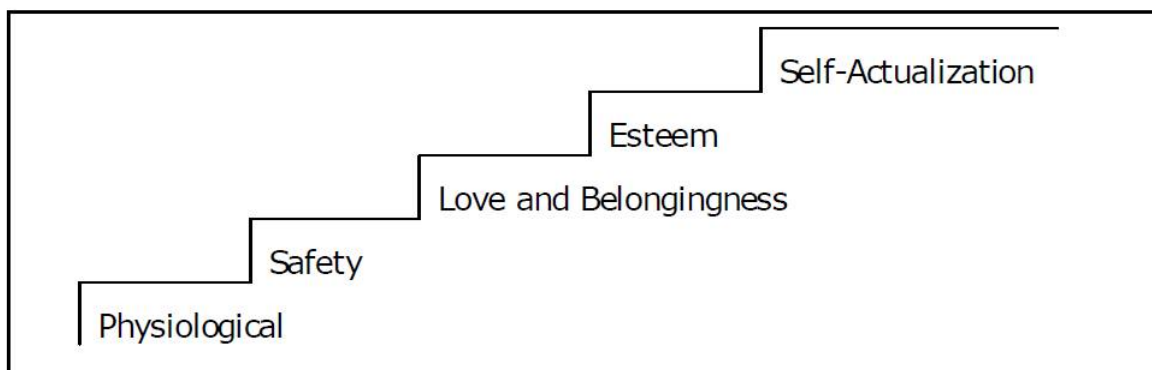
General education teachers know how time-consuming and effortful it could be to adapt instruction to learners’ diverse profiles. Despite its numerous advantages, turning a teacher-centred class into one where the learner is the centre through an individualised teaching-learning process is highly-demanding, laborious, and rigorous³⁵. One justification for this is that a thorough implementation of differentiation would radically metamorphose not only teaching techniques but also thoughts and beliefs about teaching and learning³⁶. It would require an approach-revolution to convince teachers and learners that it is worth trying, the teachers who have been playing the role of ‘wise on the stage’ for decades, and the learners who are so used to being the guest in the nest that they are most probably unwilling to leave that comfort zone and assume the responsibility of their learning. Other challenges that might turn the application of differentiated instruction difficult are: “how to deal with state and national standards”, time, and resources³⁷.

From another side, it is not quite possible to personalise teaching and learning without knowing learners. A teacher must deeply know their students not only be superficially acquainted with them³⁸. Part of knowing them encompasses knowing their needs. Gorham et al. suggest that every student has the following basic academic needs:

- 1- Each student needs to have an understanding of instructional goals and objectives.
- 2- Instruction should match the students' cognitive development, potential, and learning styles.
- 3- The need or desire to be active participants in the learning process.
- 4- The need to see how the content relates to their lives and to pursue interests of their own.
- 5- The need to experience success in the classroom.³⁹

In reference to the last need, the authors expound that students are supposed to have more successes than failures at school; they also write that: "If all they experience is failure then our system is failing them"⁴⁰. Success in the classroom can be conjoined with Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualisation which is: "[T]he need to use our abilities, potentials, skills, and talents to achieve and be all that we can be. For example, a good teacher makes good students, and then good students make us better teachers"⁴¹. Maslow (1908-1970), an American psychologist and the founder of humanistic psychology, explains it by giving the following examples: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself"⁴². That is, if there is something that a person can do, they will not feel self-actualised till they do it which is why self-actualisation is generally understood as the full use of potentials and talents and the full satisfaction of needs⁴³. This is why Maslow claims that learning cannot take place unless the preceding needs are satisfied and also why self-actualisation is on top of the Hierarchy of Needs (Figure N°1). The latter is sometimes exhibited in a pyramid and known by the name of the Pyramid of Needs. The basic needs like food and sleep are found at the bottom of the pyramid, then comes, in this respective order, the need for safety, the need for love and belonging, self-esteem needs, cognitive needs like thinking and learning, aesthetic needs, and last self-fulfilment needs. The first four needs are known as survival needs.

Figure N°1. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Source: Maslow, A. (1970), *Motivation and Personality*, Harper & Row.

Ultimately, coming to know learners and their needs well enough as the process of personalisation demands is not an easy task. Both educators and researchers know that there

are no definite truths when it comes to the possible learner profiles. Willingham, for example, admits that: “It would be wonderful if scientists had identified categories of students along with varieties of instruction best suited to each category, but after a great deal of effort, they have not found such types, and I, like many others, suspect they don’t exist. I would advise teachers to treat students differently on the basis of the teacher’s experience with each student and to remain alert for what works. When differentiating among students, craft knowledge trumps science”⁴⁴.

In truth, teaching is a job of innovation, a work of trial and error where we seldom meet the same learner’s features and group’s specificities more than once per career⁴⁵. For example, there is always a student or class that is too special a teacher knows s/he will not get to encounter their similar again; likewise, every student is special in a certain way which makes them unmatched. Not just that, society and the world are shifting, and learners are part of it⁴⁶. Each learner, or at least each bloc of learners has their own vision to things; each of them has their own interaction with and effect on others⁴⁷. On the long run, some of those effects might change, some of what has been learnt will be forgotten like “what happened on a particular date in history, or how to conjugate a French verb”, but the needs Maslow theorised about and how a certain teacher responded to them will not⁴⁸. Those needs are everlasting and teachers’ contribution to their fulfilment has a life-long mark and significance. Hurt et al. mention some of the repercussions of teachers’ assistance of learners’ needs in the following: “At the very minimum, we may thwart the possibility of interpersonal needs interfering with the satisfaction of academic needs, improve communication, and promote interpersonal solidarity. At the same time, we also may be assisting our students in satisfying interpersonal needs when classrooms, for them, have long been a thing of the past”⁴⁹.

To synthesise, learning happens successfully when learners’ survival needs are being met. Likewise, the healthy professional relationships teachers build with their students facilitate learning, help satisfy interpersonal needs for some learners, and offer some of them a dose of safety and self-esteem. In basic terms, they could constitute a gateway to learning personalisation because they enable teachers to know their students better; plus, they aid learners with trusting their teachers and the methods they use.

5- Role Models

The aim of this section is to stretch out this research paper and to apply the previous theories. The movies to be discussed subsequently are based on real stories and have inspired this paper as they have done to many teachers and students. They are considered by many teachers and viewers as role models. The five movie teachers will be studied through the lens of SLT. In many ways, they prove it right meaning that other teachers can learn from their example what makes a teacher great. Emphasis in the coming analyses will be on humanistic teaching practices and on learning personalisation. The order in which the movies appear is totally random.

5.1. Mona Lisa Smile

Teachers get to meet many new people over their lives, but as many as they know, there is always a bigger number of the ones who know them. “Whether we like it or not, we teachers are ‘known’ by many more people than we know, and often our character is invented

and then described to others by children; these others then have an annoying habit of forming indiscriminate opinions about us”⁵⁰.

People tell stories of their teachers, mostly if they are great. Books are written and movies are made of their lives and impact. It is the case of *Mona Lisa Smile*, a movie that tells “the story of a woman who challenged the minds of the brightest students in the country to open themselves to a different idea and go on a journey they never imagined”⁵¹. In this 2003 movie, Julia Roberts plays the role of the progressive art history teacher Katherine Watson who starts working in Wellesley College for women in 1953.

Like many of the eye-opening teachers, her students first misunderstand her as she challenges their habits and beliefs⁵². Later though, she succeeds at influencing how they see art, tradition, and their role in society. She does it through humanistic techniques as she starts caring for her students and trying to know them better. The first time she teaches them, she discovers that they already master everything on the syllabus which leads her to revamp it. She puts aside the ready-made content and designs what suits her students’ advanced level. In other words, she catered content and her method to the needs of her students which is, in other terms, the personalisation of learning.

The change she causes is clearly seen in Betty Warren, one of Katherine’s students who happens to be the editor of the college magazine. She keeps writing in a bad and challenging tone about her teacher but at the end, she narrates: “My teacher, Katherine Watson, lived by her own definition, and would not compromise that. Not even for Wellesley. I dedicate this, my last editorial, to an extraordinary woman who lived by example and compelled us all to see the world through new eyes. By the time you read this, she'll be sailing to Europe, where I know she'll find new walls to break down and new ideas to replace them with. I've heard her called a quitter for leaving, an aimless wanderer. But not all who wander are aimless. Especially not those who seek truth beyond tradition; beyond definition; beyond the image. We'll never forget you”⁵³. Living by example is another way to refer to SLT. Cahyani⁵⁴ observes that the alteration she causes in her students’ lives becomes clearer by the end as some of her students end up following her model. The film depicts her humanistic teaching and its impact on her class, how she cared for her students even outside the classroom, how she helped them on both the academic and personal levels, and how she adapted her method to their personalities.

By the end of the first year, Teacher Watson decides to leave to Europe. She takes the car from the campus to the port; meanwhile, her students follow her on bicycles to show their gratitude and their wish for her to stay. Indeed, the moment of her departure turned out to be a moment of acknowledgement from all her students.

5.2. Freedom Writers

This 2007 movie portrays an inspiring real story of teaching about Erin Gruwell (1969-) and her class of 1994. Room 203, high school, Long Beach, South California, was a melting pot for different races and their issues like racial segregation, gang tension, poverty, delinquency, and drugs. The students of that room had different needs and expectations from school. On the onset, they were thought to be unteachable, impossible to handle, and unable to succeed at school. Their former teachers, the school staff, their parents, and the students themselves believed they cannot make it up to a degree, college, or even to their next

birthday. Their neighborhoods were fraught with crimes and many of them had survived or escaped deadly shots. Erin illustrated this when she wrote: “When I asked one of my freshmen if he thought he’d graduate, he said. “Graduate? [...] I don’t even know if I [wi]ll make it to my sixteenth birthday!” To some of these kids, death seems more real than a diploma”⁵⁵.

Under this umbrella of class that is made up of African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Whites, Hillary Swank, who featured Ms. Gruwell (Figure N°2), learns to teach, to excel in teaching her at-risk students English, writing, literature, and the art of tolerance and cohabitation. Her method was humanistic as well as personalised for the needs of her students. Before teaching them, she tried to know and to involve them. Hence, she used texts written by people who suffered and struggled like her students such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Zlata⁵⁶'s Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo*. She showed her students how others, who went through the same, managed to keep up their humanity and kindness. She even invited Zlata to talk to her students. This way, she applied modelling and demonstration to improve her students' behaviour and lives. Moreover, in order to know, understand, and teach them, she gave each student a notebook and asked them to write their journals. Those diaries, with texts from Erin, were organised into a teaching memoir: *The Freedom Writers Diary* (2006). She read her learners' entries regularly and structured her teaching activities based on them. This way, she also succeeded as building sound relationships with her students.

Figure N°2. Erin Gruwell



Source: freedomwritersfoundation.org

The students called themselves “Freedom Writers” after the Freedom Riders, the 1960s Civil Rights activists⁵⁷. As a result, the book is a collection of the students’ journal entries, about their teen lives and learning journey with Ms. G, as some of her students call her. With the help of their remarkable teacher, they all graduated from high school and co-authored the book with her.

Erin Gruwell is also the writer of other books like *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers* (2008). Reading these books, one discovers, for instance, that Ms. G approves the idea that “first impressions are so important”⁵⁸. Also, she made tolerance the guideline of her curriculum in multiracial classes⁵⁹, which is purely humanistic. There is, indeed, a myriad of teaching qualities one can learn through her example. Lopez illustrates: “Gruwell is faced with seemingly impossible barriers and attitudes from the students and yet she demonstrates multiple leadership qualities such as passion, perseverance, resilience, creative thinking, having a vision and indestructible optimism”⁶⁰. All these are part and parcel of humanistic teaching.

These characteristics as well as the Freedom Writers story have appeared in some books and online reviews. Many writers thought they are worth a section in their books like Partin⁶¹ who provided its synopsis on page 343. He also analysed Erin’s teaching devices like the student journal, weighing that it is a potent technique to improve writing, induce reflection, and boost creativity⁶², all skills that the modern world and education necessitate.

Today, the Freedom Writers Foundation, a non-profit organisation, whose president is Erin Gruwell, carries on to give assistance to many unprivileged students around the United States of America. It takes “the kids nobody else wants”⁶³ and helps them succeed in school. Moreover, it serves as inspiration and motivation to tired teachers and hopeless students. It is, indeed, another confirmation that teaching demands role models. Great teachers encourage and motivate their observers both directly and indirectly through the effect of their behaviour; they epitomise possibility and hope, and they demonstrate techniques that other teachers can replicate.

5.3. The Ron Clark Story

Ron L. Clark (1972-) has been teaching since 1995 in North Carolina and New York City. He is the founder of the Ron Clark Academy, a private school in Atlanta, Georgia⁶⁴. Like Erin Gruwell, he taught struggling students at elementary school in Harlem, New York. He is the writer of *The Essential 55: An Award-Winning Educator’s Rules for Discovering the Successful Student in Every Child*, a book where he sets 55 rules for teachers’ and students’ use, rules like: “Make eye contact [...] respect others’ ideas and opinions [...] always be honest” and “be the best person you can be”⁶⁵. A close scrutiny of these principles reveals that Mr. Clark is another humanistic teacher who was more or less compelled by his learners’ needs to plan instruction according to his new learners’ pace, level, and personalities.

His first year in Harlem was made into a 2006 movie: *The Ron Clark Story*, starring Matthew Perry as Mr. Clark. After some years of teaching, the real Ron Clark (Figure N°3) started traveling around the U.S., he met many teachers and educators, spoke to them, and noticed similarities. This allowed him to come up with a list of qualities that altogether make up eleven characteristics of teacher excellence. They are: enthusiasm, adventure, creativity, reflection, balance, compassion, confidence, humor, common sense, appreciation, and

resilience⁶⁶. For a second time, he made a list of traits that are fundamental to humanistic education.

Watching the Ron Clark Story invokes Partin's words as he says: "Teaching should be more than just a job. It is a profession and a career. It is a long-term commitment to doing your best to help young people blossom intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally. It is a position of incredible importance; teachers with passion and compassion can profoundly influence their students' lives. At the worst, teachers also have the power to discourage, humiliate, and crush their students' spirit"⁶⁷. Teachers like Ron Clark do not just influence their learners but also other teachers. Influencing can be taken as a synonym of impacting which leads to shaping and following, i.e. modelling.

Figure N°3. Matthew Perry on the Left with Ron Clark on the Right



Source: googleimages.com

The movie shows how Clark is committed to succeeding his job, how passionate he is about helping his students. He modified his teaching method, techniques, and content because his learners were not responding to his usual techniques. He differentiated instruction which earned him the title of Year 2000 Outstanding Teacher. Besides, Oprah Winfrey interviewed him and later called him her "First Phenomenal Man"⁶⁸ for all the positive change he caused in his learners and colleagues. By the end, he managed to get the best out of each one of them despite their personal and school problems which he helped through. He also managed to be a role model and inspiration to his colleagues and other American teachers.

5.4. Dead Poets Society

This is a film about another great inspirational teacher whose method one would wish to bottle and sell. This 1989 movie depicts teacher John Keating, acted by the late Robin Williams (Figure N°4), as he inspires his students through poetry and literature with his unorthodox approach to teaching that sums up in his widely-quoted: "Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary"⁶⁹. He keeps modelling to them how to see and live life. He allows them the opportunity to teach each other and to share their views freely. In year 1959, he was already ahead of his time with his democratic, collaborative, personalised,

and learner-centred classroom method. John Keating teaches the boys to think critically of authority and to question the status quo⁷⁰.

Dead Poets Society was written by Tom Schulman, apparently “based on his experiences at the Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, Tennessee, particularly with his inspirational teacher Samuel Pickering”⁷¹. This movie touched many lives, influencing some to become teachers⁷², again proving SLT right. It shares many messages but mostly that: “There’s a difference between learning how to teach, and how to be a teacher. And Robin Williams as Mr. Keating taught us a lot about being a teacher”⁷³. Being fully present in teaching, passionate, enthusiastic, and caring is what made Mr. Keating different and bright. It made him a humanistic teacher who taught others by example, by modelling, and by demonstration. Nowadays, he is an inspiration and a role model to many teachers.

Figure N°4. Robin Williams, as John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*, Teaching His Students



Source: googleimages.com

Along the movie events, many students are transformed. However, things get complicated and the story reaches a climax when one student commits suicide after being forced by his father to leave Welton Academy in order to join a military one. Mr. Keating is blamed for the suicide and is fired, but when he comes back to collect his stuff from the classroom, the boys tell the truth: that the suicide was not his fault. They stand on their desks and salute him using Walt Whitman’s words: “O Captain! my Captain!”⁷⁴. Mr. Keating’s face changes showing how touched he is.

Partin considers this movie as a source of some unforgettable quotes such as: “Life is a play and you may contribute one verse. What will it be?”⁷⁵. This movie can be seen as a tribute to all great teachers who inculcate perseverance and enthusiasm in a humanistic method like Mr. Keating did. Using literature, poetry, caring, smiling, involving, and other humanistic means, Mr. Keating kindles and mobilises his students’ interests and potentials⁷⁶.

He reminds both teachers and students of some important yet neglected skills like feeling, thinking for themselves, supporting each other, working hard for their dreams, getting rid of the spread negativity and despair, and hoping. About these skills, Rudell Beach says: “In all our talk today about testing and standards and achievement, we sometimes overlook these “softer” life skills that children need for success. These are the skills that help them understand their emotions, cultivate empathy, maintain healthy relationships, and feel worthy of love and capable of action. These skills and mindsets are the foundation for healthy living and thriving”⁷⁷. They are, correspondingly, an underpinning for humanistic education.

Something else to underline is that Mr. Keating’s capital was the teacher-learner relationship he nurtured through caring for and sharing with his students. Matter of fact, people learn better when they like it, a humanistic realisation upon which Mr. Keating functioned. Instead of compelling his class to learning, he “managed to turn knowledge into something they desired—by connecting it to their primal interests”⁷⁸. He avoided the practices of traditional teaching where the instructor is the all-knower and learners, generally, passive listeners, liberating his students’ thinking minds and productive skills which turned them into active participants in the learning process. To draw an analogy, Lujan (2011) tells about his Global Studies teacher Sara Wolf: “Ms. Sara got more creative. She made us tell the class about our personal beliefs and then represent them in a painting. This exercise taught us that though we were all from different cultures and religions, each of us is a unique person free from any label”⁷⁹. This is quite similar to what Mr. Keating did with his students’ needs. However, where Ms. Sara used painting, Mr. Keating used poetry whereas Ms. Erin Gruwell employed journals and other classroom activities. The similarity lies in the end state: all three teachers were trying to get the best out of their students, to awaken their passion, to exploit in their capacities and needs, to let them note that though they share akin circumstances, each one is unique, to harmonise their seeming differences, thus, to lead them to respect each other’s individuality. They succeeded at engaging their initially-disengaged students by making learning significant and relevant to them which is another humanistic notion.

Finally, it seems that it is common for good teachers to personalise learning, to pay attention to students’ individuality and to make the most of it.

5.5. Beyond the Blackboard

By now, it is a truism that one of the best gifts a school experience might offer is a really good teacher. *Beyond the Blackboard* is a movie that offers the experience of such a teacher: Mrs. Stacey Bess (Figure N°5). She is a contemporary American teacher and an award-winning educator. For eleven years, she taught children in need in a no name school, a classroom in a shelter for homeless people. When she first arrived there, she found no equipment, no desks, no books, and very little support from the school board and parents. Watching her puzzled in front of such a situation and trustless children, one can only wonder: what can she do? And if it were me, what would I do?

It is hard to imagine that she will paint the classroom by herself, buy materials, and bring her own resources to turn that no name place into a real classroom. It is even harder to imagine that she will turn a cold atmosphere that does not encourage learning nor trust teachers into a warm one where children actually learn, grow, respect, and trust. She made use of humanistic techniques where the teacher feels for her learners and invests in them. For

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instance, when kids asked: why learn? She replied that because “If you know it, it is yours”⁸⁰. Knowing that they owned very little being poor and homeless, she probably realised that giving them pieces of knowledge, letting them feel they own their learning, they own what they learn will empower and motivate them as well as compensate for their lack of material resources. This way, she basically satisfied their safety, belonging, and self-esteem needs (See Figure N°1) which enabled them to focus on their cognitive or learning needs. Bongay shares an analogous view: “Her bound, determination and strength helped her did her job so well that she did not only teach her children academics but also important values that influenced them to be a better person. It is good to see how Ms. Stacey’s teaching and CARE for her adorable children makes them thrive and yearn to learn”⁸¹. In fact, this is another facet for humanistic education and its tenets: caring, sharing, motivating, and encouraging creativity.

Figure N°5. Stacey Bess on the Left with Actor Emily VanCamp who Acted Her



Source: staceybess.com

Ms. Stacey went *beyond the blackboard* in finding resources to teach her students. She used the help of Nelson, a homeless residing in the same shelter with the kids. As a painter, he taught the kids drawing, painting, and self-expression through art. The kids liked it and got motivated to come to school. She also noticed the potentials her students had and individualised tasks for them accordingly. For instance, she discovered the leadership skills of Danny, one of her students, so she gave him the leader role. It turned out to be the role that Danny’s good side needed to thrive as a responsible protective learner. Furthermore, she kept trying to get material support from the school board to her class. Even the parents who gave

little interest in their children's education, when they started meeting her regularly and noticing her constant care, they gave in and started believing in her but mostly in their children's education. Consequently, she succeeded at involving them in their children's schooling. She even accommodated one girl in her house when her father had to move away from the shelter.

Stacey Bess chronicles her story and those of her students in an inspiring touching book. She writes in the memoir of her teaching in the homeless shelter about her students and the transformation that takes place once someone chooses to care, to do their work passionately, and to find the humanity in teaching. The 2011 movie *Beyond the Blackboard* is based on the real stories that the book tells, "stories of love and anger, of fear warmed by triumph, of loss tinged with hope. They are stories you will never forget"⁸². Mrs. Stacey, like the previous model teachers, has been an inspiration and an example to many colleagues and teachers.

In the book, there are many interesting passages. One of them reads: "We never know who is watching; we never know when what we have to give might meet another's need. No matter how simple the act may seem, we may never get another opportunity to touch someone's life"⁸³. These words evoke, again, personalisation and push teachers to take into consideration their learners' needs. Her students were very grateful. They gave her the little they had as gifts "in return for her teaching and love"⁸⁴. Seemingly, she role-modelled it for them through her gratitude for the opportunity to be their outstanding teacher. She chose to not leave, to make a difference, and she did through her humanistic, personalised, and learner-centred way.

6- Characteristics of Great Teaching

These five inspiring teachers reveal some secrets about teaching. All of them are teachers who demonstrated and employed humanistic education methods and techniques. It is probable that they did it spontaneously and that they did not necessarily stick to theory, but they succeeded in its practice and in establishing warm professional and human bonds with their learners. Relationships are the basic component of the classroom psychological atmosphere and they are essential to great teaching⁸⁵. A teacher does not become great by only delivering impeccable content coldly, but also by caring about learners and their learning which is what the five movie teachers did. Adams and Ross⁸⁶ explain that a working relationship infers not just caring about learners but caring enough to help them rise and attain their expectations. The five role models display that good teaching translates into being capable of helping students learn as well as challenging and rising their self-expectations.

Erin Gruwell and the others confirm that there is not just one way to be a good teacher, and that it does not always take years of teaching to become a good teacher. The five teachers show us that being a good teacher encapsulates talent, mastery of subject matter, knowledge of the science of teaching, and courage. Great teaching is courageous, creative, and reflective practice, always developing and seeking to innovate instead of taking things for granted, seeking to try novel techniques, and daring to delve into newness and individualities. In his inspiring book: *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Parker Palmer puts such issues under the microscope. He stipulates that teaching is a heartfelt job and that many teachers choose it

because of their love for people or a certain subject matter⁸⁷; many others choose it thanks to a role model teacher they had.

On another hand, a great teacher is a professional one, one who does not only rely on talent or intelligence, but someone who works hard each day, who dares to apply what they believe is right for learners or what is new, who loves what they do and who cares for learners. Effective teachers demonstrate both the ability to well-connect with students personally and the ability of material organisation and coherent planning so as to facilitate learning⁸⁸.

Good teachers work towards knowing their students' personalities, their needs and preferences, their learning styles and strategies, which allow them to present learning in ways that suit the learners, i.e. to personalise. Great teaching is personalised for the individual needs of learners. It is, as show the methods of the five studied models, eclectic but with a heavy load of humanistic principles like caring, encouraging, motivating, boosting creativity, investing in potential, teaching autonomy and responsibility, making the learner active, and making learning significant.

7- Conclusion

By combining scientific theories with the art in teacher movies, this work endeavoured to explore the effectiveness of role models in becoming a great teacher and the synergy between great teaching and role modelling. Based on SLT, it has been found that having a role model to follow could be effective, maybe even compulsory to learning how to teach. Observing, encoding, then identifying with the modelled practices could constitute one way to learn to teach well.

The five analyses showed overall that their good teaching is humanistic and personalised. The five great teachers all proved to be caring about students both personally and academically, willing to know them, brave enough to try new things, innovative, creative, and goal-oriented. Last but not least, based on the collective indication of their students and watchers, all five teachers serve as role models to many learners, teachers, and would-be teachers.

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