From the Students’ Corner

Why Teach? One Dental Student’s Views from Both Sides of the Lectern

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I entered New York University College of Dentistry with a different perspective from most other dental students. Dentistry is a second career for me. I taught public school for six years before hearing the call of dentistry—four years in elementary education and two years teaching high school biology. Those six years of teaching experience “behind the lectern” combined with three years of learning as a dental student facing the lectern have given me a unique perspective on dental education and distinctive insights into one’s motivation to teach.

My Background

After completing my bachelor’s degree with a major in biology and a minor concentration in music, I was faced with what may have been my first bona fide decision: what was I going to do with the rest of my life? I would imagine that most recent college graduates have similar experiences when faced with a myriad of job and professional opportunities and great pressure when choosing the road that will lead to lifetime professional fulfillment. Since most Americans spend the majority of their weekdays on the job, the decisions we make about our careers are just as important as the decisions we make regarding spouses or lifetime partners.

Not knowing exactly where I wanted to go with my biology degree, I chose the only logical path: continue my education. I knew how to be a student, so it made total sense. I completed my master of education degree and decided to give teaching a try. I was good at being a student, so I assumed I’d also be good at being a teacher! Teaching seemed a truly innate field for me. I spent two years full-time working on my master’s degree, studying educational theory and psychology, and enthusiastically entered the classroom to teach. Six years later, I look back on my years of teaching as a great leadership building experience, the pathway to better parenting, a canvas for soul searching, and the springboard that projected me fully into my true calling—dentistry.

I have recently begun my final year of dental school. I’m a bit weary and worn around the edges from three rigorous years of studying anatomy, physiology, pathology, and all branches of dentistry; honing newly acquired hand skills; working in half-millimeter increments; learning to see upside down and backwards with a mirror; and losing all orientation of left and right. I’m downright tired, to be frank! All fatigue aside, I’m confident that dentistry is the right professional choice for me, and hindsight allows me to see how prior teaching experience has been an asset as well as a motivation to eventually return to the classroom.

Behind the Lectern: The Teacher’s Perspective

There were many reasons for my decision to teach. I enjoy interacting with people and value interpersonal relationships. I appreciate my former teachers and their impact on my life and education. I had truly remarkable educational experiences from kindergarten through college. I relish those “light bulb” moments and feel great satisfaction enabling another to reach that point. I value education and never want to stop learning myself.

One of my greatest joys in teaching was spending time getting to know a different generation of students. This allowed me to keep in touch with what was going on in the world of technology, music, popular
culture, and fashion, among other areas, and to keep an open mind about different cultures and viewpoints. Within my classroom, I was an active promoter of diversity, tolerance, and cultural appreciation.

As a teacher, I consistently participated in organizations and leadership opportunities that enhanced my knowledge and skills. I have always been very involved in school activities. As far back as I can remember, I was in this club or that group, this sport or that academic competition, taking this guitar class or that piano lesson. Being an active participant keeps focus on the bigger picture and minimizes excessive preoccupation with the issues of the day.

Teaching requires maintaining current knowledge of the subject matter, which promotes better understanding and perspective as views and innovations change. This sparks creativity, realization, and possibly even a new invention.

Finally, I find great fulfillment in sharing my love of and enthusiasm for a subject with the next generation. Dental students are merely a few years away from becoming doctors and colleagues to their faculty members. As teachers relate to students with this perspective in mind (i.e., “I’m working with a future colleague”), the relationship is fully primed for camaraderie in the future.

Before the Lectern: The Student’s Perspective

Every student can recall teachers who have influenced them in some positive way. My most treasured memories of being in school are those in which I connected with a teacher on a personal level. I often pushed myself to greater success when expectations were heightened by a personal connection with a teacher or mentor. Of course, not every teacher will deeply connect with every student, which is why a diverse teaching population should match the diverse student population.

In my experience as a student teaching assistant in dental school, I have realized that teaching a subject is one of the best ways to reinforce the information you have learned about it. I believe this concept could be the center of dental school curriculum in certain areas rather than memorizing and regurgitating information on multiple-choice exams. Returning to the underlying principles of any oral health topic after having practical experience helping other students learn concepts and techniques sheds new light on the subject because of the deeper understanding that often emerges from the teaching process.

Leadership opportunities as a student also foster the desire to teach. Good leaders inspire others to lead. And effective teachers are good leaders. As a student leader, I have met many dental students, dental school faculty, and dental school administrators from across the country. Networking and collaboration spark a flame that spreads like wildfire. I see teaching as a collaboration that energizes knowledge.

I have participated in organized dentistry through the American Student Dental Association and the American Dental Education Association. Through this involvement, I have learned of the teaching shortage that dental schools are currently facing. The cost of dental school tuition is greatly increasing each year, causing students to become more in debt with larger student loans. This discourages recent graduates from returning to teach because pay for dental school faculty is significantly less than that of private practitioners. In addition, most dental students chose to attend dental school because they want to practice dentistry! Somehow, teaching must be attractive to practitioners. I have heard from many faculty members that they chose to teach because private practice had become monotonous and they needed some intellectual stimulation. If student teaching was more prevalent in dental school curriculum, I believe that students would be more energized about returning to the classroom to teach because they would have experienced first-hand the excitement and rewards of helping others learn. In addition, students would be shaped into leaders of the profession and take a vested interest in protecting dental education.

Going Forward

I most certainly see myself returning to the classroom in some facet of dental education, whether it is lecturing, serving as a preclinical or clinical faculty member, or working in administration. I value and want to protect the future of dentistry and will work to actively recruit good teachers with experience and desire to do the same. My journey along the winding road to dentistry, with a pit stop in education, has given me a unique perspective, for which I am truly grateful. I plan on giving back as a teacher to the profession that has given me so much.