



# My Most Important Teaching Tool

► **Louis Schmier**, professor of history, Valdosta State University

**A**s I walked in the crisp morning air, several things were on my mind. Preparing to present a daylong workshop on creating a motivating classroom, I began thinking about a student journal I had recently read. The journal revealed that a professor in another department sees things through the eyes of a self-proclaimed “weeder outer” rather than through the lens of a nurturer. And my mind also pondered a question that had been posed to me by a professor from another institution. “Dr. Schmier,” she asked, “what is your most important pedagogical tool?”

“That’s it!” I exclaimed in a eureka moment on the back leg of my power walk. I rushed into the house, grabbed a cup of steaming coffee, and began writing the answer to her question. “You asked what my most important teaching tool is? Well, it’s me. I have found that I cannot escape the power of my intentions.” After all, it’s our intentions that set our priorities, marshal our resolve, and lay in our course of action. And who I am is the result of the clear, positive, and empowering priorities and resolve nourished by my vision.

My intentions are rooted in my two fundamental outlooks on life, in general, and on each student, in particular. First, when I beat cancer four years ago and survived a cerebral hemorrhage last year, I consciously decided that surviving was not enough for me. I decided I was going to thrive as well. Second, I am a people person—I am enthralled by students. I go on campus

determined to improve and honor the lives of ordinary students as anything but ordinary. That is the inseparable linkage between my philosophy of life, my celebration of each student, my vision of my mission, and my teaching methods. I teach each student with conscious and intended unconditional, unlimited, and unending faith, hope, belief, kindness, awareness, newness, challenge, commitment, dedication, perseverance, otherness, and empathy. My vision is to be the person who is there to help them become who and what each is capable of becoming.

For me there are seven key elements of my vision that guide whatever it is I do, in and out of class:

1. The classroom is like my garden. There is nothing that is ever ugly in it. If it is capable of blooming, it stays. Likewise, I believe that there is good, ability, and potential in *every* student. And, that is worth believing. I’ve never known a student who wasn’t worth the trouble and effort required to make her or his life whatever it could possibly be. I have never found that a student is a headache as long as I keep loving, having faith in, believing in, and having hope for that student, and if I am helping her or him to become the person she or he is capable of becoming. So, my head never aches when I am supporting, encouraging, or comforting a student.
2. I know I must know and believe that I have the therapeutic power to be that nurturing person in a student’s life.
3. I know that a student’s sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in a classroom provides the scaffolding for deep learning beyond grade getting.
4. I believe every student comes on campus with a desire to learn, though she or he may not know how to do it.
5. I believe that students will be more responsive and motivated to learn when I create a safe, trusting, and secure environment in which all students feel comfortable, valued, and noticed.
6. The classroom is a shop of “serious novelties” and adventurous “let’s see what happens” experiments that tap into students’ unused strengths. To keep myself and students fresh and sharp, the classroom has to be washed each day with breezes of crisp, fresh air; that is, we must never get into a predictable, old-hat, stagnating, repetitive, and mind-numbing routine. New ways of looking at, thinking about, and using both the material and ourselves must be the rule of each day.
7. I accept that most of my students are not adults; that no student is perfect; that good people will occasionally lapse; that things do not always go the way I want or expect; that nothing is quick and easy; and, that nothing works 100 percent all the time.

“There is both an ‘I’ and ‘we’ in teaching and learning,” I wrote to my colleague. “And I, like you, am my most important and powerful teaching tool.” ■