

TWELVE THINGS THAT GREAT ENGLISH TEACHERS DO

By Geoff Barton

I'm no academic. I'm not hot on action research. So you must take what follows as purely personal. But based on watching lots of teachers teaching English, here's my instinctive list of twelve randomly-listed ingredients which make good English teachers into great English teachers.

1. Great English teachers are passionate. They're passionate about many things - books, literature, theatre, their classes, film, wine. They're people to be reckoned with, people with opinions, people you can't ignore. They're people who students want to listen to and ask questions of. Whatever their age, these teachers are still relevant to their students' lives.
2. Great English teachers are text maniacs. They're always reading something. They'd never say they don't have time to read anything any more because of the weight of marking. They couldn't live if they didn't read. When students are reading in lessons, these teachers will usually be reading. They'll talk to students about what they're currently reading. They'll divert the course of an entire lesson because of something they read last night in bed. They exemplify the relevance of written texts in life: they don't just quack the rhetoric of being seen reading: they actually can't avoid doing it.
3. Great English teachers work too hard. They write out advice-sheets for their classes, sample essays, give detailed feedback, write plays, direct, take coachloads of kids to the theatre. If they look like they're not working hard, you're being conned.
4. Great English teachers don't pretend to know all the answers. They relish being asked questions they can't answer because it gives them something to find out. They exemplify real learning - open-ended, messy, unpredictable, ongoing learning.
5. Great English teachers love individualism. They relish the eccentrics in a class - the naughty ones as well as the paragons. The naughty ones will often only behave for these teachers. These teachers have something individual to say to each student. They call them out and talk about their work one-to-one. They say when they're disappointed about something a student has done, but mostly they celebrate success - not in some phoney saccharine way, but through sheer enthusiasm for a job well done. Students know when a teacher really knows

them: a great English teacher invariably does. You only have to note the way ex-students send cards or make visits to be reminded that great English teachers change people for life.

6. Great English teachers balance spontaneity with structure. Their lessons can feel hugely creative and unpredictable. Yet they fit into an overall developmental pattern. A student will know where she's heading, what she needs to work on to improve, where the half-terms' lessons are heading. And yet it will all feel so fluid, so unforced, so natural. This is the great English teacher's gift.
7. Great English teachers are risk-takers. They have their own favourite texts but they frequently try out new finds. They're not afraid to use a grammar or punctuation exercise if that's what's going to clarify the thinking of the class. But chiefly they use texts to excite and challenge young minds, even when they know that the texts may be a little high level. It's a sign of their self-confidence, of their high expectations. They mix idealism and pragmatism. They have high ideals about students gaining a love of literature and a relish for the infinite complexity of language. But they're happy to read Joby, and to simplify language to a series of accessible rules if that will help their students' progress.
8. Great English teachers love the process of teaching: they like its creative opportunities. They like listening to students talking, like watching their drama, reading their stories. They may complain that they don't, that they'd had enough, but, deep down, it's what drives them - a love of the intangible processes of the classroom.
9. Great English teachers are undervalued. They should be showing teachers in all subjects how to teach - how to build students' confidence, how to structure lessons, how to assess skills and knowledge humanely and precisely. They should be our first choice of mentors, watching fledgling teachers and helping to shape their skills. Great English teachers are great teachers per se and schools should recognise this more.
10. Great English teachers have a powerful emotional impact. You walk out of their lessons feeling you can do things - can read better, write better, think better, learn better. The world seems a bigger challenge but we suddenly feel up to it. Great English teachers nourish our heroism.
11. Great English teachers get nervous on the day of exam results. They don't need to, but they do. It's a sign of their concern that their students should do well in

exams, as well as enjoy their subject. It's a sign also of their accountability: great English teachers don't automatically blame their students if a result is disappointing: they live the exams along with their students.

12. Great English teachers are more important than they realise. They teach the most important skills within the most important subject. They remind us of the power of language and the delights of literature. They help students to mediate a bewilderingly complex world, standing for certain values - for the confidence to ask questions, for the security of knowing there aren't always simple answers, for being prepared to argue your case, and doing so in a style that is powerfully appropriate. Great English teachers do all this and more. They have an impact beyond their knowledge, influencing generations of young people. They're the reason many of us are ourselves English teachers. They are, quite simply, great teachers in an age when teachers are almost automatically disparaged. We owe them a great deal - not least, our gratitude.

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