



UP
front

As a kid, I never imagined I'd be a teacher. I was determined to land a job that pays well. I was smart and a successful student (albeit disinclined towards homework and studying), so I imagined myself a doctor as a grown-up, with a white coat and a nice car.

"Get a profession and you'll never have to work for somebody else," my dad said (more or less). Back then, unlike now, "profession" seemed to be narrowly defined: doctor, lawyer...maybe architect or accountant, so long as you had your own firm.

The problem with the medical aspiration: I came to understand that entrance into medical school was competitive and uncertain, and I'd need to study a lot. With respect to college, I had other plans. I intended to spend more hours in a fraternity house than a library carrel, so I scrapped the orthopedic surgeon pretense and signed up for an engineering degree (which, according to the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission – teachers, doctors/surgeons/dentists, accountants, lawyers, engineers, architects, artists/authors, designers, chemists, editors, scientists, registered nurses – evidently, is a profession in its own right). And I limped my way to a 2.2 composite GPA and academic probation my freshman year before turning things around as a sophomore (thanks, in large part, to a diligent girlfriend), and graduating with honors and a reasonably valuable engineering degree.

Thirty-five years later, I'm the teacher I never imagined I'd become. It started with middle schoolers, one summer of language arts (English, as we used to call it) and one summer of math. Now, I'm back at college – an environment I still love – and some people call me "professor" until I plaintively redirect them..."Scott" is fine."

The sweeping generalizations are true: The pay is lousy; but, the rewards are great.

I have developed a seminar-style course (actually, I'm building it on the fly in real time) that meets once a week on Wednesday afternoons for three hours. Eight brave senior business majors registered (with little context) to learn – ostensibly – social enterprise management and entrepreneurship, though we aren't afraid to go off-script. I assign them more reading than I would have done as a student and a Harvard Business School-style case each week. A significant component of their grades depends upon class participation. Five weeks in, not one kid has missed a single session. I hold office hours, as professors do, and two of my eight have stopped in, as well as a student who couldn't register for my class but wanted to meet me anyway.

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"You're paying for this...or your parents are," I said, towards the end of our second class meeting. "I don't want to waste your time. Please, let me know if you're getting something from this. If not, we'll adjust."

They looked at me wide-eyed, a collective expression of silent protest. Then, one girl spoke. "In 30 years, I'll remember a few things from my college years. Mostly, it'll be fun times and friends I made. School – I'll have forgotten most of it. But this class...this, I'm going to remember. I already know it. I just do."

And I nearly cried. But I held it together well enough to respond..."You're not bullsh#\$*#@g me, are you?! Because I'm smart enough to override my sizeable ego and figure out if you are."

They laughed.

Today is Tuesday. Tomorrow, we have class. I am anxious this time each week, certain I can't adequately prepare. How will I fill three hours? Three hours is a long time. I have dreamt unsettling things...anxiety dreams... on class-day eves. I awaken early and in cold sweat.

Then, as if transported through time, it's 5 o'clock Wednesday. And I dismiss them. And the adrenaline peaks before it begins to fade during the hour-long drive home.

I think of my eight students every day until I see them again. I conjure each of their faces clearly in my mind's eye as I sit at my desk. I imagine that something – perhaps as unremarkable as a brief exchange in the midst of a spontaneous, tangential detour from our core lesson – will, decades from now, lead one of them somewhere just-a-little-bit "better" than he or she would have navigated had we never met.

In that moment, savoring the possibility of such a thing, I have a new appreciation for the word "profession," and the metrics we use to measure "success."

Scott A. Lauretti



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