

Authenticity in Teaching

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Most frequently, authenticity is described as being “real” or “genuine,” and the advice often given to faculty wanting to develop authenticity in their teaching is to “just do what comes naturally.” But obvious definitions and easy advice frequently obfuscate deeper complexities, and that is definitely the case with authenticity.

Scholarly work on authenticity is being done in the field of adult education. Highlighted here are two articles, both featuring the work of Carolin Kreber, a professor at the University of Edinburgh. When Kreber and colleagues looked for a common conceptual understanding of authenticity, they found none. In their attempt at advanced understanding of the concept, they did an extensive review of the literature, starting with its philosophical origins. They make the point that “as long as authenticity remains only vaguely understood and ill defined...it is...not feasible to articulate a persuasive rationale for why we should be concerned with the phenomenon in the first place.” (p. 25)

Based on their review of the literature and a subsequent analysis by Kreber, which involved interviews with faculty and other empirical explorations, the following six dimensions of authenticity were identified.

Being sincere, candid, or honest—When students look at the teacher, they see a genuine reflection of that teacher’s personal identity. They also hear from someone who speaks with candor and integrity.

Being true to oneself—The teacher is a self-aware person who has made a commitment to teaching. This teacher has reflected on the purposes of education and has chosen to teach because educational goals matter. Authenticity here finds expression in consistency between values and actions.

Being true to oneself—Being true in this sense means not being defined by others but using self-knowledge to establish one’s own identity, regardless of how well or poorly it fits with the expectations of others.

Acting in the interests of learners—Authenticity extends beyond the individual. It is other-directed as well. In the case of teachers, it is caring about students and wanting them to flourish. One interviewee described it as the difference between teaching what we are interested in versus teaching what interests us plus what students really need to know.

Care for the subject—Authenticity also involves beliefs about the value of the subject matter and being committed to engaging students with the subject in important and meaningful ways. The ultimate goal is using connections between students and the subject matter to grow the authenticity of students. It might be something as concrete as genuine interest in the questions students ask and something as abstract as being fully invested in the course.

A process of becoming—Authenticity comes via a process that involves ongoing critical reflection. Teaching that is authentic continually revisits the purposes of education, and regularly inquires as to the origins behind and rationales that justify how certain norms and practices have come to be accepted.

At the conclusion of their literature review, Kreber and colleagues write: “The literature reviewed here revealed authenticity in teaching as an intriguing but also complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Authenticity in teaching involves features such as being genuine; becoming more self-aware; being defined by one’s self rather than by others’ expectations; bringing parts of oneself into interactions with students; and critically reflecting on self, others, relationships and context, and so forth....Authenticity is not just something that exclusively rests within myself...for authenticity to be meaningful it needs to be sought in relation to issues that *matter crucially*.” (pp. 40-41).

The problem with the glib advice to “be real” and “do what comes naturally” is that it assumes teachers know their real selves and know how to act in ways that are consistent with those selves. That kind of knowledge does not come easily—it must be discovered and learned, and for many teachers that takes sustained effort. The effort to achieve authenticity in teaching is worth making, because teaching that shares what is genuine and real about the person is teaching that challenges students to pursue their own authenticity. It is teaching that goes beyond changing what students know—it can change who they are.

Reference: Kreber, C., Klampfleitner, M., McCune, V., Bayne, S., and Knottenble, M. (2007). What do you mean by ‘authentic’? A comparative review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58 (1), 22-44.

Kreber, C. (2010). Academics’ teacher identities, authenticity, and pedagogy. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35 (2), 171-194.

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