

Teaching

There are no typical Harvard professors, any more than there are typical Harvard students, but almost all of us share certain characteristics. Whatever our field of expertise may be, whether ancient Chinese texts or electoral politics in California or the biochemistry of genetics, we like to understand things as well as we can, to figure things out that others before us have not understood, and to talk to other people about what we have learned and discovered. It has gotten to be conventional to split the professor's job into "teaching" and "research," but for most of my colleagues these are external manifestations of a single underlying social process: we are trying to move the world of knowledge along, and to bring our colleagues and students with us as we go.

My interactions with my students have been the best part of my professional career, and are the best part of every continuing day of it. Teaching is the reason I am a professor - as a computer scientist, it would have made more sense for me to go into industry if I did not care about bringing people with me as I moved with the field. It is hard work - Harvard students have high expectations, and are not hesitant to challenge me. Successfully teaching them requires that I guess what misperceptions, overgeneralizations, and confusions are raised by every new idea I introduce, and yet appreciate the new observations and insights that come from students' questions and commentary. A good class is like a train that pulls smoothly out of the station, picks up cargo along the way, nearly gets derailed a few times as it lurches forward around unpredictable curves, but slides fully laden into the station at the other end of the track. The passengers themselves won't sit still, which adds to the excitement of the ride. Students can be brought along on that trip in an individual tutorial, in a discussion seminar, or in a large lecture - different teaching techniques are needed for each class format, but the objective is the same.

But aren't Harvard professors scholars first and teachers second? Not true, not for most of the ones that I know. Indeed, for a great many Harvard professors, the opportunity to work with our extraordinarily talented student body was as important in their decision to come here as the quality of our libraries and laboratories, or of their faculty colleagues. The work we do with students is of mutual benefit: our students push harder than do students elsewhere, and because of that we can get more out of our collaborations. I know professors who got interested in moving to Harvard only when their children reached college age, and they began to understand the excitement of student-faculty interactions here from the standpoint of their children.

Finally, the greatest reward of teaching at Harvard is the simple pleasure of getting to know our undergraduates, people who have such intense and wide-ranging knowledge and interests, who do such admirable things when they are not studying, and who go on to such wonderful futures. Students are sometimes reluctant to take the initiative to make the contacts with faculty that will enrich student and professor alike; but it is not a mistake to invite us to lunch, or to engage us in some inspecific discussion about where we came from and how we wound up becoming so interested in the subject we are

teaching. When I get in one of these conversations, I usually wind up learning a great deal myself, about life in Alaska or starting a software business or a student's most beloved poet. Were I not a teacher here, I would not have learned so much from my students; for me, there is nothing more significant.