

# The Energy to Teach

**F**orty-six years ago this September, I began my teaching career. We didn't call it Middle School in those days, but I taught 10- to 13-year-olds who didn't have many of the complicated growing pains that children do today. We had three curriculum guides that totaled around 40 pages, and we complained that we couldn't possibly teach that much in one school year. We reasoned that the authors of those guides had to be from another planet; they didn't understand the travails and demands of teaching.

I remember the tension that marked my first two years of teaching. I had all I could do to make time for breakfast, and I never had enough energy to do everything that needed doing. There were certain students who bugged me and others who I just couldn't reach. I'd feel buoyed by a good lesson on Tuesday, but when I tried to follow up on Wednesday, the students couldn't remember what we'd done the day before. I wryly remarked to a colleague, "Teaching these kids is like herding turkeys. They all go in different directions."

Of course, teaching in those days was easier than it is today. The school day was the same length, but the curriculum was much narrower, the interruptions fewer, and the culture of accountability nonexistent. I am continually amazed by teachers today who exhibit a consistent, energy-filled professionalism. Sadly, though, the numbers are growing who find the energy drain unbearable.

Three years ago, I began a study of teacher energy (Graves, 2001). I wanted to learn from teachers themselves what gave and took away energy. I formulated a simple question, "What gives you energy or takes it away, and what, for you, is a waste of time?" I interviewed teachers and administrators across the country, as well as people in other occupations, for one to two hours each. I followed some for as long as six months. I learned much about energy that many of you know instinctively, but sometimes it helps to see a tangible list. Here is what I learned.

## Energy Principles

*We are in charge of our energy.* We can't wait for people to give it to us. First, we have to get knowledgeable about what gives energy and what takes it away in our own lives. Many of my informants took a sample week, wrote down everything that happened in school and out, and rated the events with a plus (+) for what gives energy, a minus (-) for what takes it away, and a zero (0) if they couldn't tell. Today, I'd add a third marker: (L) for learning. Learning is usually an energy giver. On the other hand, I have had draining experiences that I could classify as significant learning. Teachers reported that when they focused on the energy givers and dealt with the takers, their energy increased.

*It takes energy to get energy.* I've learned this from my exercise program. If I feel unhappy about certain events, lethargy sneaks in. Tired as I am, I go out and run, cycle, or race walk. I return with more energy than I had when I started. This phenomenon has been well documented: People who have energy are constantly giving it away. Energy begets energy. Janet Tassel, in her article "Yo-Yo

Ma's Journeys" in *Harvard Magazine*, writes from her interview: "Many of the students' questions involved stamina and endurance. 'Go with the energy around you,' [Yo-Yo Ma] urged Lauren, who, having just played the prelude to the cello concerto of Eduoard Lalo, was concerned at how drained she felt. 'I used to get very tired from playing this movement,' he reassured her. 'Use the power of the orchestra to help you, that's the secret. Save a little, so you can give a little more. You have to expend energy in order to produce energy. If you empty yourself, you're going to fill yourself even more.'"

*Find energy in knowing what you do well and practice it.* Usually, you enjoy what you do well. And the more you do it, the better you get until eventually, you are knowledgeable enough in the practice to be creative. That creativity generates even more energy, which generates more creativity, and so on. It's a productive and satisfying cycle. This finding is true across all occupations. Unfortunately, we can't always articulate what we do well in our teaching; our evaluators may point too much to what *isn't* going well. If so, then it is up to us to take the initiative, to search our abilities and practices, and to write them down for ourselves. Ask a trusted colleague for input. Sometimes others see and appreciate our strengths before we do. Finally, we must internalize them until we are comfortable enough with them to begin using them creatively.

*Find energy in your students.* Students return energy when they feel valued. Knowing their names, what they do well, what they want, as well as what makes them laugh are indispensable energy sources. Of course, we must first know what we do well and from that, create clear values and expectations. Above all, we have to be able to laugh at ourselves and our foibles as teachers. Truly, humor is one of our greatest energy sources. If students write regularly, then they are sending energy my way. Of course, the assignments have to allow students to show their personalities, and they have to feel safe doing so. I sometimes model my writing and revision processes, taking care to introduce my own voice into whatever I'm doing.

More often than not, that results in more carefully written pieces in which students have actually made an investment. In the end, I not only save both physical and mental energy by reading interesting papers that don't require as much tedious technical correction, I also start to feel myself becoming re-energized.

*Find energy in colleagues.* This is another one of those investment situations. We have to stop focusing exclusively on our own needs and give—especially to teachers who are new to the profession. This takes energy, and *we* have to initiate it; otherwise, it won't come back. I have found that three simple practices create energy: 1) Noticing—clothing, books, practices; 2) Asking for advice—again and again teachers reported that they felt an energy surge when their opinions were solicited; 3) Listening—this means active listening and not chiming in with our own agenda. Finally, the data showed that if you have even one colleague with whom you can share ideas, readings, and questions, you can draw from that enough energy to maintain your motivation and ability to grow professionally. Build slowly by sharing books, ideas, and applying all three practices mentioned above. Above all, you should be able to share what isn't going well. That kind of trust is earned over time.

*Find energy in curriculum.* Middle school students are curious about the lives of others, how they've handled problems of growing up, decisions about what's fair, paths taken and not taken by people in literature, history, politics, science, and popular culture. Of course, they can also be very self-centered and bored. I've found that when teachers skillfully introduce characters in a relevant context, wherever they are found in curriculum, and make them resonate with the lives of young adolescents, they generate energy in their classrooms. When we bypass the people in texts, we bypass the energy our young students can give us. But delving into the character and motivations of

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people takes time, as does learning to know our students. Neil Simon said, “I realized only recently that until my main character wants something and wants it badly, nothing happens in my plays.” So, I ask the same question whenever we meet a new character, fictional or real: “What did this person want and why?” Of course, that quickly leads to students expressing in bold emotional terms what they want in life. I press hard for the details behind their emotions.

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Most curriculum frameworks ignore student emotions, and test makers care even less. Too many politicians, administrators, and curriculum specialists forget that emotion is the engine of the intellect. True student engagement takes time, and that means making tough decisions about what will and will not be taught in our curriculum.

*Find energy in being assertive—ask questions.* There is energy in asking tough but persistent questions about what affects student learning. Teachers reported that one of the greatest energy drains was the quiet, passive acceptance of what they knew was not good for students. Remember this: It is easy to ask questions when the bottom line is student learning, not just for today, but for the long term. We need to be concerned about the qualitative aspects of learning; we want students who show initiative, drive, curiosity, respect,

and creativity. So, quietly and persistently, we should ask such questions as “How does this policy or practice result in learning? Would you please describe the good reader for me? How does this assessment find that out? How does this policy show that we respect students? How can we expect better scores when test preparation and assessment steal one full month of teaching time?” Where possible, ask questions of administrators and policy makers in private. If answers are not forthcoming, then ask them in staff meetings. Try not to be the only complainant. I strongly suggest writing out your concern in order to maintain a written record. Your questions may not make you popular, but they will generate respect if you are asking on behalf of your students. We cannot accept answers like, “This is what *they* want.” To that we must reply, “But as an educator and student of learning, what do *you* think?”

We are in charge of our energy; we can’t allow other people to take it away. We went into teaching because we enjoy learning and helping our students to love learning in such a way that it will become a lifelong habit. We simply cannot be distracted by people who have never taught and, in many cases, who are not held as accountable in their own occupations. The bottom line is learning—and not just student learning. We are most energy-filled when we are learning ourselves.

## Reference

Graves, D. H. (2001). *The energy to teach*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

**Donald Graves** is Professor Emeritus from the University of New Hampshire. He has written 24 books and his most recent, *Testing Is Not Teaching*, will be released by Heinemann the first week of September.