

Teaching: a finite set of skills or dynamic capacity

By Bambi Betts

Have you ever been in a class in which the teacher defied every “rule” of teaching, yet every student learned? And how about one where the teacher followed every “rule” but very few learned? What does this tell us?

The answer lies somewhere between the notion that there is a rigid set of effective teaching practices which all teachers **MUST** adhere to and the freewheeling idea that the “best” teacher is a maverick.

Think of a world-renowned surgeon. She cannot and does not violate the life and death “rules” that the body plays by (like how many minutes it can go without oxygen), yet becomes “renowned” by carefully considering each unique case and bringing to it style and innovation.

That’s pretty much how I view teaching. There are some clear “rules.” Everyday we are learning more and more about them – those things which are just true about the primary learning instrument, the brain, whether we agree or not.

Things like the brain want to make connections, even though we prefer to fragment knowledge into “subjects.” The brain **WILL** make connections – it’s the teacher’s role to help it make the right ones which lead to real understanding.

Or the fact that the brain learns best in context. That is now an axiom. When we attempt to teach without context we violate a rule of the brain’s survival. It is in our best interest as teachers to continuously update our knowledge of these “rules.”

But the rules are just the foundation. With these clear rules as the base, teachers construct new knowledge and skills in practice. New skills generate from the day to day practice of teaching, using the “rules” as an essential premise.

Teaching is a dynamic capacity, grounded in the realities of how learning actually takes place.