



An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students

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Drawing from his own remarkable experience as a veteran classroom teacher (still in the classroom), Ron Berger gives us a vision of educational reform that transcends standards, curriculum, and instructional strategies. He argues for a paradigm shift - a schoolwide embrace of an "ethic of excellence." A master carpenter as well as a gifted teacher, Berger is guided by a craftsman's passion for quality, describing what's possible when teachers, students, and parents commit to nothing less than the best. But Berger's not just idealistic, he's realistic - he tells exactly how this can be done, from the blackboard to the blacktop to the school boardroom.

An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students Details

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From Reader Review An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students for online ebook

Mar says

Engage students in meaningful projects and watch them grow.

Heather says

A good reminder that quality is better than quantity. Much of the main points had been part of a week long PD I did last summer, so it was a good refresher.

Ben says

It was difficult rating this book. In some ways, I feel bad giving it an average rating since it has such a positive goal.

I loved the intentions of the author -- to not just propose better ways to educate young people, but also to redefine education as about something more and very different than standardized testing. His insights into creating a supportive culture, the importance of refining drafts, of deriving work from models of excellence, and many other points were all enlightening and useful. I applaud the book for that.

On the other hand, while the intentions were admirable beyond a doubt, the author didn't quite "convince" me. I wanted to be convinced, since I think education does not get nearly the care it deserves and is not setup properly to help people most, but ultimately I was not.

For example, the author outlines early on in the book how, in presentations he gave, skeptics of his methods weren't convinced by the stories of how well his students were doing -- until they saw the work of the students themselves. Yet, in the book, all it does is talk about high quality of the student work *without showing any examples*. I found a bit astounding: he spells out exactly what he learned he needed to do to convince everyone, describes it in the book, and *doesn't* actually do it in the book! There's not a single example of one of his student's work in the book despite the multitude of references to the essential portfolio of work he carries to all his talks.

I suspect that in the author's eyes, I likely would fit the model of ones of those skeptics thinking about education too systematically and in business metrics terms...a mindset which he uses a bit of a disdainful tone for. Nonetheless, as much as I didn't want to fit the mold of those people the author looked down on for not getting it, a collection of anecdotes about student success (told with, to be honest in my critique, a bit of a prideful manner) was not enough for me because, well, I do think like that.

Another problem was I wasn't even actually sure what the author was trying to convince me of.

I believe the author was a very hard working man who did an tremendous job teaching his students in a way that traditional system never allow him to. But the book felt too much like a story of what his own enormous

talents and efforts could accomplish, rather than a broader thesis into what needs to happen to improve education on a large scale. Not all, but too much of that success seemed to depend on the particular teacher, not a theory, an approach, a thesis, or anything else that could be *externalized* and embraced everywhere.

The author, of course, specifically addresses this and implies those looking to "scale up" his work are missing the point -- and that's where my enthusiasm for the book deflated. I have to believe that there are ways to improve the system. I would never argue that great teachers are anything but essential to great teaching (and need the creative freedom to work as their talent guides them), but human progress often is about individuals enacting changes in the culture and the system beyond themselves: *externalizing it*. Beyond some minor points, I never really understood what the author's particular changes for the "system" of education were, nor was I convinced that they *did not* depend too heavily on the being bolstered by a great teacher where greatness is rare quality.

Perhaps that was the exact message of the book: great teaching will always require great people. I just had been hoping to read about something more -- some way to make a global change that *can* exist without the constant, heroic efforts of rare individuals. Such individuals will always be necessary to push the system further, but I still fundamentally believe that externalized, global change *is possible* and maybe that is why the book did not inspire me as much as I hoped.

Sarah says

The idea of a educational community where excellence is upheld by all members is inspiring.

Jamie says

I found this book and the ideas and practices in it fascinating! I wish I could better retain all the great concepts I read in here about education. It is exactly what we need. In all honesty, I tend to get bored easily with informational:educational books, but I could barely put this down, it just makes sense!

Dinah says

Loved it. Love the teaching philosophy that says you can't build (academic, social, artistic) confidence on hot air - you have to get kids to do really excellent work, and be proud of it, and appreciate the long and deep drafting process as necessary to learning. Love Berger's analysis of the ways public education is not like your average capitalist enterprise, and why measuring outcomes as if it were is not only destructive, but silly. Especially love reading about the units of study in all these expeditionary learning classrooms - what lucky students!

(If I don't read a book like this that is applicable to high school teaching soon, though, I might lose my marbles. I feel like an elementary teacher could take these ideas and run with them; how to create a school culture that values investment in the material(s) (both intellectual and financial) and sets expectations that students will produce beautiful and well-rounded work through a single-subject high school classroom is totally beyond me, as it was before reading this book. I get that culture is bigger than one room, and that

community buy-in is everything... but changing a 15-year-old's mind about whether trying hard in school is worthwhile is a whole different ball game. Can anybody point me toward that book?)

Charles Cohen says

What does excellent education look like? This. It looks just like this.

This is maybe the most important, useful book I've read about formal education. It's challenging, and inspiring, and it will make you cry in equal parts awe and frustration.

Lauren says

This book by Ron Berger is for any teacher and administrator in a school looking to improve quality assessments for students. Berger stresses the importance of student portfolios and the importance of publishing work. Student work could be published on line or in class for others to see. Berger states that it lends importance to the student's sense of purpose with regard to the work. He also states that it is important to display student work. He also feels at the secondary level it is important for students to present their work. I happened to connect with this, since I have a book trailer festival inspired by the ARCLMS program- where students present their projects and they have to dress for success. They feel a sense of pride when they finish. Berger's book is not long, and would be a good read for a teacher looking for summer reading to help jumpstart thinking for the new year.

Angela says

Wonderfully inspiring. Having met Ron, and seeing his passion firsthand, I could hear his voice as I read this. His ideas of authentic learning experiences for our students should be spread and shouted from the mountaintops. Thanks for your years of dedication, Ron. You are a master in our field.

Pamela says

Berger asked me these important questions in his dense and inspiring little book: what is the ethic in your classroom, Pam? What contributes to the successes in your room to cultivate a love of beauty, craftsmanship, passion? What prevents this culture from developing and thriving? And perhaps most importantly, he asks me, how do you know what you have truly done for students? I have to admit that these questions have sometimes haunted me in the past--I CHOSE teaching from an array of many other much more lucrative and perhaps less harrowing professions. I can even remember the day I decided, two months into teaching a reading class (in my first "observation" student teaching experience with a teacher desperate for helping hands in the classroom) at Scandanavian Middle School. I read this book because it was recommended to me by an engineering teacher at High-Tech High School in San Diego, CA, where colleagues and I had traveled to learn about an innovative project-based school approach. I have to say that it has reignited my passion for building deep and experiential units for my teachers (with the hopes that they will loan me their students at times to model lessons), even after perhaps the most trying and difficult year of my 30 years of teaching.

Berger waxes poetic about his woodlands elementary school and its project-based approach, but where that would typically cause me to disengage because the classrooms and systems in which I work are so radically different, his words instead inspired me to make the pursuit of building an ethic of excellence my renewed pledge. I imagine I will need to re-read this book a few times, but that's okay--it will be my saw-sharpening exercise when I need a jolt of redirection. Some reviewers, I see, didn't like Berger's "preachiness," but this was a must-read for me, and just what I needed to pursue the challenges ahead with vigor. [Note: for those who read to the end of this review, please Google a video titled "Austin's Butterfly" as a companion piece to the discussion about how deep revision and meaningful peer review can shape this ethic.] >^..^<

katharine says

I enjoyed the stories of this teacher's experiences in the classroom. The different routines that he has set up gave me ideas for how to approach my own projects this year. My overall impression was that the author is a compassionate person who cares about educating children and that his big heart goes a long way to bringing out the best in his students.

Mike says

I really enjoyed this book on what makes for bringing a culture of excellence into the classroom. I thought Berger's stories were inspirational, and loved many of his ideas. Like many stories on great teaching though, his methods are virtually impossible to use in a big sense because his school basically allows him to teach however he wants. At most public high schools, teachers would have to maintain a certain pace while covering a large curriculum. However, I do like his technique of peer review and of making the work important to students. Demanding more of students is something that sounds easy, but over time it can become difficult to maintain a high level of determination when teaching a class load of 130 kids through 180 days. This book reminded me to never give up pushing each and every student.

John Damaso says

Teachers are benevolent narcissists, and I suppose they have to be in order to best serve students: what can I take from Berger's book that I can immediately deploy in my classroom, my context, for my students? How is all of this discussion of school culture, an ethic of quality, projects, portfolios, critiques relevant to me? As I read *An Ethic of Excellence*, as others did, I kept talking back to Berger, and he often anticipated the doubters, the skeptics, the businessmen in the Afterword who wanted "scalability." In fact, he begins that section with this question: "How much of this could possibly work in MY setting?" (150).

Others have written that Berger's ethic is hard to engender or apply at the high school level since he, a primary teacher with block scheduling, has "one group of students whom I see almost all day" (141). I am currently in this camp of "How can I do this?" thinkers, but I am open to be persuaded otherwise. "Scale" me to 150 students, Mr. Berger, even if you dislike that word. Berger suggests to start small, and I think collaborating with a teacher in another department on a single project would be a good start.

A few other items really stood out to me:

- Berger tells numerous anecdotes about students, but he rarely uses MALE students, and his first male example is Jason on p. 37. Why is this?
- The deeper the understanding by students, the more nuanced and gray (not black & white) their educations become. See Deaf school exchange example pp. 56-57.
- The use of "tribute work" contributes to strong alumni-student relationships. Tribute Work is "the work of a student who built off of, borrowed ideas from, or imitated the work of a particular former or current student" (85).
- The "critique" rules he describes are very similar to Writing Workshop methods: 1. Be kind. 2. Be specific. 3. Be helpful.
- I love the idea of two grades, 'A' or 'Not Ready.' Berger writes that C or D work is "not worthy of being accepted."
- "The push now is to standardize, not innovate" (142). Berger unabashedly bashes standardized testing and "teacher-proof curriculum." Agreed.
- The last page of the Afterword, in which Berger suggests he knows an ethic of excellence exists because everyone around him -- nurses, policemen, excavators, lifeguards -- are his former students and he has trust in them, totally confounds me. Very strange, seemingly narcissistic conclusion (unless I totally misread that passage).

I also found a couple elements missing in the book:

- No discussion of innovative educational technology movements (though he published this in 2003, pre-Web 2.0).
- No discussion of college admissions' take on the quality of Berger's students as college applicants.

In sum, the book has made me think, and I appreciate the challenge of creating an environment in which students pursue with care projects of quality with "the work" (and not distractions) as prime.

Drama Sylum says

While this may seem petty, the inconsistent capitalization problem of deaf versus Deaf (a four letter, grade 3 vocabulary word) made me question the author's understanding of the word "excellence" in conjunction with education. I was able to place that on hold until I learned that my teaching of Tom Sawyer could be enhanced if I just heated rocks, allowed children to play in tunnels, and discussed the inner workings of spelunking because certainly I could understand how all of that would increase the children's comprehension of the text. I also learned that I could teach The Odyssey in a water unit with science because it wasn't, as my advanced degrees and twenty years of subject experience led me to believe, about mythology and heroism at all - it was about water.

And this is why the state of education is in the utter shambles that it is.

Cassie Sonnenberg says

The best thing I can say about this book is that it's a quick read...I read it in an afternoon. The premise of it is spot-on: if we want students to be excellent, we have to expect excellence and instill in them a work ethic that will create excellence. But most of the book is stories from Berger's classroom -- cool things his students have done. The book lacks direction, and the "method" to his success is simply, "My whole school expects this. These kids have been expected to work hard since preschool. So they do." Not exactly helpful for those of us in the real world. I don't recommend this book and wish I'd saved the 10 bucks I spent for it on Amazon.
