The Most Important Lessons I Learned from My Students

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"I have learned much wisdom from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but the most from my students." —Talmud

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Introduction: Who Teaches Whom?

When people ask what I have learned in my career, they often expect me to talk about the books I've read, the research I've conducted, or the frameworks I've developed. But the truth is this: the deepest lessons have not come from me *teaching*, but from *being taught*.

The classroom is often imagined as a place where a professor dispenses wisdom to students who absorb it, test it, and carry it into the world. But any teacher worth their salt knows this is an incomplete picture. A classroom is a living organism, a dialogue, an ongoing negotiation of meaning. The best students do not sit passively and accept the professor's words; they question, challenge, and sometimes overturn them. And when that happens, if you are awake enough to notice, you find that the ones who thought they were teaching have in fact been the students.

Over the years, I have come to realize that my most important learnings—the ones that have shaped not just my teaching, but my life—came directly from my students. They did not always appear in polished form. Sometimes they came as complaints, sometimes as deceptively simple questions, sometimes as flashes of insight that I almost missed.

What follows are three stories, and the larger lessons they taught me. Together they have become the compass by which I navigate both the classroom and life outside it.

Lesson One: The Bright Student from IIT

Many years ago, a student who had earned a degree from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) came to see me after class. IIT is legendary for its rigor; the students who earn degrees from there are among the brightest in the world. He was one of them—sharp, thoughtful, and unusually self-aware.

But he was frustrated.

“Professor,” he said, “I sometimes make contributions in class that are not acknowledged. I say something I believe is insightful, but the instructor dismisses it because it isn’t the answer they were looking for.”

He paused, searching for the right words. “When I was at IIT, if a student said something unexpected, the professor would stop. They would pause and consider, because they knew their students were among the brightest minds. There was always the chance that the student had seen something they had not. That respect shaped everything.”

His words stopped me in my tracks. I had thought of myself as open, curious, and willing to learn. Yet here was a student telling me that, however unintentionally, I was sometimes more concerned with whether a student’s comment matched *my* intention than whether it contained truth.

That moment changed me. From then on, I resolved that my questions in class were not designed to elicit *my* answer, but to discover *an* answer. The difference is subtle, but profound. When you teach for “my” answer, the classroom becomes an echo chamber. When you teach for “an” answer, the classroom becomes an arena of exploration.

In practical terms, this meant slowing down. It meant resisting the temptation to move briskly toward the teaching plan I had sketched on my notes. It meant pausing to say, “Tell me more,” or, “Let’s unpack that.” It meant acknowledging that wisdom does not always flow downhill from the professor’s podium.

The student from IIT reminded me of a truth I needed to hear: teaching is not about control, but about humility. The best professors are not those who deliver the cleanest lectures, but those who make space for students to surprise them.

Lesson Two: The Best Question in Forty Years

On another occasion, while teaching a case study, a student delivered an analysis that was impeccable. Their logic was airtight, their evidence solid, their conclusion persuasive. It was, by every measure, a “right” answer.

Before I could affirm it, another student raised her hand. She looked thoughtful, even hesitant.

“I understand what you did,” she said, “but how did you know that you should do that?”

That single question floored me. It was the best question I’ve heard in more than forty years of teaching.

Why? Because it went beyond the mechanics of analysis to the heart of judgment. The first student had demonstrated skill in executing a technique. The second student was probing something deeper: the ability to discern *which* technique to use, *when* to use it, and *why*.

This distinction has haunted me ever since. In education, we often focus on imparting knowledge and skills. We teach students how to analyze a case, how to apply a framework, how to crunch numbers and interpret results. These are necessary, but insufficient. What truly distinguishes great leaders from merely competent ones is judgment—the ability to know *what matters most in this situation, at this moment*.

That student's question was a gift. It reminded me that the real work of teaching is not simply to train competent technicians, but to nurture wise decision-makers. Wisdom, after all, is not just about knowing what can be done; it is about knowing what *should* be done.

Since that day, I have tried to design my teaching with an eye not only on the "what" and the "how," but on the "when" and the "why." That is, I try to cultivate judgment, not just competence. And I learned that from a student who dared to ask, "How did you know?"

Lesson Three: "So What's Next?"

Another vivid memory comes from teaching the concept of *order-winning criteria*. These are the competitive dimensions by which companies succeed: cost, quality, delivery, flexibility. It's a framework I've taught many times.

On this particular day, the discussion went smoothly. The students understood the categories, applied them to the case, and drew intelligent conclusions. I felt the class had achieved exactly what I had intended.

Then a student raised his hand. "OK," he said, "so what's next?"

I paused. The framework had always seemed to me like a conclusion, a way of summing up the key levers of competition. But to this student, it was only a beginning.

That question—so simple, yet so disruptive—reminded me of an essential truth: every framework, no matter how elegant, is provisional. It captures reality as we know it now, but reality keeps moving. Markets change, technologies advance, human aspirations evolve. Today's categories may not hold tomorrow.

"So what's next?" is the question that keeps progress alive. It is the refusal to accept any framework, however useful, as the final word. It is the posture of curiosity, of openness to the future. And once again, it took a student to teach me that lesson.

Pulling the Lessons Together

Each of these stories shares a common theme. They are not about me dazzling students with knowledge, but about students revealing knowledge to me.

- The IIT student taught me humility: the best answers may not match my plan.
- The case discussion student taught me depth: judgment matters more than technique.
- The "what's next?" student taught me openness: no framework is final.

Together, these three lessons form a philosophy of teaching—and of living. They remind me that wisdom is less about holding fast to what you know and more about being willing to learn what you don't.

The Talmudic saying is right: I have learned from teachers and colleagues, but the deepest, most enduring lessons have come from my students.

Broader Reflections: Beyond the Classroom

The implications of these lessons extend far beyond academia.

In leadership, for example, the humility to listen for "an" answer rather than insist on "my" answer can transform organizations. Leaders who treat their team members as sources of insight—who pause, reflect, and say, "Tell me more"—unlock creativity and trust.

The distinction between competence and judgment matters in every profession. The world is full of smart people who can analyze data or execute a plan. But the people we admire, the people we follow, are those who know *when* and *why* to act. That is the difference between being clever and being wise.

And the spirit of "what's next?" is vital in a world of accelerating change. Industries rise and fall, political systems tremble, societies evolve. If we cling too tightly to existing categories, we risk irrelevance. The ones who thrive are those who keep asking, "So what's next?"

Conclusion: A Grateful Teacher

As I look back on my career, I feel immense gratitude. Not just for the colleagues and institutions that supported me, but especially for the thousands of students who unknowingly became my teachers.

They taught me to be humble. They taught me to seek depth. They taught me to stay curious.

And if I could offer one piece of advice to the next generation of teachers, leaders, and learners, it would be this: never assume that wisdom flows only from the top down. The greatest insights may come from the least expected places—perhaps even from the student sitting quietly in the back of the room.

For that reason, I remain, even after decades of teaching, a student at heart.