



Teacher Man by Frank McCourt

Report by:

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Introduction:

McCourt says:

Children are:

- Vulnerable
- Precious
- Our Future

Teachers are:

- Entrusted

Society is not:

- Valuing teachers
- Understanding responsibilities of teachers



In his own words:

His own childhood was difficult, with an unemployed, alcoholic father and great poverty.

“There should be a medal for people who survive miserable childhoods and become teachers...” (p. 1)

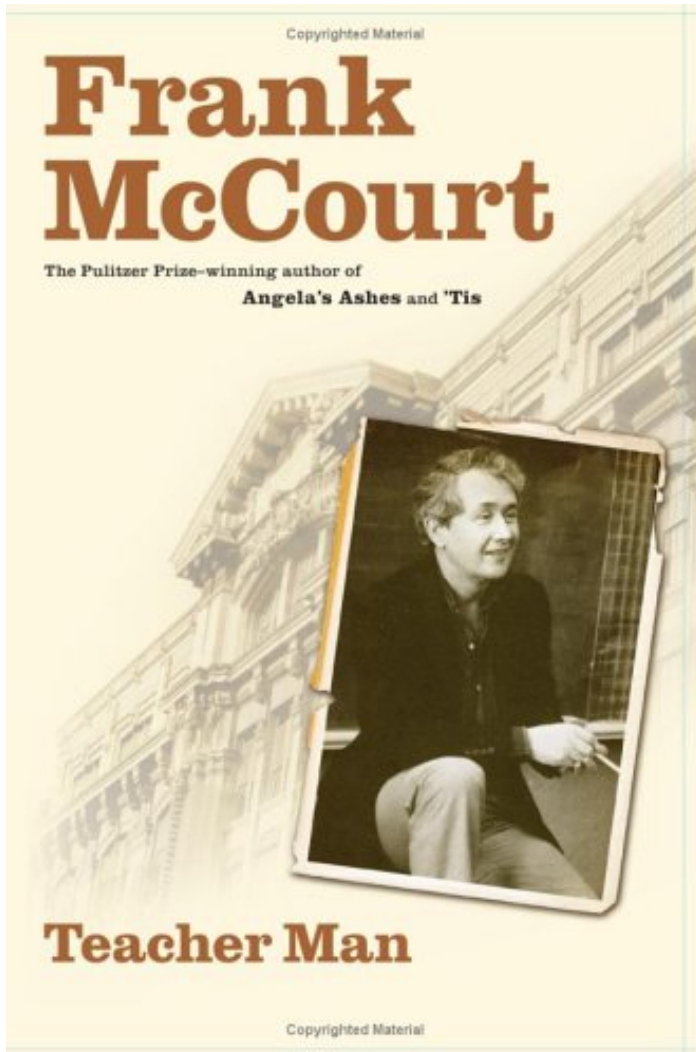
He understands misery and understands children are not to be blamed for it. *“The miserable childhood doesn’t simply happen. It is brought about. There are dark forces.”* (p. 1)



In his own words:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sANiGrRvktc>

Summary



In *Teacher Man*, McCourt tries to learn necessary skills to be an effective teacher.

Teacher Man is a compilation of stories to assert that teaching is about educating and helping students learn about learning. It is written passionately, with an appropriate degree of irreverence and great humour.

Challenges for Teachers:

- Classrooms too large
- Students come from abusive, impoverished families
- Students are indifferent and angry

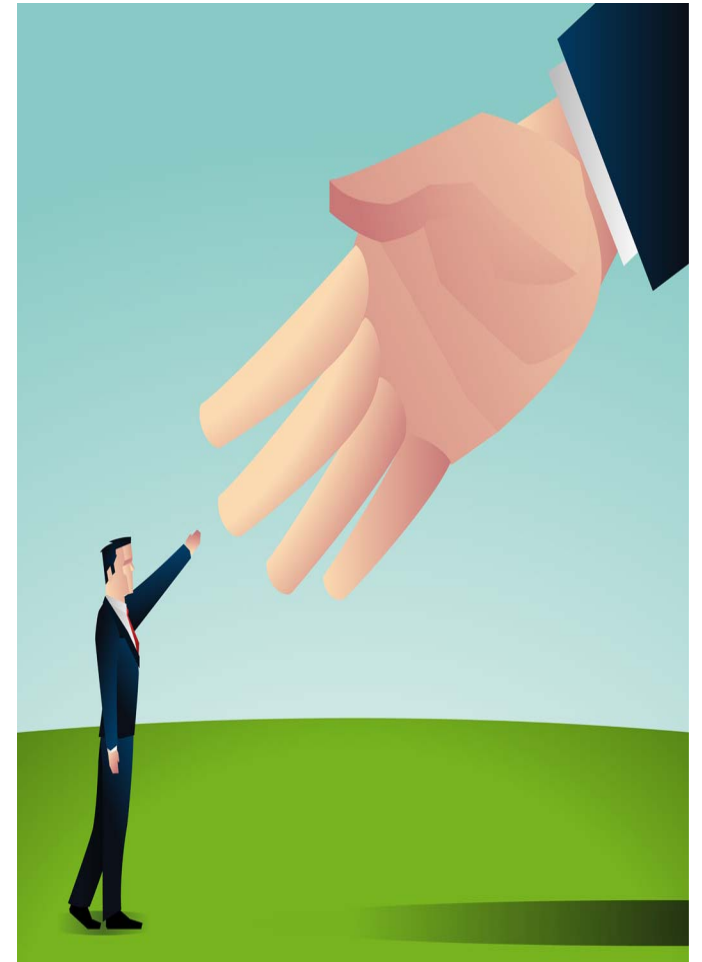


He acknowledges that many teachers are authoritative and harsh. *“Don’t let them take over the classroom. Stand up to them. Show them who’s in charge. Be firm or be dead. Take no shit.”* (p. 21)

In Teachers’ College, teachers are taught to be fearful of students. *“They’re never satisfied. Tell ‘em nothing. They figure you out and move on you like heat-seeking missiles. They find out where you’re vulnerable.”* (p. 78)



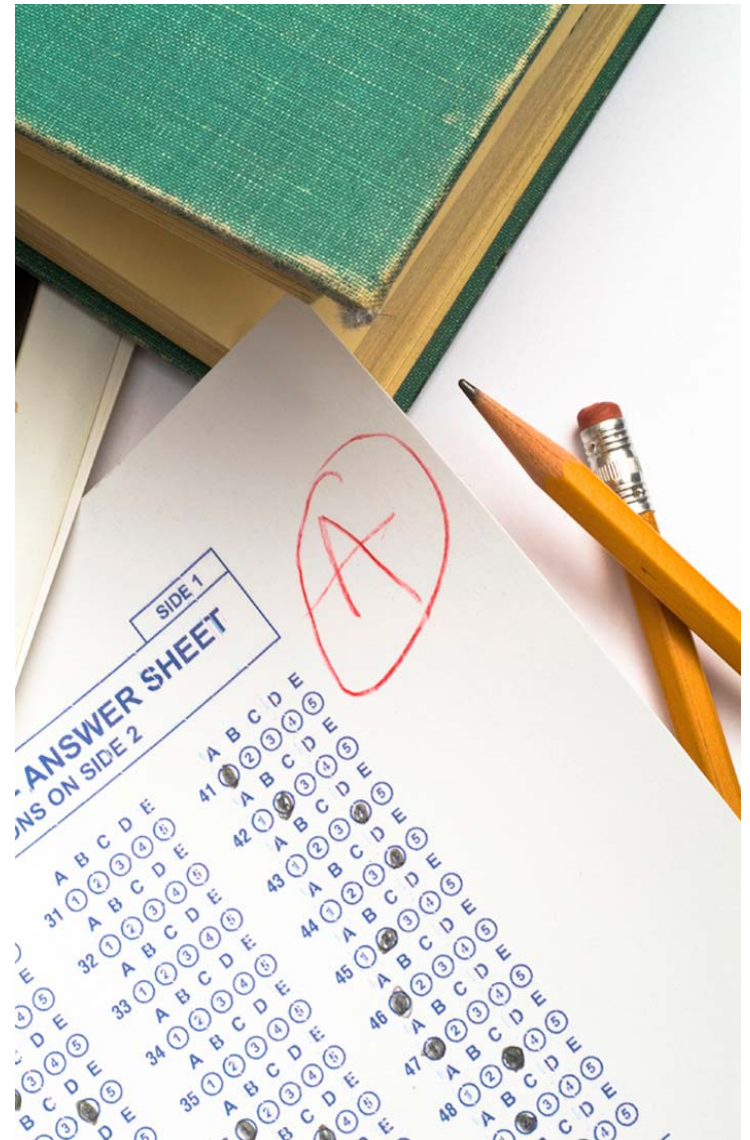
McCourt, however, figured it out. He understood what the fundamental question was from students and how to reach them. As one student asked, *“Why can’t teachers treat us like human beings?”* (p. 69)



For McCourt, learning how to teach took many years.

Knew:

- he wanted his students to know that he was happy to see them
- students would create an environment that could either be conducive for learning or if he tried to impose discipline, he would fail
- he needed to be sensitive
- teaching was not *“a simple matter of telling the class what you knew and then testing them and giving them grades.”* (p. 41)



McCourt's writing style is similar to his teaching. *"Instead of teaching, I told stories. They thought I was teaching. I was learning. I didn't call myself anything. I was more than a teacher."* (p. 19)



McCourt's Curriculum

McCourt presents his pedagogical approach to curriculum as a reflection of many dynamic components of his life and experiences. He drew more on this life than on his training.



In his own words:

I'm not prepared, trained or ready for this.

It's not teaching. It has nothing to do with English literature, grammar, writing. When will I be strong enough to walk into the room, get their immediate attention and teach? (p. 22)

External Elements of Curriculum

- History
- Social contexts
- Pathways to work and school
- Discipline and social control

Reflection question: what external elements impact your curriculum and pedagogy?



Internal Elements of Curriculum



- Personal development
- Self-discovery
- Vicariousness
- Catharsis
- Redemption

Reflection question: what personal factors influence you as a teacher?

Unplanned and Unexpected Curriculum

- Spontaneous
- Desperation
- Opportunistic
- Controversial

*Reflection question:
how often do you
have to revise your
approach on the fly?*



Evolution of McCourt and Curriculum

Over the course of a 30 year teaching career, his evolution as a man, teacher and writer was witnessed by the estimated 12000 students that spent time in his classrooms.

- Confidence
- Knowledge
- Experience
- The wisdom of age

*Reflection question:
where will your path
of development take
you? Where do you
want it to take you?*

Self-Evaluation and Curriculum

I'll tell you how I arrive at a grade. First, how was your attendance? Even if you sat quietly in the back and thought about the discussions and the readings, you surely learned something. Second, did you participate?...Third, did you comment on the work of your classmates. Fourth, and this is up to you, can you reflect on this experience and ask yourself what you learned? Fifth, did you just sit there and dream? If you did, give yourself credit. (p.253)

Self-awareness and Self-evaluation

McCourt provides a framework for self-evaluation that can provide a simple way to assess your own self-awareness and engagement with the world.

Reflection question: how often do you self-evaluate? Is your own personal engagement in the process a goal?

Engagement

This was his ultimate goal. Engagement with the world finally happened as a consequence of his teaching experiences. He wanted to live within the world and not on the periphery. Teaching was his pathway.

**Self-awareness + Engagement =
A fulfilled life?**

In his own words:

*Time's winged chariot is hurrying near
followed closely by the Hound of Heaven.
You're getting older, and aren't you a two-
faced blathering mick, prodding and
encouraging kids to write when you know
your own writer dream is dying. (p.254)*

Critical Framework for Analysis

- Two philosophers provide a possible critical framework for analysis
- They are the contemporaries of his age and coming-of-age: Michel Foucault and John Dewey
- A few slides follow that will provide a context for understanding McCourt's positioning

McCourt's power a la Foucault

- An overt theme is the power relationships at play between student, teacher, administration, parents
- McCourt historically felt as if the power was rarely or ever in his hands
- He granted the majority of the power in the hands of the students

What would Foucault say?

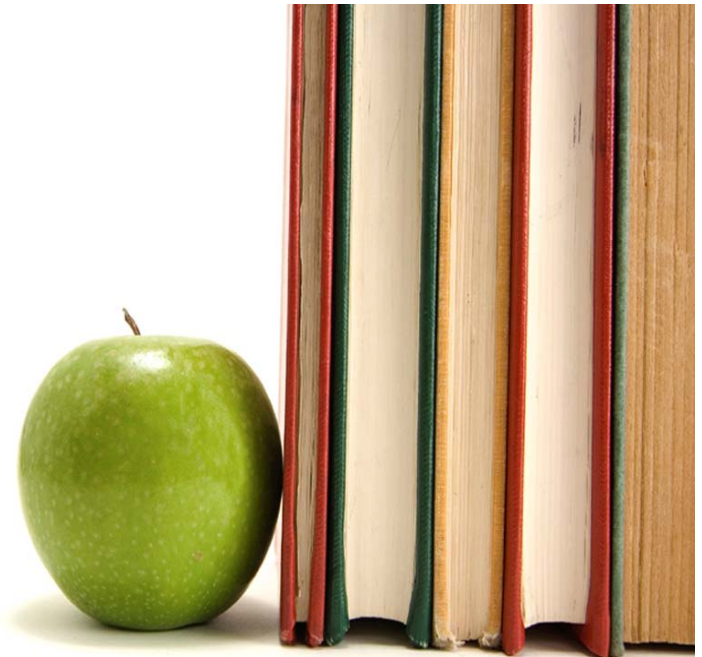
- The power dynamic and the discourse of relationship dynamics is established in the history of the class structure
- Social order of the classroom is a prerequisite for the social order of society as a whole
- McCourt may have thought that he had abdicated his power but it was only transient and constantly circulating

What would Dewey say?

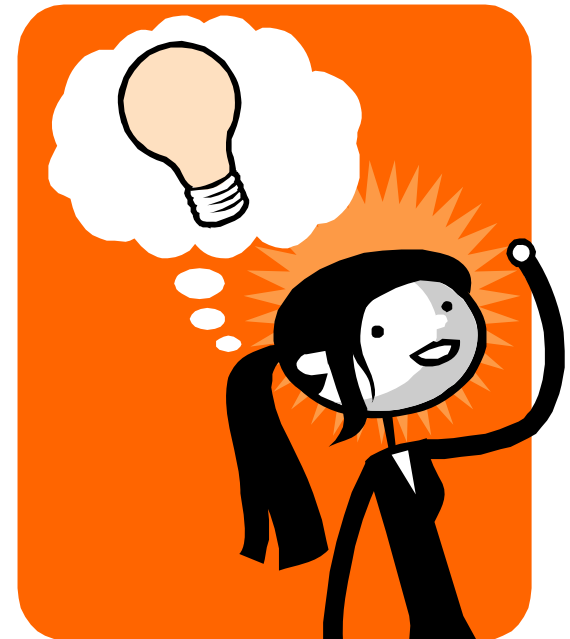
- *“Teachers should not focus directly on learning, but rather on the environment that obtains in the classroom.”* (Hanson on Dewey’s Conception of an Environment for Teaching and Learning, p. 1)
- Environments in the school and classrooms should promote such a mode of life by enabling teachers and students to enact it day-by-day, even moment-by-moment. (Hanson, p. 1)



- Human self is not fixed, ready-made or fated... growth presupposes retaining the all-important quality of plasticity. (Hanson, p. 269)
- People “*should break loose from the cut-and-dried materials which formed the staple of the old education.*” (John Dewey, Experience in Education, p. 78)

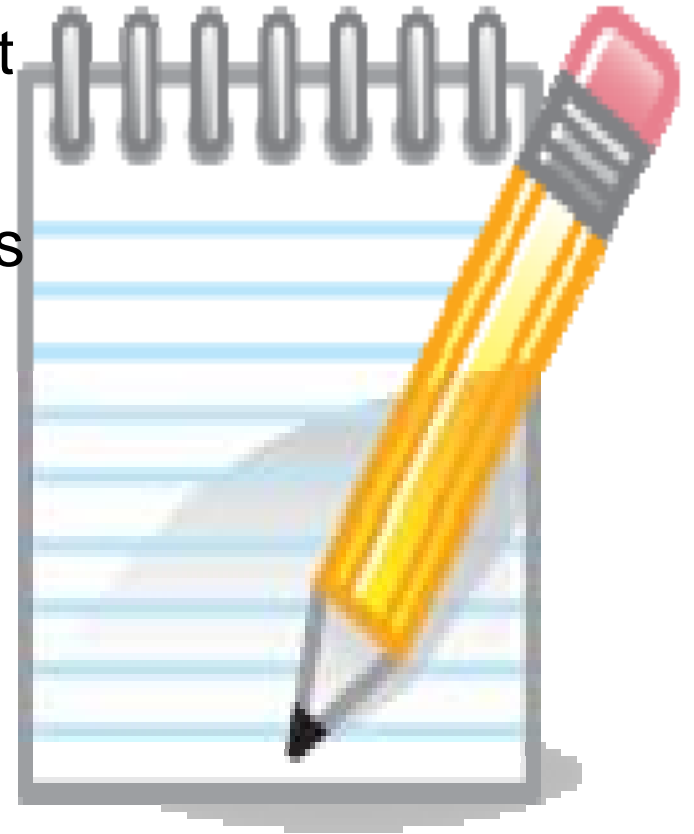


- *“The experience of every child and youth... is what it is in its present actuality.”*
(Dewey, p. 79)
- *“Education may be intelligently conducted upon the basis of experience.”*
(Dewey, p. 33)



Dewey would commend McCourt:

1. When McCourt discovered that students were forging excuses for not doing their homework or for being absent from school, McCourt took this as an opportunity to teach creative writing. *“I want you to realize this is the first class in the world ever to study the art of the excuse note, the first class, ever, to practice writing them.”* (Mccourt, p. 86)



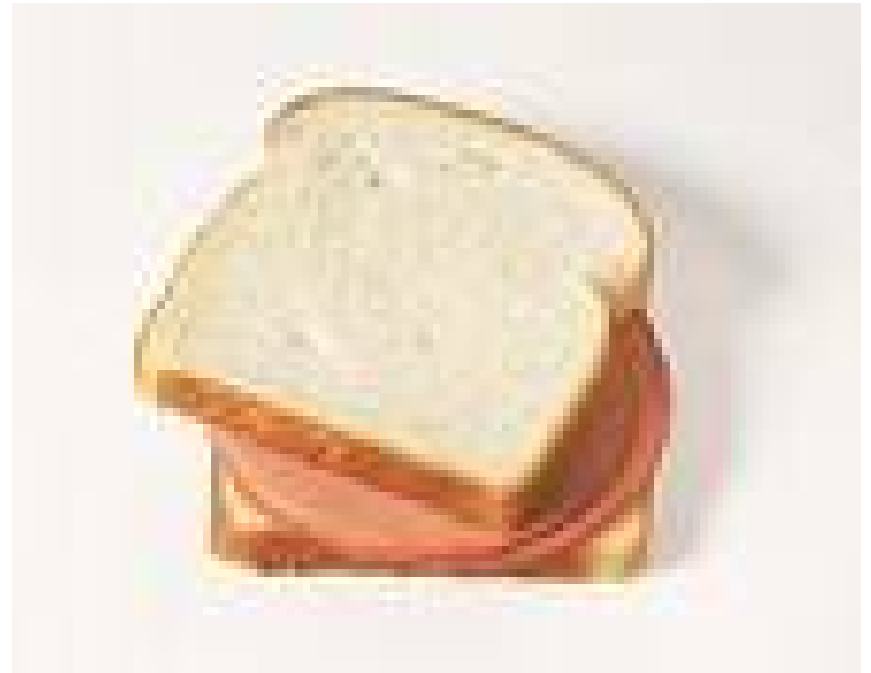
2. A teacher being critical of a student during parent/teacher night, which might result in a beating of a student by the parent. McCourt changed his approach to protect the students. “I said positive things about all my students”, such as:

- “Every one of them had a bright future.”
- “Parents should be proud.”
- “They were eager to learn.”

(Mccourt, p. 71)



3. When McCourt enters a classroom at 9am, students are throwing around a baloney sandwich. McCourt took the sandwich and instead of chastising his students, did what people do with sandwiches, namely, ate it. As McCourt said after eating the sandwich *“I felt I could do anything with this class.”* (Mccourt, p. 17)



- *“The educator more than a member of any other profession is concerned to have a long look ahead.”* (Dewey, p. 75)
- *“Every class has its chemistry.”* (McCourt, p. 77)



- For Dewey, this “environment constitutes the intermediary, the medium, the means of educative influence.” (Hanson, p. 270)
- The educational environment for Dewey features several characteristics. Dewey would commend McCourt for promoting “a standing environment”... where students can “harmonize their knowledge, in sight, feeling and viewpoints.” (Hanson, p. 272)

Curriculum



Pedagogy

McCourt's curriculum and pedagogy seemed to be constantly interchanging. At the heart of his methodology was his storytelling.

He told stories to accomplish many different things: engage the students, entertain himself and them, personal catharsis by the reliving of the story, when he had no other options!

Vulnerability

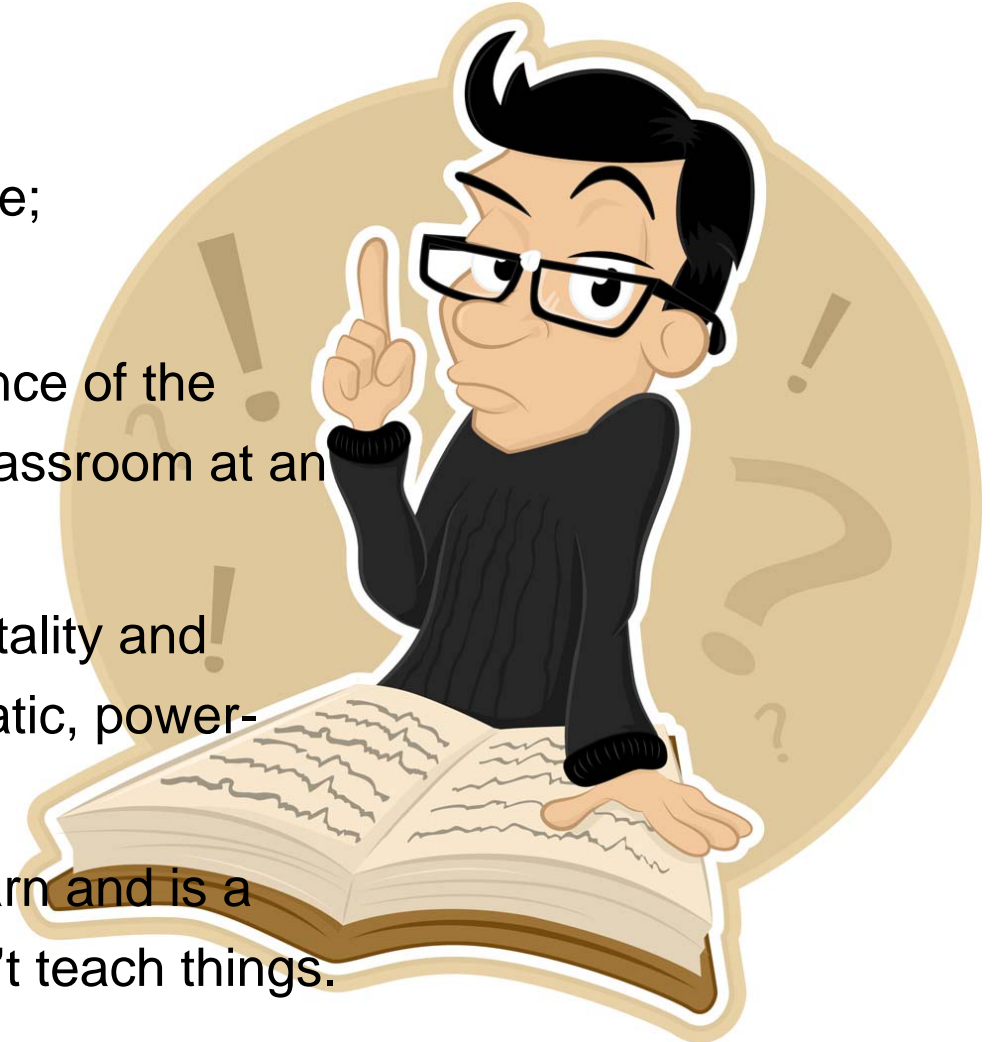


Reflection question: are you open to the vulnerability that personal story-telling entails? Is it a pedagogical method that is accessible to all? What are the limits?

Life Lessons for all

What constitutes a good teacher?

- Someone who respects students;
- Someone who understands people;
- Someone who likes people;
- Someone who brings the experience of the teacher and the students to the classroom at an equal footing;
- Someone who understands the vitality and importance of a learning, democratic, power-sharing environment;
- Someone who teaches how to learn and is a learner in that process and doesn't teach things.



In his own words:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajNxjZRJGqk>

Summary and conclusion

A good teacher is:

- Someone who likes and respects learners
- Someone who is also a learner
- Someone who shares authority in the classroom
- Someone who creates a democratic learning environment
- Someone who is not judgmental
- Someone who embraces different experiences of participants in the learning environment

References

Dewey, John. (1938) **Experience & Education**. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Foucault, Michel. (1975) **Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison**. Toronto, Ontario: Random House of Canada Limited.

McCourt, Frank. (2005) **Teacher Man**. New York, NY: Scribner.

A decorative banner with a light blue background and a darker blue border. The words "Thank You" are written in a large, elegant, blue cursive font. On either side of the text are decorative flourishes consisting of three curved lines and a central scroll-like element.

Thank You

Please take a few minutes to watch this visual montage and ponder some of the reflection questions.

Laura and Irwin

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN1sSrLi7PU>