

Part of

Ertel, P. K., & Ridgley, R. (Eds.). (2025). Educator reflections: The power of our stories. MT Open Press, Middle Tennessee State University. <https://doi.org/10.56638/mtopb00325>

Chapter 2-3

Happy Students, Happy Life

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The first inquiry of the committee that interviewed me for a potential lecturer position was to comment on the opening paragraph of my cover letter, which read, in part:

“I believe it is the primary mission of education to help people become happy and productive. Sometimes we focus so much on the ‘productive’ that we forget to reinforce the ‘happy.’ Business leaders who are positive and earnest in making the workplace a center for creativity, who embrace the humanity of their staff, who look for ways to develop their employees, they are the model for success.”

This has become the foundational element of all my classes in my five-plus years at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). The students have responded so positively to this basic message that I now look in amazement at how powerful this simple statement has been. In retrospect, it is easy to see why students are attracted to this sentiment. They are so busy and wrapped up in just trying to get through their college experience that having someone reach out to them as a person and recognize the emotional element we all look for in our interactions with others is something they desire but don’t ask for and something they need but do not know how to seek out. My main reason for being an educator is to help them recognize the potential for positive possibilities in their life and the lives of those around them.

Since the beginning of my teaching career at MTSU, we start each class by writing “Happy” on the whiteboard. We write many other things on the board during class, but when we leave, we erase everything but the “Happy,” leaving it for the next class. It becomes interesting as the semester progresses to see how often it is still on the board the next time we meet. Students brought the importance of this seemingly insignificant action to my attention during my second semester on campus. As I was leaving the classroom, one of my students from the previous semester was chatting with me and asked how the “Happy” campaign was going. Another student

nearby overheard and was surprised I was writing “Happy” on the board as he had assumed it was just some random student. He said he had noticed it the previous semester, and it would change his attitude if he were having a bad day. He said, “Sometimes I would not be feeling great, but would see that and think maybe I should be happy instead.” Now, we even have buttons and stickers that allow students to share our happy message.

My journey into the teaching profession started later in life when I had the opportunity to teach some business classes as an adjunct faculty member for Columbia State Community College during my mid-thirties. I fell in love with the classroom from that very first moment. After a couple of semesters of teaching, it was apparent that I needed to add to my knowledge base, so I enrolled in the MBA program at MTSU. Upon completing my graduate degree, I took a position managing and negotiating Information Technology (IT) outsourcing contracts for IBM and then later for Hewlett-Packard. While still completing my MBA, I was recruited by IBM to go to work with them after graduation. I was grateful for the opportunity to have the job immediately after completing my degree, but teaching was always on my mind. Years later, when I suffered through a corporate downsizing episode, I met with a very wise job coach. After spending time discussing my next move, she offered some advice. She said, “When you talk about your time as adjunct faculty, your time on the local school board, your work as an adult literacy teacher, everything about you lights up. You need a career change.” I agreed.

My opportunity to teach at MTSU came when I was 57 years old. I was hired as a lecturer in 2018. That was the start of the most rewarding period of my professional career. Every morning, when I know I will be in class, I wake up excited and happy. When people ask what I do for a living, I tell them I get to be in a room with a group of intelligent, motivated people, and we share ideas. Who else gets to spend their days like that other than teachers? I felt successful in my previous career as a contracts manager and negotiator. It was rewarding monetarily. I worked with many of the best professionals in the business, and my clients were some of the most well-known brands in the world. I was lucky enough to be recognized for my contributions to the company with awards and bonuses. But none of that means more than the rewards I get from working with the students in my classes. To have a meaningful impact that helps a student prepare for their career is more exciting than any work I did as a negotiator.

There has been a learning curve as I have navigated the teaching profession. You never know how each student will react to what you say. Each word is important. Mark Twain commented about the importance of choosing the correct word by saying, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning” (Twain’s letter to Bainton, p. 87-88, as cited in Bainton, 1888). A point that illustrates this is when one of my students emailed me after his graduation to tell me a story. He had some issues during the semester he was enrolled in my class and got placed on academic probation. If he did not make some drastic changes, he would face dismissal. He went on to say I taught him

some valuable lessons that he applied going forward. From then on, he earned over a 3.3 GPA as he completed his undergraduate degree.

I remain unconvinced that anything I say can have that kind of effect. I suspect the student looked within himself and realized a better path was ahead if he diligently applied his talents. It may also be true that something I said helped. And if so, what could be more rewarding for someone than being in a position to help shape stories like that?

It is also true that other students have not had the same experience. The end-of-the-semester surveys usually show that. While most students have enjoyed the classroom experience, a few do not. Seeing comments like “Lectures are booooring” or “Could not hold my attention for two seconds” is humbling. But then, there are others saying, “Best professor ever.” That lets me know that I must continue to make changes to work to help every student have the best experience possible.

Our profession is so impactful every day for each of our students. When we create an environment that allows each student to be heard and honor the validity of their thoughts, we give them a powerful tool to leverage to improve their future. When we help them understand the commonality of our human experience and open their eyes to the interconnectedness of our world, we are equipping them to succeed.

Like so many of my colleagues, we have these stories that our students share with us. They are the stories of students sharing credit for their success because of something we, as teachers, did for them or said to them. We may bump into a former student in the grocery store aisle or receive an email out of the blue. The students will tell us of some positive message from us that they relied on when they needed it. We may also get a message through LinkedIn that allows us to look into the amazing things they accomplish in their lives. All teachers have stories of students in a better place because of the skills and ideas we share with them in the classroom. Real impact on real lives: These are meaningful moments that were a part of our time with them.

When I reflect on my teachers’ and professors’ positive impact on my life, I am humbled to think that I may have a similar effect on the students in my classroom.

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