

Sustainability Principles used to Sustain the Drive towards Teaching Excellence

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Abstract:

Sustainability principles are usually associated with maintaining a balance between humans and the environment. These same principles and overall premise of sustainability can be used to support and maintain our drive towards excellence in teaching. Once we are established as excellent teachers through awards, tenure, etc., how do we maintain the conditions necessary to continue this excellence? What conditions are necessary to rejuvenate, refresh and inspire teaching once again? How do we overcome the inevitable obstacles and barriers that would prevent this excellence? Processes learned from sustainability models can help faculty members sustain the drive towards excellence in teaching throughout their professional careers.

Key Words:

Sustainability, teaching excellence, support, motivation, time.

Introduction

Sustainability began as a term to describe issues related to the environment. In the literature, sustainability can be linked to environmental protection, law, policy and such topics as ecology and climate change. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA; n.d.) describes sustainability as a way to “create and maintain the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony...” (p.1). Now the term is used, some may argue overused, to describe the harmony of components within businesses, government, healthcare and education in terms of policy, management, law, economics and public health, just to name a few. In this article, I will extend the sustainability concept to teaching.

Early in professional careers, many of us adopted a blueprint for achieving tenure. We can look back on the path of achieving teaching excellence. Now that we have achieved tenure; now that we have, perhaps even, earned teaching awards, how can we sustain that level of excellence? How can excellent teachers maintain the conditions necessary to sustain that level of excellence? How do we avoid settling for the status

quo, waiting until a new edition of a textbook arrives before changes are considered? What are some practical ways to rejuvenate, motivate, and re-energize teaching? How do we maintain balance between what we need and what we have as available resources to continue teaching improvement? Several principles of sustainability can be transferred to sustaining the drive towards excellence in teaching, overcoming obstacles to that maintenance, and particularly, not settling for the status quo.

Epiphany that Sustainability was needed

My professional journey will seem familiar to those who teach at small universities and may also resonate with those teaching at larger institutions. I successfully achieved tenure and promotion in my sixth year. Since then, I had received several teaching accolades and awards and begun planning and mentoring in the area of faculty development when the call to administration happened. The call didn't come from within my soul; it didn't come with a gentle whisper but was an actual phone call from the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs. A request from the VCAA sounded more like a command that I needed to provide service to my department in the form of Interim Dean. As a faithful servant, I did serve. I chose to take on the mission impossible and served my one year term with valor. Although I stepped down from the Dean position, I am continually involved in administrative tasks serving as Assistant Dean since.

When serving as Dean my teaching load significantly lessened and now serving as Assistant Dean the load is manageable. But manageable was not what I was seeking. I wanted to connect with my award winning teaching self again. I wanted to renew the passion and enthusiasm of not only spending time with college students but planning curriculum and instructional strategies that energize both my students and me.

My epiphany began when I was selected to join a Faculty Learning Community with the title: Using Integrative Learning to Promote Environmental Literacy. Within the community sessions, we discussed the concept of sustainability, usually in the context of the environment. But through these discussions I realized that I had found the key to rediscovering the passion for excellence of teaching that I had lost to administrative duties. I realized that I needed to develop a way to sustain my drive towards excellence in teaching. Here is my journey.

Sustainability Definitions and Models

I began with delving into the literature on Sustainability. Scholars debate and disagree over the actual or accepted definition of sustainability (Bell & Morse, 2000). Even when I investigated the definitions and explanation of the word, "sustain," I discovered many different interpretations.



Figure 1. Sustain Wordle. Visual representation of the many definitions of the word, sustain, using www.wordle.net.

Despite the confusing definitions, we do know that the term was born out of the synergy between humans and the environment.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (n.d.) explains that “everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment” (p.1). This statement clarifies the importance of sustaining the natural environment. The term sustainability then developed into “create[ing] and maintain[ing] the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations” (p.1). Bell and Morse (2000) help us understand the conditions under which this synergy between humans and nature can occur as well as the complexity of trying to measure and quantify those conditions. These sustainability indicators can be subsumed into three categories (social, economic, ecological). The social indicator focuses on the human capital; the economic indicator explains the cost involved; the ecological indicator includes all the nature elements (Bell & Morse, 2000).

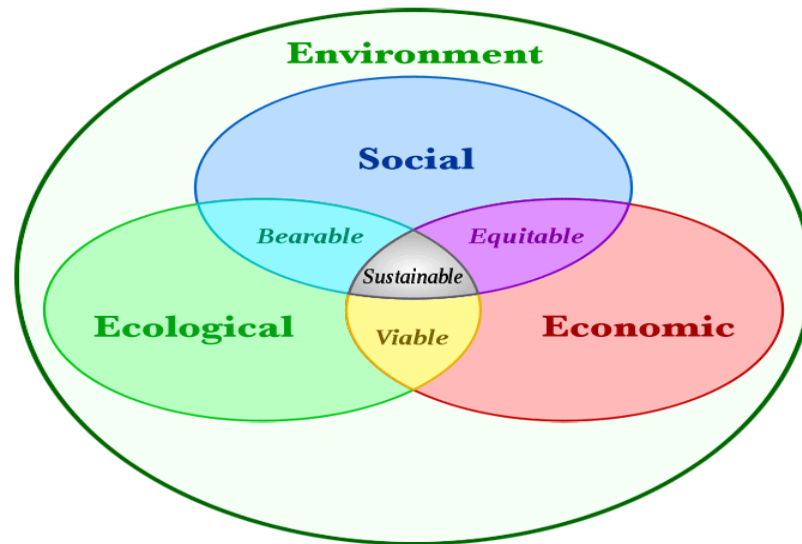


Figure 2: " The "three pillars" of sustainability bounded by the environment" By Andrew, Sunray, based on "File:Sustainable development.svg" by Johann Dréo (created in Photoshop) [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC-BY-SA-3.0-2.5-2.0-1.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Sustainability Model in Use Outside the Environment

A search of the literature also revealed that Sustainability principles are not solely used to explain the interconnectiveness between humans and the environment but are now used to explain other constructs such as business formats, health care, and even leadership models. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) constructed seven principles of sustainability in regards to leadership and how to act on these. These principles as well can be mapped onto the three indicator categories. In the social category, Hargreaves & Fink (2006) would consider matching three principles: depth, length and breadth where depth is integrity and morality linked to leadership; length is encompassing leadership endurance and planned continuity; and breadth is a category to explain one's aspirations as a leader. In the economic category, justice and diversity would be linked so to explain the cost in taking risks and the decision process among choices and variability. Lastly, resourcefulness and conservation would connect to the ecological category. Here a leader would renew energy and work to not deplete resources as well as learn from past wisdom.

Mapping the three indicator categories (social, economic, and ecological) of sustainability on principles of sustainability of leadership shows how the interconnected model of the indicator categories can be extended to different entities. To extend this premise to sustaining the drive towards excellence in teaching, we need to identify the conditions (indicators) under which the drive towards excellence is satisfied and maintained.

Three Main Factors of Sustainability of Excellence in Teaching

We can brainstorm indicators that help us sustain our drive towards excellence in teaching and we can also look to the literature for faculty vitality factors.

Constructive Feedback	Awards	Technology
Peer group	Innovative	Fearlessness
Mentor	Balance	Reflection
Creativity	Intellectual Stimulation	Training
Student Learning	Conferences	Collaboration

Figure 4: Excellence in Teaching Indicators: Anecdotal data generated through conversation with faculty members from varying departments located in one Midwestern state.

In the faculty vitality literature, Bland & Bergquist (1997) explain that factors that influence vitality fall into two categories: Intrinsic (for example: work habits, subject knowledge, network of colleagues, sufficient work time, and autonomy): and, Extrinsic (for example: clear goals, fair salaries, opportunities for growth, and a supportive academic culture).

Using the indicators of sustaining teaching excellence and faculty vitality and aligning with the Bell & Morse (2000) sustainability categories, I have developed the three main factors for sustaining the drive towards excellence in teaching.

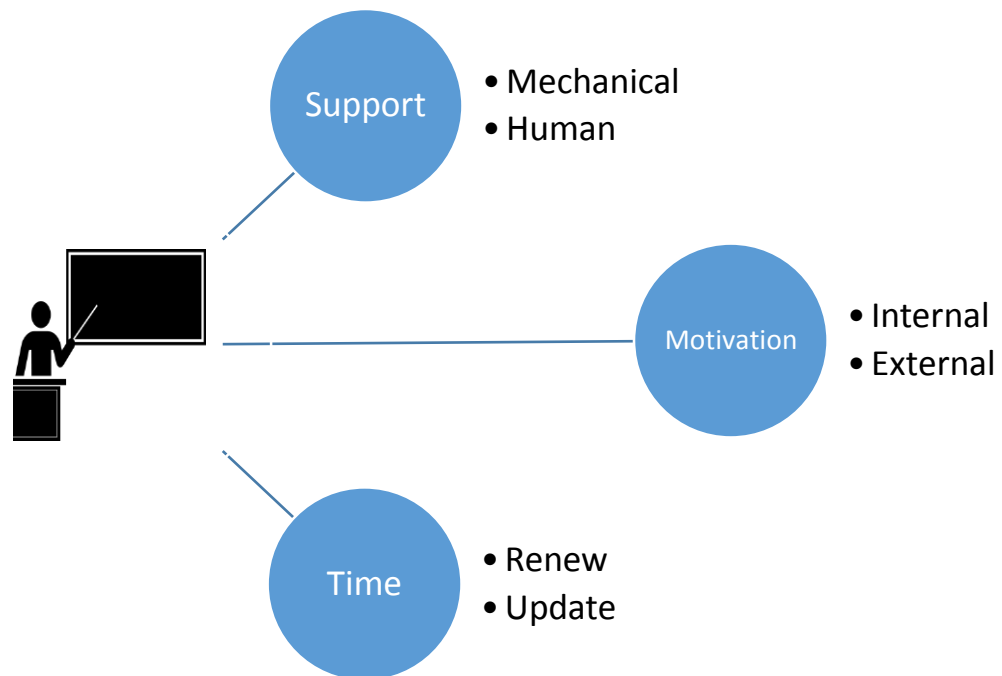


Figure 5: Three Main Factors for Sustaining Excellence in Teaching (Clipart retrieved from <http://openclipart.org/detail/185205/teaching-male-by-ousia-185205>).

Not in any particular order, to sustain one's drive towards excellence in teaching one needs Support. This category aligns well with the Bell & Morse (2000) sustainability model, social construct, where humans and the resources that humans can produce are an essential commodity in sustaining the environment. In this model, support can come in two forms: mechanical and/or human. This Support category can come from inanimate mechanical resources such as technology, finances, awards, recognition. New technology can propel us into innovation to sustain excellence. An award or recognition that supports the efforts we contribute can sustain excellence because recognition can re-instill confidence. Expected or even better unexpected finances through grants, awards, bonuses, etc. can also sustain us. Support can also come from human capital such as support from a mentor, peer group, family and/or administration. Having administrators support one's ideas for innovation either monetarily or through a time release can most definitely support our drive for excellence. With ample support, we will have the motivation to move beyond the status quo.

Motivation is also a main factor in sustaining the drive towards excellence in teaching. Motivation can come either externally or internally. Some of the external motivation will come from the support indicators mentioned as well as from constructive feedback. When a peer group or mentor gives us constructive feedback, we are motivated to make changes and improve. External motivation can also come from the fact that we are to some extent held accountable to succeed in teaching. This accountability will motivate us to sustain our drive for excellence. Another motivator is the ultimate reason why we teach...student learning. The sheer notion that teaching is for simply student learning will motivate us to continually reflect, revise, and renew teaching based upon the external feedback from students' academic success or personal evaluation. Helling & Helling (1989) in the faculty vitality literature agrees that

teacher renewal can come from student success in learning and these incremental successes can renew our drive for excellence. Sometimes the external motivation will trigger internal motivation. To sustain our drive towards excellence in teaching, we will rely on internal motivations that are intentional such as goal-setting, focus-driven, and decisive-planning, and unintentional such as being fearless, open-minded, creative, and innovative. This internal motivation can help propel us out of a comfort zone where creativity and innovation can occur uninhibited. This motivation is natural and also it is natural to be motivated by student learning. This is why I have aligned this category with the Bell & Morse (2000) category of ecology, the nature elements of the environment. The ultimate reason for sustaining the environment is the environment itself. The ultimate reason for our motivation towards excellence in teaching is our student's learning success.

Lastly and most definitely not the least factor to sustain the drive towards excellence in teaching is time. Time linked directly to the economics category of the Bell & Morse (2000) model as both entities are a balance of costs. Time is needed to update skills and time is needed for renewal. For updating skills, one may choose to attend a conference, workshop or teacher training session. One may seek out fresh/diverse perspectives through webinars or face to face encounters with master teachers. Beginning a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project may reveal data to help sustain excellence in teaching. One may also work in collaboration with other teachers updating course material, developing new courses, or delivering integrated curriculum. An important use of time that we more often forget is time for renewal. We need to allow time to think about one's teaching; reflect upon what is working and what needs to be revised. We also need time to be social to renew as humans so that professional life can be renewed as well. This social time will allow us the rejuvenation that we need to be innovative, to allow for intellectual stimulation, and to provide us a balance.

Implementation to Sustain

The model alone will not help us sustain our drive. We need to develop a process by which an implementation of the model can occur. This prompted my return to the literature to examine the implementation of the Bell & Morse (2000) model in the environment. Most implementation structures involve some sort of quantification of indicators; which indicators are of most value to exhibit change in behavior. There are many different models describing sustainability and quantifying the indicators. "Quantification, however, does have limitations, and clearly it is not possible to measure all human experiences" (Bell & Morse, 2000, p. 42). However, a general mathematical model can be used to conceptually understand the process of sustainability. As Onwueme & Borsari (2007) explain, quantifiable indices can be calculated and then interpreted to improve sustainability for any system.

Onwueme & Borsari (2007) used a horizontal asymptote to display that the lower the calculated index (x-axis, positive sustainability indicators) the more gain in improvement (y-axis, percent of sustainability) can be expected with small adjustments. In a horizontal asymptote graph, growth is displayed as large at first and tapers off towards the end.

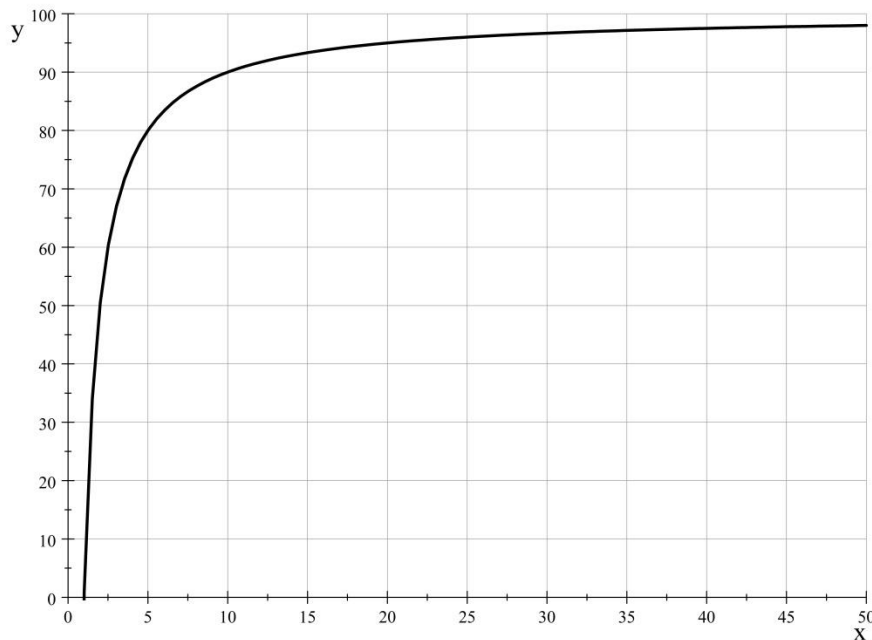


Figure 3: Horizontal Asymptote using $Y=(1-1/x)*100$ function created by Mr. Joshua Gottemoller using www.desmos.com online graphing tool. Used with permission granted August 15, 2014.

Onwueme & Borsari (2007) used a graph of a horizontal asymptote to explain that those indicators that are calculated as small indices would show greater growth. For example, a community decides to construct a wind turbine. They find an ideal location for the wind turbine having less negative impact on the environment. They calculate the economic impact and find the turbine as an advantage for the community. They are now in need of human support. In this graph, the ecological and economic aspect would be calculated as a high index (x-axis) and any improvements to these factors would be small in growth and cost a lot in effort. The social aspect would be calculated as having a low index (x-axis) and could conceivably entertain large growth with a small amount of effort. The goal is to have all three components working together to approximate as close to 100% sustainability as possible. Therefore, it is important to analyze which indicators are the lowest in the sustainable system and work on those first since this will give the highest gain and hence closer approximation to 100% sustainability.

One important factor to keep in mind though is “no matter how good a person or system is, there is always a sustainability deficit that cannot be overcome” (Onwueme & Borsari, 2007, p. 47). From this model we can understand that 100% is not achievable, therefore “the quest for perfection is the enemy of improvement” (Sullivan & Thompson, 2013, p. 219).

Sustaining excellence in teaching is not always easy no matter how supported and motivated we are and how much time we are given. What we have learned from implementing environmental sustainability is that a sustainable system is in balance with its resources. A sustainable system does not use up all of the resources before any new resources are generated. In teaching, we need to make sure that we do not use up energy before we are renewed; that we do not use up capital resources before we are

awarded more; that we do not use up time before we have completed the task at hand. As Bell & Morse (2000) explain the sustainability factors are all interrelated and need to be monitored to ensure sustainability. Onwueme & Borsari (2007) gave me an implementation process to help monitor the factors, prioritize the improvements, and make progress towards sustainability. For example, upon my return to full time faculty rank, I would rate my support index as rather high. I was able to acquire a couple of grants, and received a couple of teaching awards so my mechanical and human support was in check. I would also rate my motivation as rather high. The aforementioned support was externally motivating as well as my internal motivation was high since I encountered the epiphany in the faculty learning community. The time factor would be lowest on the index and therefore my priority. Remember that Onwueme & Borsari (2007) explain that factors with low indexes should gain more attention because greater gain can be obtained. I know there will be barriers and obstacles to improving upon the time factor and thus sustaining my drive towards excellence in teaching. The key to being sustainable is to avoid the plateau, avoid getting stuck, and avoid getting burnt out. My personal focus was to improve upon my time for skill development and renewal. So my journey continues... I have a model of sustainability; I have an implementation strategy; now I need to find solution models to overcome the obstacles.

Solution Models

Incremental renewals.

In the environment, resources need time to renew so to sustain the balance between using resources and generating resources. Phelps (2012) explains that teachers also need renewal to help us balance professional work. Weirisma (1989) agrees the vitality of faculty involves faculty engaging in “self-promotion” by redefining teaching. Phelps (2012) suggests this redefining can be in the form of a “Renewal Activities Checklist” (p. 28) used to refuel teaching resources.

- Talk with a teaching colleague. Brainstorm ideas.
- Ask to be assigned a new course preparation.
- Change textbooks or select current articles for a course.
- Write an instructional mini-grant to support an innovative idea.
- Attend a workshop or conference on teaching.
- Read a book about teaching.
- Form or join a book discussion group.
- Blog about teaching matters.
- Go on a retreat for reflection.
- Seek a new role in the department or college.
- Ask a colleague to observe your teaching.
- Observe others' teaching.
- Get to know your students better.
- Learn more about motivation.
- Enroll in a class of some kind.

The items on this checklist can be categorized within the three main factors of sustaining the drive towards excellence in teaching and mirror sustaining resources in

the environment. For example, writing and obtaining an instructional mini-grant is a form of mechanical support for teaching, similar to obtaining a grant to fund an innovative idea to recycle used car tires. Another example would be being assigned a new course which externally motivates a teacher to reflect upon curriculum and instructional strategies. Similar to when scientists need to rethink a depleting habitat for a certain species of animal and decide to move the animal to a more suitable space or work to replenish the current habitat. To sustain the drive towards excellence in teaching not all items on the list need to be checked, not all items on the list need to be accomplished in a certain amount of time.

Another way to enhance incremental renewal is with Parker Palmer (1993) in his renowned work in studying the passion for teaching. He suggests renewal comes out of reflection and reflection involving a group of faculty is even more powerful. In his book, *Good Talk about Good Teaching*, he proposes to work through reflection prompts with a group of faculty in a faculty learning community type of environment. Reflection prompts could include: "critical moments in teaching and learning; the human condition of teachers and learners; metaphors and images of what we are doing when we teach; and autobiographical reflection on the great teachers who helped bring us into academic life" (p.10). This type of reflection can forge a path towards renewal and renewal can be incremental taking one step at a time slowly moving towards sustainability.

Systematic progression.

Incremental renewal is a pathway that is nonlinear, one that can be started and stopped at any time, one that is abstract in nature. When an issue arises a solution is sought. When renewal is needed, a solution is developed. Systematic Progression is by nature a process that is more systematic, linear, and progressive. A plan is put into effect that helps the individual avoid plateaus, avoid getting stuck, avoid getting burnt out. Two books come to mind when planning a systematic progression approach to sustaining the drive towards teaching excellence, *The Plateau Effect: Getting from Stuck to Success* by Bob Sullivan and Hugh Thompson and *Eat That Frog! 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time* by Brian Tracy.

Plateau effect.

As I explained in the Epiphany section of this paper, my plateau, my choke point, my point in my career where I felt stuck was after serving as Interim Dean in the department. The year I served as Interim Dean was productive in terms of administration; we successfully navigated the accreditation process and we were successful in hiring a new permanent Dean. It was when I returned to my faculty role that I felt lost about where to go. I knew I needed to renew my research interests but with a year absence from my research some data sets just were too old to come back to, also I was not as passionate about the current theme of my research as I was before the Dean's position. I also found myself going through the motions of teaching but not feeling the enjoyment that once was there. I had plateaued and I needed help to move through this phase into a more productive phase that could invigorate the teacher I once was. I needed renewal. I engaged in the renewal activities checklist from Phelps (2012) and I utilized some principles from Sullivan & Thompson (2013) such as identifying the

choke point. I was also able to use The Plateau Effect approach to make some systematic progression in my career. Two of the principles outlined were setting clear benchmarks and thinking about solutions on a larger timescale. I gave myself a mental break and didn't expect radical improvement over one semester even over one academic year. I am still introducing new renewal strategies such as taking course work and reading about teaching to renew my spirit and sustain my drive towards excellence in teaching. In giving myself this mental break and not expecting perfection and not even expecting radical improvements overnight, I also realized that it is a fine line between too much pressure and slacking. So I keep my benchmarks in sight and I used "Eat that Frog" principles to systematically progress through the benchmarks.

Eat that frog.

Tracy's (2007) premise in *Eat that Frog* is to tackle the big task first. More sense of accomplishment will come from completing the big task than accomplishing a laundry list of smaller more mundane tasks. Although I always thought I was satisfied with checking tasks off my list, I found with the "Eat that Frog" premise that I am more satisfied leaving the minute tasks behind and tackling the "elephant in the room." So now my task lists are shorter because I just compile all minute tasks into a catch-up category and only work diligently on the tasks that involve intellectual rigor and concentration. For example, instead of spending the first hour of every work day sifting through email, I don't open my email and I turn off the notification on the computer. I then get to work on the one item that has been hanging over my head; the one item that if I could just get that large task completed, I would feel accomplished. When I can check that item off the list or at least make significant progress on that item then I can justify tackling the catch-up category. Then I check the dreaded email. And to my surprise, no one needed me to answer those emails immediately. I have never had to apologize for working on a much larger task than email. I am more productive and it is noticeable.

Conclusion

Sustainability of the drive towards excellence in teaching is important. It is important to teaching and student learning. How one goes about accomplishing sustainability is a very personal endeavor. One may be able to mirror the principles of sustaining the environment. One may be able to balance support, motivation, and time resources. Like me, one may need to identify the choke point and move past it. Suggestions and advice from Phelps (2012), Sullivan & Thompson (2013) and Tracy (2007) may offer some comfort, motivation, or jolt that is needed. Or another pathway may lead one to the same conclusion. Whichever way one chooses, I hope that he/she is able to find a way to sustain excellence in teaching for his/her students' sake and for him/her. We are worth it!

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