**Answers to questionnaire for ATPE Teacher of The Year**

**Howard Ritz**

**Essay I Philosophy of Education:**

The old aphorism “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink it” is not complete without the phrase “but you can put salt in his oats.” As I continue to evaluate and reevaluate my purpose in education, I find that inspiration is more important than education. I may not be able to implement all of the new classroom strategies or impress my students with my insights into Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, but I can connect with my students where they are, arouse their curiosity, and walk with them on their life long journey of self-discovery. Education is more than just providing worksheets and preparing students for state and national exams. It goes beyond even preparing our students for what we call the “real world.” Education is a process whereby each educator elevates their students to visualizing and tasting a sample of their true potential. Our students are not here to justify our existence, but we are here to enhance their journey to self-discovery and significance.

Students don’t care how much I know until they know how much I care. In order to connect with my students I must make myself available to them outside as well as inside the classroom. Arriving early and staying late, for those who not only need tutoring but someone to listen in silence, is only one aspect of convincing adolescents that I care. Giving out my cell phone number or email address gives them the confidence that this is not just a job but a ministry for me and that I am here for them. Meeting them at the door with a handshake, smile, and a kind word creates an atmosphere of mutual respect preparing the students’ hearts as well as their minds for the learning experience. Once inside the classroom the challenge of meeting each student’s needs as an individual in a group really begins. Creating an emotionally safe environment with affirmation, quiet admonition, and authenticity without pretension seems to be successful in disarming students’ feelings of intimidation and anxiety. I have found that students who feel safe, and see themselves as a significant part of the class are more open to taking on more responsibility for their actions as well as taking risks to taste the possibilities that each learning experience offers them.

When I have connected with my students, I know what makes their mouth water. This knowledge empowers and energizes my creative spirit in transforming the curriculum into a quest for understanding themselves as well as the world into which they were born. Provoking my students’ curiosity with open-ended questions and sometimes, unanswerable imponderables lifts their spirits to no longer depend on a teacher for the answers but to research, contemplate, and take ownership of the treasures they themselves have discovered. Once the student discovers the refreshment and gratification this new knowledge grants them, I find they continue to come back to drink for themselves.

Once my students begin to thirst and hunger for the answers to their own questions, it is a simple task of getting out of their way. Though it may feed our own ego to be the “guru” and source of all knowledge it is important for us to walk beside our students as a guide and not stand before them as the final authority. We must point the way and not be in the way. It is more important for them to see themselves in their future than being trapped in the shadow of our brilliance.

Someone once said that love is its own reward; I believe so is teaching. Though students may or may not ever return to us to thank us, we can look over the horizon of the future with the confidence that our success is not measured by how much water is in our own well of knowledge but in how often our students drink from their own cisterns.

**Essay II: Education Issues and Trends:**

Who am I, amongst so many credible scholars, to address the major issues that confront us in public education? Because I have the honor, the expectation and the responsibility in this forum to share my own limited perspective, I will endeavor to shine my light in the darkness to which we have all become so accustom. The biggest issue facing public education today is not one that can be corrected with more taxes, lotteries, or even the infamous Robin Hood Plan. It cannot be solved with more seminars, publications, regulations, or new certifications. We can increase the standards, test our achievements, and continue to reevaluate our progress, but all of our efforts are nothing more than rearranging the obstacles in the maze. Realizing our students are trying to find themselves in the shadows of our expectations we must do more than rearrange our priorities or curse the darkness. In the midst of political agendas, academic research, and the recycling of “new” methodologies we lose sight of the switch that will illuminate the direction in which we wish our students to go in finding their way in this world.

Though what we do collectively and individually throughout the academic community is well intentioned and sometimes productive, our success will be limited until we recognize that our major obstacle is attitudinal and not financial or political.

 It is easy for teachers trapped in an ever changing maze to get distracted as well as discouraged. In an effort to implement new policies, as well as educate their students, and pour themselves into the lives of the next generation it is easy to lose sight of our purpose. Fatigue and frustration cast shadows on the hopes and aspirations they had as a new teacher until many times their own light suffers burn out. Some quit while others commit to plodding through the darkness confused that their students don’t see the importance of their instruction or direction.

Instead of cursing the darkness we need to light a torch of enthusiasm for the greatest profession on earth. Holding it high, we can expand our vision beyond the “Three Rs.” We need to look beyond the states minimum requirements, national tests, and the continuing demands that overshadow, intimidate, and perplex us. Just because we may find ourselves lost in this political and ever-changing maze gives us no justification or benefit in repeating the same complaints year after year. We must remember that we are in this maze by choice and need to hold our heads up high and keep our torches trimmed. Though there are more “Rs” that will enlighten my spirit and brighten the way for my colleagues and students, I have chosen these seven to fuel my own desire to continue this wonderful journey through the halls of academia. They are:

Refrain from a critical attitude

Rejoice in small achievements

Respond positively to change

Remember the reason I am here

Recognize my own limitations

Respect the person and the place each student and colleague is in his/her life.

Reevaluate what works and what doesn’t.

These “Rs” fuel my enthusiasm for the teaching profession and enlighten my way so that I am able to see not only the light at the end of this maze but also the accomplishments and needs of those on this journey with me. Light dispels darkness, attitudes are contagious, and success breeds success, so we have a choice before us. We as educators will always choose to light our way with this enthusiasm instead of cursing the darkness, but we find that unless we keep refueling our lamps we will soon burn out.

 **Essay III Personal Teaching Style:**

The wise King Solomon said, “There is no new thing under the Sun.” Therefore, I can not take any credit for either my teaching strategies or style for they have been gathered, borrowed, and maybe even stolen from other educators wiser than myself. I have gained new tools, strategies and perspectives from a variety of sources over the years. My teaching style is as old as Socrates with his own method of teaching by asking those imponderable questions. The new insights from seminars like “Six traits of Writing,” “Love and Logic,” and “Team leadership” have served to sharpen my teaching skills as well as energize my spirit. My classroom is a conglomerate of the same successful strategies used in almost every classroom across America. I post the students work up on the walls; we do cooperative learning activities, research, share our research, and even decorate the room with decorations to emphasize what we are studying. So what would make my teaching style or methods different than any of the other successful teachers? I would have to contribute the success I discover with my students in the classroom to my own unique humor I bring to the classroom, the utilization of cooperative competition, and publishing the success of my students on a regular basis.

 I have abandoned the pretentious attitude of education and made a commitment to do anything to keep my students attention and to reduce the level of stress they feel when they enter the classroom. I will act out, animate, and demonstrate the learning objectives in a visual manner. I operate that it is not only ok to laugh in my classroom but it is encouraged. Rather than get mad when students misbehave I know I have to catch their attention before I can redirect their activity. This may be achieved with a song, or pan amine, or a crazy look with eye contact. Tapping into my students creative spirits I will encourage them to create humorous power point presentations with or create videos illustrating their knowledge of the material learned. Creating a safe emotional environment for my students to express themselves and their opinions creates lively, informational and many times a very humorous classroom as we laugh at ourselves. I have found that there is indeed a converse correlation to the amount of stress in the classroom and student achievement. Contrary to popular opinion we need not raise the level of anxiety as we raise our level of expectation. Bringing humor into the classroom has only served to raise the performance of my students and willing to overcome the fear of failure as we unite together in a common purpose.

This cooperative spirit combined with providing opportunities for students to show off and be proud of what they know creates a team spirit where everyone wins. Incorporating competition within the classroom allows students to gain from the performance of their peers. We as a class make a commitment to establish an open ended question and then to read, research, and look at all sides of that particular issue. Students then present their findings, draw their own personal conclusions, and debate the validity of their arguments with the evidence they themselves have found or brainstormed with other students. Incorporating a student lead effort as opposed to an authoritarian driven classroom has demonstrated success for my students in and out of the classroom. Students have spent more time researching for a competitive event with other students that they would have spent if they were simply being test over the same material. In preparing for competition students have been found to develop a love for learning not just a compulsion to cram for a test. What they learn in this competitive environment where they must proclaim what they know results in not only a longer retention of the material but also a sense of pride and self accomplishment that a punitive grading scale could never produce. Not only do students in this classroom learn and assess their own performance, but assist other students as mentors, which also serves to establish a healthier self-esteem.

Publishing each student’s success either with a positive rewarding phone call or email to their parents as well as former teachers develops a sense of community as the student is reinforced not only internally with a sense of self satisfaction but also with affirmations coming back to them from unexpected praise. This also allows fellow educators to take pride in the investment that they have made in these students. As we continue to brag on our students and on the efforts of our colleague’s success will continue to breed success in our students as well as bond us together as a community of educators.**Essay IV Biography:**

From Mrs. Dugan in First grade, Miss Garcia in second, Miss Kiss in sixth grade, teachers have intimidated, intrigued, and inspired me from my earliest memories. As a young child they held the key to my future as well as the wisdom of the ages. Coming from a blue collar family with two mentally challenged brothers and an overbearing father with a fifth grade education, I quickly came to the conclusion that as much as I would aspire and dream of joining this academic elite it was never meant to be. These wise sages towered above this little guy with their assignments, admonitions, and deadlines. Their tasks seemed unrealistic and their demeanor mostly professional and distant. They were like magicians demonstrating illusions I would never grasp. Through much study and hard work, I would be rewarded with a disappointing “C” at the top, indiscernible symbols in the margins and red marks throughout each paper that I wrote. It was their job to elevate their own importance and to keep me in my place. Sit down, shut up, and listen to their continual droning. Though frustrated with my own performance I was enthralled that anyone could possess such knowledge. Year after year I met their minimum standards and plodded my way alone through historical facts, scientific methods, and the maze of meaningless mathematical formulas. Arriving at junior high the frustration only increased as I got lost in the mass of students and strangers flooding the halls past me as I fumbled through the process of opening my locker combination.

Learning the combination to my locker was nothing compared to unlocking my future and what I wanted to be when I grew up. Busy working with my father till late at night, cramming for tests, and trying to discover my identity, and wondering why I had to read things twice to understand them filled this young student with anxiety and frustration and left my heart empty of any hope that I had a future any better than my father’s. Though I was the first to graduate from high school, (and that at age seventeen) there was no encouragement to go on to college. With no parents who believed in me, no teachers to encourage me, and no counselors to direct my decisions, I joined the United State Air Force upon graduation. After four years in the service, I realized that college may just be a possibility, but teaching was still a far off dream. Struggling through a Baptist College again with professors who were stoic and distant I was able to graduate with a higher level of education but still with my self-esteem in the basement. It was only after many years of life with its experiences and finally raising my own children did I finally realize that I had a lot to offer other children besides my own. Returning to college, at the University of Texas at Arlington, I began to focus not on my ability but on what I had to offer. Step by step I added to my Bachelors of Science Degree a “Teaching Certificate.”

I realized little by little that it is not our aptitude as much as it is one’s attitude that determines one’s success. I had one goal and that was to place myself in a position to encourage someone like myself who struggled to find themselves in the world. I concluded that there must be others who find themselves frustrated in the halls of academia that could use someone to simply encourage them. Smart kids who didn’t know they are smart and kids with abilities of which they are not even aware need someone to connect with them and encourage them with the fact that if I could achieve my goal of teaching they could achieve their dreams as well.

As time has proven over and over again, everyone can dream, but sometimes we need others to affirm that the possibilities of our future are greater than even our dreams. Having students all over the country reaffirming that what they appreciate and remember the most are not the facts that I taught them, but that the encouragement and inspiration I instilled in their hearts to believe that the possibilities of the future are beyond their wildest imagination is indeed gratifying. Having a “content mastery” student now graduating from Texas Tech and going to medical school and another at Yale University are only two of those who continue to keep in touch and thank me for just believing in them when they didn’t believe in themselves.

 I can’t change the past of my life, but I can invest in the future of those who follow.