

Book Review

The Way of the Teacher

J. M. Haile (Macatea Productions, June 2005)

Review by

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One of the tangible benefits of the increased attention given to teaching and learning in recent years has been the increased number of books published in this area. Many of these books are focused on specific topics such as collaborative learning, assessment, teaching first-year students, service learning, or teaching in specific disciplines. But very few books focus on what the anthropologist and systems thinker Gregory Bateson described in *Mind and Nature* as “the patterns which connect” teaching and learning. It is exactly those patterns that *The Way of the Teacher* focuses on, which makes reading this book a very unique experience.

The author, J.M. Haile, has patterned his book after the *Tao Te Ching*, the over 2000 year old Chinese text that is one of the world’s great treasures of wisdom literature. *The Way of the Teacher* uses the same minimalist language and presentation of apparent paradoxes as the *Tao Te Ching* to look at patterns that connect teaching and learning:

“Patterns of thought
must be presented to students
in logical and self-consistent ways.

In other words,
a certain amount of scaffolding must be constructed
to support a pattern or network of ideas
when it is first presented to students.

Thereafter,
Students must practice using the new pattern:
by repeatedly exercising a new conceptual structure,
students slowly dissolve the scaffolding,
leaving the structural pattern
standing independently,
yet connected to other networks of ideas.”

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“Every student is born with a set of talents

But those talents will be developed -
the associated skills will be practiced
and thoughtful growth will occur -

Only when students learn to genuinely care
about what they are doing.

Ditto for teachers.”

The book is arranged in five chapters - Teaching, Learning, Students, Problem Solving, and Master Teachers - with each chapter containing from 10 to 25 of what the author calls “threads.” The two passages quoted here are two separate threads and are typical of the length and formatting of these short and open-ended pieces. As the passages above demonstrate, this is not a book of prescribed answers that teachers should simply implement. The author makes clear in the preface that this book was written for teachers who are dissatisfied with how students are currently benefiting from their classes and seek “some, usually modest, guidance and encouragement.” But Haile goes on to say “no quick fixes are offered here - this book is not about the mechanics of teaching or learning...Instead, in this book I try to illuminate certain issues that I believe you must resolve in your own mind, if you are to master your profession.” Having read the book in its entirety and in parts, I found myself again and again bringing my own experiences as a teacher to the patterns and frameworks suggested by each thread. There are very few books in the teaching literature that are consciously designed to provide so much space for readers to “insert” themselves into the text.

The text is not what we normally expect of more formal academic treatises. While Haile does include footnotes to indicate when a particular image, pattern, or phrase comes from another source, there are many threads that have no footnotes at all. This approach was done intentionally, as Haile makes clear in the preface. But *The Way of the Teacher* is clearly scholarship, an example of what Maryellen Weimer in *Enhancing Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning* calls the personal narrative approach to “wisdom of practice scholarship.” Haile’s book has all the characteristics that Weimer identifies in high quality personal narratives: in-depth and critical self-reflection, transcendence of personal relevance and application, originality of insights, and excellence of writing. Haile taught science and engineering at the college level for 24 years, and that experience clearly colors *The Way of the Teacher*. But the patterns that he presents in the book will be useful to faculty from all disciplines. The list at the end of the book with over 30 different entries under “Literature Cited” is testament to the breadth of knowledge that Haile has drawn on in the course of his own reflections. I highly recommend *The Way of the Teacher* as a book to be read slowly, savored, and deeply reflected upon.