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: connection makes learning stick



Fahad Hassan

## In Praise of Non-traditional Teachers

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**Click here to read an original op-ed from the TED speaker who inspired this post and watch the TEDTalk below.**

There are a lot of different types of teachers out there, but some have greater impact on our lives because of the relationships we forge with them. This is the focal point of Rita Pierson's TEDTalk, in which she says, "One of the things we rarely discuss is the value of human relationships" -- a sentiment I could not agree with more.

Today I want to bring special attention to the "non-traditional" teachers we've all had that are often the unsung heroes of our lives. I'm talking about our coaches, mentors, friends, and even our first few bosses who hired us for all those summer internships.

My transformation from a curious, geeky, computer programming kid in the '90s to who I am today really begins around ninth grade. At that time, Johns Hopkins was launching a new summer program for high school students interested in engineering and computer science, with the promise of a summer internship after class. Dr. Richard Scott was the Director of the HeadsUp Program, and was also one of my earliest "teachers" outside the classroom. We had an amazing relationship. He taught me about the importance of going to college, how to major in a subject I was passionate about, and what my studies could translate into after college. My time in this program was a perfect balance between being taught amazing things in a classroom and gaining knowledge with real world experiences outside of it. They were some of the most formative years of my life. I also realized for the first time that my teachers outside of school were just as important as my teachers in school.

During her TEDTalk, Mrs. Pierson talks about the different types of relationships she experienced throughout her life, and focuses on a few that really caught my attention. She explained how her mother (who was also a teacher) would bring crackers and peanut butter to school so that the poorer kids in her class wouldn't go hungry throughout the day. She discusses the influence her fellow teachers had on her, and brings up a few who simply wanted to teach and go home without building any relationships at all. When recalling how hundreds of her mother's former students attended her mother's funeral to show their respect, she especially emphasizes how the best relationships pass the test of time.

However, my favorite story during Mrs. Pierson's TEDTalk revolves around a student who got a two out of twenty on a test, but received his paper back with a smiley face on it. The puzzled student asked Mrs. Pierson why he had gotten a smiley face on a failing paper, to which she replied, "Because you got two in a row! You're on a roll and I'm sure you'll do better on the next test."

It takes a special teacher and an even greater relationship to respond to a failing student in such a positive manner. As Mrs. Pierson says, "Minus eighteen sucks the life out of you, but plus two says 'I ain't all bad'."

I want to thank all of my teachers who focused on the plus two's with me and blessed me with positive reinforcement over the years. Ironically, the five or six "teachers" I immediately thought of as I watched Mrs. Pierson's TED talk were those with whom I had the greatest relationships.

I remembered Mr. Stiefel, my fourth grade teacher who made learning science incredibly fun; Mrs. Russell my A.P. English teacher who helped me write my first college essay; Dr. Britt at Virginia Tech, who challenged me on an academic level like I'd never been challenged before; Fred Kim, my high school football coach who taught me the value of hard work during the season and outside of it; and I especially remember Bill Schafer, one of my earliest business mentors, who taught me everything I needed to know in those early days about building a company. No book, test or course could ever serve as a substitute to the lessons I was taught by all these people, and I'm grateful for the relationships I built with them.

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## Rita F. Pierson

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