Way back when I was a junior in high school, I had the good fortune to be in the English class of the best teacher I ever had (encompassing not only K-12, but college and graduate school). This was not a special course of any kind: it was the standard American literature class taken by nearly every one of the other 794 kids in my 11th grade class (including my classmate Jim Janos, who later became the Minnesota governor known as Jesse “The Body” Ventura, though who at that point was mostly known to me as the guy who often beat up my best friend on the way to school—but that’s another story).

The teacher was David Bane, who was in his early 30s at the time. Mr. Bane's gift was that he could reach nearly everyone in the class—from the jocks and cheerleaders (this was pre-Title IX) to the kids who were just passing through the class on their way to graduation, to the few who were actually predisposed to reading Twain, Fitzgerald, and Steinbeck.

So how did he manage this? In a way it sounds simple: David Bane was a great prober and questioner, and he had a real intellectual talent for connecting students’ thoughts and actions with larger ideas and knowledge. He constantly challenged us—not so much as a class, but as individuals. He challenged our thinking, our points of view, our ethics, even some of our personal foibles. He knew which passages would stir debate in the class in general, and when a passage would strike one of us as significant to our lives. He could spot kids who were taking an intellectual snooze and draw them out of their somnambulism. He wasn’t afraid to get personal, but he wasn’t harsh or sarcastic, instead showing sincere concern or perhaps a sly grin (e.g., “Kysilko, some might call that ‘intellectual snobbery’ – what do you think?”).

He also gave us opportunities to, as he dubbed it, “Do Something!” This was our chance to produce something related to the books or discussions we’d had in class, which could include writing an article or letter to the editor of the city newspaper, the school newspaper, or even our underground school newspaper; interviewing someone about an issue; giving a speech or presentation about one of the issues; writing a story or poem in the style (either straight up or satirically) of one of the authors we were reading; or just reading more by one of those authors.

Nor did he let himself off the hook. He also assigned himself “Do Something!” projects. I recall, for example, that when I wrote an essay for the school’s literary journal decrying how students were just slaves of the system, he published a thoughtful reply that considered productive ways the school could address the issue (not, admittedly, that the school administration took him up on any of his suggestions).

And when it came to all those questions he asked us, it turned out that many applied equally to his own thinking and point of view—because above all, Mr.

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Bane was a seeker of deeper knowledge. Often, when he probed the class on an issue, he didn't have the answer himself; he was still looking. And though he didn't admit that openly, I think we students implicitly understood—and respected—that we were all on this journey together. And as an aspiring teacher I was particularly in awe because as we probed and searched and actually had many of the students sitting up and engaged, Mr. Bane could usually connect the discussions back to the themes in the books and stories we were reading. Then a little gleam would appear in his eyes that I imagined was saying, “Got you! Yes, we are still in an American lit class and you were actually enjoying it.”

Sadly for the Minneapolis school system, Mr. Bane only lasted five or six more years in the classroom. Was it teacher burnout? I don’t know. In his search for deeper meaning, he journeyed to the Southwest where he immersed himself in the culture of one of the Native American tribes living in the area. But on the way he had enriched the lives of thousands of students. There wasn’t yet a name like deeper learning for what he was doing. It was just great teaching. And now that we do have a name (and even expanded the definition to reflect the 21st century skills that were just emerging back in my high school days), it’s perhaps become something that’s easier for us to aspire to as we take our students—and ourselves—on the learning journey. —DK

To the business community, we urge that you get involved in education in meaningful ways—at the local level, for example, by creating internships, work-study opportunities, or other ways that give students real-world educational experiences; and at the state level, make sure policymakers and the public know that the business community supports efforts to bring deeper learning standards and instruction to all students.

Together, we can help ensure students have the deeper learning skills they need to succeed in their careers and enhance our country’s economic competitiveness and future prosperity.

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