One person’s ideal teacher can be another’s nightmare

Orlando Sentinel
Researchers have spent decades trying to find out what makes a terrific teacher.

What they’ve learned is that a teacher can be perfect for one student and bad for another. They’ve discovered that teaching is a hard subject to measure and that their findings are often contradictory.

Put plainly, it’s hard to say what makes a great teacher.

“One of the interesting issues,” said Gordon Greenword, an education professor who studies these things at the University of Florida in Gainesville, “is whether you learn more under a prof who gave you a hard time and pushed you … or from the popular one that everyone liked.”

High marks for Dr. Fox
The characteristic that college students seem to value, at least according to the teacher evaluations they fill out is enthusiasm.

Yet enthusiasm is not a hallmark of some college teachers, who tend to read from their notes or, in a moment of inspiration, emphatically underline something on the blackboard.

Called the Dr. Fox experiment, it involved a medical conference at which a group of doctors were to listen to a Dr. Michael Fox, who would lecture about a new technique.

Fox was not a doctor. He was a soap opera actor who posed as a doctor. But the audience didn’t know that.

“He got up there and called on all of his abilities to emphasize and enthusiastically expound, rather than acting like the dry academic type who doesn’t deviate far from the notes – the way profs often deliver their lectures,” Greenwood said. “At the end, they not only gave him almost a perfect rating for his performance, but they all said they learned a lot, when in fact he didn’t tell them anything.”

The experiment set off a flurry of other studies that continued into the 1980s. Many academics were outraged that they might be judged on acting ability alone. But, Greenwood said, subsequent research seems to conclude that a great teacher needs to combine knowledge of his subject with the ability to act.

“In fact, I had a number of excellent students who majored in education and minored in theater,” Greenwood said, “but the idea is still not popular with some people. Somebody comes along and says, “What are you saying? Do we send all of our teachers to acting school?”