



# Artisan teacher NOTES

## What is an Artisan Teacher?

By Mike Rutherford, author of *The Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching*

I have an incurable curiosity for teaching. For the past forty years, I've been teaching, observing teachers, and studying teaching. In that time, I've personally observed thousands of classrooms. Contrary to what one might imagine, these thousands of observations have never seemed repetitive or redundant. There is always something new to see, and, the more I look, the more I'm convinced that there are innumerable ways to be excellent as a teacher.

A consistent, recurring pattern has emerged through all these observations. The most successful teachers are skillful. They do things. They make moves. They teach with an attention to detail and a level of execution that produces extra success for learners. They see teaching as a set of skills, some natural and some learned, that combine to produce optimal learning for students. As I have thought about this skillful approach and how it might be best described, I am reminded of an old term that has recently enjoyed a renaissance. The term is Artisan. The teachers who best exemplify this skillful approach to instruction are Artisan Teachers; skilled in the craft of teaching. The word artisan, when used as an adjective, connotes a high quality, hand-made, unique nature. An artisan "this or that" implies that a craftsman created a product in small batches, applying specialized knowledge and skill, with a measure of artistic creativity.

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We often hear of artisan bread, artisan cheese, or artisan jewelry. Historically, the word artisan is a noun. An artisan is a craftsperson. An artisan makes things. Stonemasons, coppersmiths, bakers, tanners, playwrights, songwriters, and tailors are artisans. The fruits of their labor have utility. They create items of value. The item's value is not entirely based on utility, however. It is also based on beauty, design, and delight. An artisan creates an item that is not only sturdy and functional, but beautiful and delightful to use.

Artisans are not purely artists, though artistic expression is found in their work. Artisans are not purely scientists, though scientific knowledge is essential to their work. Artisans are not merely technicians, though skilled labor is the core expression of their work. An artisan is one skilled in the applied arts, a craftsperson... a unique combination of artist, scientist, and skilled laborer. Excellent teachers are just like this. They are Artisans... artful, knowledgeable, skilled, masters of their craft. (Rutherford, 2013, p. 1-5).

An important hallmark of a profession, as opposed to an occupation, is that professionals practice based on an established body of knowledge for the benefit of clients. Physicians practice according to an established medical body of knowledge for the benefit of patients. Attorneys practice according to an established body of legal knowledge on behalf of clients. Airline pilots practice according to an established body of aviation knowledge on behalf of passengers. And educators, if we claim to be professionals too, should practice according to an established body of educational knowledge on behalf of our students.

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Further evidence of this professional approach is found in the use of a common lexicon of terms that describe and illustrate patterns of professional knowledge and practice. Medical Doctors speak and collaborate using terms from a common, scientific lexicon known and spoken by all physicians. Attorneys and airline pilots do the same thing. When this common, scientific lexicon is used, collaboration is clearer, faster, and less prone to error.

The Artisan Themes are derived from thousands of classroom observations. Inside these classrooms I looked for instances of instruction that resulted in unusually high levels of student engagement, success, effort, clarity, thinking, and performance. I watched for instructional approaches that increased students' speed of learning, recall of content, and transfer of knowledge and skills to new settings. When I saw these things happening, I took close and copious notes on the details of how it was happening. If I saw similar instructional results again and again, I began to craft a description of the instructional approach that most dependably delivered the positive learning results. These descriptions began to sort together as themes and the ones that recurred most often and most dependably became the twenty-three themes contained in *The Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching*. The field guide is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all the ways teachers are excellent, but rather a useful way of looking at some of the themes that are most common and have the broadest utility.

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I have also noticed that successful teachers often have idiosyncratic skills; skills that are theirs alone and are not widely seen in other classrooms. It is intriguing to watch teachers use their “signature moves” at key moments of a lesson. This field guide does not attempt to describe these personal techniques since they are, by definition, not widespread. So, to be included in the Artisan Teacher Field Guide, a theme had to qualify in these four ways:

1. The theme must have utility in all content areas.
2. The theme must have utility for all ages and grade levels.
3. The theme must have a body of research and literature to support it.
4. The theme has to be observed repeatedly in the classrooms of successful teachers.

It is important to note that, in my observations of successful teachers, no one attempts to employ all twenty-three themes on a regular basis and certainly not in a single lesson. To do so would be counterproductive. Instead, Artisan Teachers tend to identify the themes in which they are already skilled and employ those skills first and most often, to the great benefit of their students.

Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, in their excellent book *Now Discover Your Strengths*, describe how peak performers in every field approach their craft... “they capitalize on their strengths and manage around their weaknesses” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 27). I see artisan teachers taking a similar approach. Instead of obsessing on areas where they are less effective, they identify their key skills, both innate and learned, and lean more heavily on those.

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They don't ignore their weaknesses, but rather, seek to manage them. *The Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching* is designed to support and enhance this process. Each of the twenty-three themes is presented in an easy to access format that will enable teachers to quickly recognize the themes in their own teaching, determine key skills and strengths, and enhance their practice. Administrators and others with a role in the development of teachers can use the field guide as a resource to support growth-evoking feedback and coaching.

I'd like to gratefully acknowledge the thousands of teachers, who in the midst of a thousand busy days, welcomed me and our observation teams into their classrooms and provided both the inspiration and the evidence for the twenty-three artisan themes. You have been and will continue to be the object of my incurable fascination with excellent teaching.

## References

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