



*John Beck discusses the thinking behind The Economist Business Professor of the Year award and how difficult it is to capture passion in a contest.*

The best professors are passionate – and they change their students' lives. Of course, getting too passionate could land you in jail, but great teachers get excited, involved, and agitated about almost every part of the educational process.

I remember when I first started teaching—in a subject matter, Strategy, that was not my PhD field—my department chairman informed that I should use a particular textbook because that was the book that all the professors in the department used. Having no real alternative in mind, I obediently taught from the book. It was a train wreck of a class. Passion never left the building, because it never entered in the first place. But over time, I learned that if I taught cases and content that has a personal connection for me, my classes had the ability to be transformative. Students would tell me, often years after they'd been in school, that something about a class I taught had changed them forever.

During my career I've had the honor to sit in on classes taught by other professors that have significantly changed me—I wish I could be as good as they are. But I have noticed that these amazing professors are often not the ones running the department or making the most money. Administration and publishing are the activities that bring money and prestige in today's academic world, teaching rarely does. So I started toying with the idea of a Professor of the Year contest—to honor those who are transformative teachers.

But how do you judge passion in a contest? That was the conundrum facing us as we began planning for The Economist Intelligence Unit Professor of the Year contest which concluded this past March.

We decided to start with a nomination process. We opened it to the world. The artwork in the advertising that appeared in *The Economist* showed 30-something professionals thinking about older professors. The copy asked for former

students to recommend teachers who had changed their lives. 222 professors from six continents were nominated. Reading some of the heartfelt notes from students was powerful. We were off to a good start.

During the rest of the contest, it became harder to assess passion. Voting for the best nominees meant that those from larger schools, or those better at rallying large numbers of current students to vote for them ended up as finalists. In wanting to make sure that the webcast "teach off" would look good, we judges defaulted to choosing finalists who came across well in video clips—our bias was toward motivational speakers rather than life-changing teachers. In retrospect, that was a flaw of the contest design.

Our finalists may have all the passion in the world when they are with their students on their campuses. But in the artificial competition of 30-minute teaching segments to a random audience who did not even sport nametags, our finalists had very little interaction with their students. They taught concepts and entertained rather than reaching out to touch and change the audience in any lasting way. There were only a couple of personal stories offered during the 3-hour final session—and those stories were designed to amuse rather than transform.

In the end, we recognized some talented business professors, and for a day got to shine the spotlight on great teachers. And nothing has dissuaded me from believing that the best professors are passionate. But adjudicating transformative powers and passion—particularly in world driven by the need for large numbers in advertising awareness, website clicks, or teacher ratings—is probably impossible.

Here are the numbers that matter to me: during our lives, we'll have around 100 formal teachers in school or corporate settings. If most of those do their job pretty well in communicating knowledge

and even one, on average, helps make us profoundly better people, the entire educational process has been worth it.

My challenge to teachers: be the one that teaches with the passion to change lives.

My challenge to students: find that one teacher who sparks your passion and who will help make your life significantly better. And even if you don't nominate them for a teaching competition, let them

know they've made a difference. That's the best reward that any great teacher can receive.