

Finding My Own Style

By Steve Gladis

“EVEN A BLIND PIG FINDS AN ACORN” is an old adage that best describes my first training experience as an FBI agent instructor.

In the 1980s, I was newly assigned to the training division at the FBI Academy. Due to an instructor shortage, I was sent to teach a one-week, train-the-trainer police school in New Jersey, mainly because I was available and I knew where New Jersey was located.

The good news: I was teamed up with one of the academy’s best instructors, who could teach the entire week without ever breaking an academic sweat. The bad news: This agent, let’s call him Jack, not only knew his stuff, but he also looked like a movie star—tall and, according to the women I’d heard describe him, a hunk. I, on the other hand, was neither. While I had teaching experience, I had not taught this particular course, and I was rusty. Unfortunately, I would be teaching beside a guy who looked like he’d stepped right out of *GQ* and was as sharp as a pedagogical razor.

My first reaction was, in a word, fear. However, the upside was that the fear of looking incompetent or stupid in front of other adults motivated me. So the week before we left, I read research and best practices as fast as I could. I was at that learning epiphany known as the “teachable moment.” Right up to the night before our class, I studied, revised, and practiced my lesson plans.

The next morning when we met to go to the police academy, Jack came down to the hotel lobby dressed impeccably in a well-tailored suit and elegant silk tie. I walked in wearing a blue blazer and bright green golf pants.

“Nice pants,” Jack said, shaking his head.

“Yep, I like bright colors—to wake up the students.”

“I guess,” he said.

When we arrived at the police academy, people must have wondered if this FBI agent (Jack) had arrested me for indecent attire. The class was respectful, but their side glances spoke volumes: Weird. Jack stood up and introduced us. He also set the stage for the course—lecturing about the principles of learning and adult development. Everyone—including me—sat, listened, and dutifully scratched down notes. During the break, Jack asked me to lecture about nonverbal delivery techniques. I agreed and tried not to look intimidated.

When I stood up to teach, I got a few friendly comments about my colorful pants. Then, I put the class in small groups, had them discuss great speakers whom they’d observed and note what those presenters had done nonverbally to make them great. Later, the groups reported back to the whole class with comments, examples, and demonstrations. The group presentations were lively, competitive, and quite well done. Meanwhile Jack, who had returned to the classroom from a coffee break, observed the less structured class environment and stared at me with a look that said: What the hell are you doing?

After my session, Jack pulled me aside to discuss the virtues of good lecturing. Though he never said the word, his own nonverbals communicated his disapproval. But I stuck to my guns—metaphorically speaking. I conducted my sessions that week using facilitation, group work, free-writing, and think-pair-share exercises. In short, I used adult-oriented learning. And for three days in a row, I wore a different colored pair of pants—green, yellow, red. However, on the final day, I wore a conservative suit, just to be unpredictable. Clearly, the class was disappointed.

When we finished the course and received our final critiques, I was pleased that my ratings, while not as high as Jack’s, were still respectable. But their written comments were priceless—and

all about the colorful pants and the interactive learning. Their comments taught me to always go with my instincts. I could never be Jack, so I found a way to be myself.

In his new book *Teacher Man* about his long teaching career in New York City public schools, Frank McCourt said it best:

“You have to make your own way in the classroom. You have to find yourself. You have to develop your own style, your own techniques. You have to tell the truth or you’ll be found out.”

We all have different styles, different skills, and different strengths. We’ll all be influenced by other colleagues—valuable resources to help us improve our own instruction. But our greatest success will come when we find our own style and perfect it.

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