Four Lessons I Learned from Sam Seifter

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When I was invited to compose a piece about Sam my first response was that I had nothing to write. “How could you have nothing to write?” I asked myself. “You’ve known Sam for over 30 years. He recruited you to Einstein. You’ve sat in scores of seminars, departmental meetings and exam writing sessions with him. How could you possibly have nothing to write?” Then, I found the answer. I felt as if I had nothing to write because things I learned from Sam were so much a part of me that I forgot they came from Sam. So I searched within myself and I found four lessons that I thought were mine but that actually came from Sam Seifter.

Sam’s first two lessons were generically paired as applicable to an assortment of perplexing issues. Sam would tell me there were two things I should remember. When an academic lists just two things, you should listen very, very closely. That’s because most academics dispense things in threes—three reasons, three examples, three parts to a class. However, if truth be told, generally only two of those three are really important. So, when an academic lists just two things you should listen very, very closely because you’re getting a pruned list.

Sam’s first lesson was, “Choose your battles.” Life rarely goes swimmingly for sustained intervals. We encounter bumps and setbacks. We feel frustrated, annoyed, and angry. Sam’s first lesson was to decide where to put your energy, which issues or battles you will address. This conserves your energy and allows you to focus. It also makes sense psychologically because in the process of choosing which battles to fight you reflect on all your battles. And reflection is therapeutic as well as educational.

Sam’s second lesson was, “This too will pass.” With the passage of time, winning some matches and losing others, the frustrations of the moment blend into the perspective of the passage of time. Considering another meaning of “pass,” as educators we are part of a process of passing on. We make our own contributions to the impossible task of “education” and pass them on to the next generation of educators for further revision and improvement.

Sam’s third lesson was that people whom we label as students are frequently our teachers. In this regard, we should respect our students because we have much to learn from them. Sometimes the simplest of questions from a learner is the most insightful. A simple question can lead to learning by forcing us to examine the foundation of our hypotheses. However, asking simple questions is risky. The audience for our questions may think that we are simple because our questions are simple. They may not see the depth and direction of our simple questions.

But wait a minute! I just said that academics dispense in threes and that usually only two of the three are really important. I’ve now listed three lessons I learned from Sam Seifter. Are only two of those three really important? What to do? The resolution to this problem, like the resolution to other problems I’ve posed over my 30 years at Einstein, comes from Sam: Sam’s fourth lesson. Rules aren’t rules so much as guidelines. If you bind yourself to rules, you are bound to be tricked by rules at some point. Open-mindedness, flexibility, and receptiveness to serendipity are traits that will serve us better than adhesion to rules.

Those are four lessons I learned from Sam Seifter.