

Richard Bolstad and Margot Hamblett

Revealing State Secrets to Teachers

“Art of the State” teaching

As you think back over your life, we wonder how often you’ve met a teacher who is utterly inspired by her or his work. One year when Richard was at high school he had a maths teacher who considered, like Pythagoras, that the fundamental principles of the universe were mathematical. To him, mathematics was a passion. And rather than just studying the syllabus, that year Richard’s class ended up being entranced by stories about everything from Greek philosophy to quantum physics. It was the only year Richard ever enjoyed mathematics. The text books were the same, but this teacher made them seem like a door to life itself. A teacher is not a mobile text book. A teacher is what brings information to life. The mathematics teacher understood that teaching is the art of changing people’s state.

In the 1950s, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar was a teacher of physics at the University of Chicago. He had already made his name from a paper he wrote while travelling between Calcutta and London in the 1930s; it explained the physics behind black holes. In the 1950s he was living near the University’s main observatory, eighty miles from Chicago itself. There were very few physicists in the world who were up with the state of the art when it came to Chandrasekhar’s specialties. And he wanted to change that. That winter, he set himself the goal of teaching an advanced seminar in astrophysics. Unfortunately, only two students signed up for it. For Chandrasekhar, coming to Chicago meant travelling through snow for eighty miles on back-country roads. The University assumed he would cancel the seminar. But he did not. He travelled there and back twice a week, all semester.

The full results of what Chandrasekhar did as a teacher that year were not to be known for nearly thirty years. Even today, there are teachers who probably changed your life forever; and yet may not even realize it yet. How did they do that? This article is about the art of changing learners’ states of mind.