The worn-out statement that “those who can do and those can’t, teach” is proven wrong by the career of Dr. Robert Richburg, who dedicated his life to helping people learn how to teach in many different situations, urban and rural, at home and internationally. Through his own continual learning and emphasis on active learning situations rather than lecture, he helped many teachers improve their skills and thus improved the education of countless students.

Born on February 5, 1939, Richburg’s childhood in a Chicago suburb was defined by the summers that he spent elsewhere. His parents were both consumed by work in a hospital, and his most memorable moments were on a family friend’s dairy farm. They also were teachers, and he “came to respect what they did for a living because I could see that even though they never made any money on the farm, they were very happy, wholesome people.” He found a sense of community on the farm “that was absent in the community that I lived in near Chicago,” which he describes as “very affluent and very materially oriented.” Although he did well in elementary school, he struggled in a large high school setting, acknowledging that he “just couldn’t shine in that environment.” He worked all throughout high school, caddying and mowing lawns, to save up for college. Luckily, he ended up at the perfect place for him, Grinnell College in Iowa.

He entered Grinnell on probation, with his advisor telling him he’d only last a semester. Between senior role models in the residence halls and outstanding professors in his favorite subject, history, he found an environment where he could shine. He proved his advisor wrong and made honor society his freshman year, and he never looked back. He majored in History and after graduating went straight to the University of Southern California for a Master’s in History, a program which importantly also could provide him with teaching licensure. He wrote his thesis on the history of gold mining in Kern County, California, and taught throughout the two years it took to finish his degree. After graduate school, he decided to enter the Peace Corps.

For two years, he taught at a missionary school in Nigeria, an experience that he says changed his life dramatically. “Even though I had trained to be a teacher, I never really understood the idea of the joy of serving people … I really became interested in the whole idea of service and working to benefit people less fortunate than myself.” When he returned to the U.S., he taught one semester at a trade school in Louisville, Kentucky, and then came to Denver for a PhD. He disliked the competitive structure of the University of Denver’s program, though, and transferred to the University of Colorado, where he changed his major to social science education. For four years he worked on his doctorate and renovated the science curriculum. Near the end, he got a job at Colorado State University, “a perfect situation for me, teaching teachers.”

In 1970, he joined the staff of CSU as an assistant professor. Contrary to the urban CU, he “loved the idea that there were a number of students from urban and rural areas. And I loved the balance of majors that were here [at CSU].” In his 33 year career, he taught 27 different courses, took a three-year leave to work as an administrator in Northern Minnesota, and founded Project Promise, an innovative teacher training program. He says he wanted to “help people learn to teach, because I don’t think very many people appreciate how challenging teaching is.” And he accomplished that goal. Many of his students hold awards for outstanding teaching, including National Science Teacher of the Year, Colorado Teacher of the Year, and
recognition of excellent teaching by individual school districts. It is of his students’ successes that he is most proud.

Richburg himself is a university distinguished teaching scholar, and he credits his success to continual study. “What I would do is take summers to learn a new field because I wanted to stay fresh,” he explains. He was also involved with the Colorado and National Councils for Social Studies and with his church, as a Sunday school teacher. He consulted for school districts in the Bahamas and locally, and served on many Master’s and PhD committees. He worries about the superficial state of social studies, especially in regard to the textbook industry, and he urges people to consider “a different concept of what it means to be an educated person.” For Bob Richburg, “an educated person does not have to know everything ... but they know where to find it, and they know what good knowledge is.” As of 2011, he continued to teach one course a semester, which he says he will do until “I feel like I cannot do justice to my students, then I’m outta here. Truthfully, I think we have to honor the teaching process. They deserve the best.”