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Encouraging Reciprocity or Relinquishing Authority? The Story of a New Teacher's Struggle

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On the first day of school in my first year of teaching, I explained to students the classroom procedures. A bewildered face with a crinkled nose looked up at me from the first row. The student's top lip curled up in disapproval as she informed me, "We never have to raise our hands before we speak in *other* classes."

As I ponder my first two years as an English teacher in a public school, the most perplexing aspect has been when students and their parents criticize my methods and discount my expertise. This was particularly difficult the first year because I believed that the students knew more than I did about running a classroom. After all, while I had spent recent years studying the practices of *ideal* classrooms, they had been experiencing what works and what doesn't in the academic reality that was unique to their community. As a reflective teacher, I responded by frequently reevaluating my classroom expectations. The question about raising hands was just the beginning.

A few weeks into my teaching career, Frank, a student in my 11th grade English class, took issue with the rules of my classroom, the tone I used with students, the assignments students were asked to complete, the timeline for completion of such assignments, and other teaching decisions. One day, while distributing an assignment, Frank asked, "Where did you get this handout from?" I could not tell if he was genuinely curious or implying that it had come from a Cracker Jack box. Either way, I was uncomfortable with the question. Did it deserve an answer? Or would providing an answer model my subjugation to Frank's authority and set a troublesome precedent? I knew that students did not

automatically respect teachers, but I was unprepared for students to disregard my teacher training and behave as authorities on teaching, fully empowered to criticize my decisions and assess whether or not I was effective. Frank, for example, saw this as his responsibility.

Frank joined forces with a couple of other students and challenged my decisions in front of the class. He became a powerful leader, who was very effective at causing me to question my practices. I announced new assignments with apprehension, watching for Frank's reaction. He claimed to have a petition, signed by peers who agreed that I had unreasonable practices and expectations. Because I believe that a positive relationship with students is crucial to effective teaching, I listened to his ideas about how the class should be run, and we negotiated concessions (talking during the warm-up was OK if it was on topic, students could have a couple of minutes to collect their belongings before the bell rang at the end of the period, etc.). Although I believed that my rules were reasonable, I also knew that, as a new teacher, I had a few things to learn. Furthermore, I believed that students would be more successful in the class if they perceived me as supportive and reasonable.

Despite my concessions, Frank continued to question and discredit me in front of the class. I had lost my balance on the trapeze wire that differentiates encouraging student input from accepting disrespectful behavior. Frank's criticisms interfered with my relationship with the rest of the class and left me feeling disconcerted and anxious. Finally, I asked him and his guardian to sign a behavior contract to ensure that he would not question or criticize my practices during class time. They were insulted by this and insisted on his transfer to another teacher's class at the end of the marking period. After a counselor granted their request, the turbulent classroom environment grew calm in his absence.

What counts as *effective* teaching?

As a new teacher, I am hungry for feedback about my effectiveness. I want to teach well. I can measure the effectiveness of my teaching by analyzing the pre- and post-performance of my students, but in those first few weeks and months of teaching, such data was still being created. The unsolicited opinions of outspoken students and their assertive parents seemed to be the most relevant and useful feedback because it was immediate. Looking back on the situation, I know that it was not useful feedback. I had forgotten that the goals that drive secondary students and their comments are not always related to their educational success or their development as well-rounded citizens. Adolescents may be driven by a fear of failure, anger at adults, or a desire for independence and control in their lives. Frank ended up dropping out of school the following semester due to personal circumstances that had nothing to do with my class. Chances are, his criticisms of me had very little to do with my teaching. Similarly, I have found that the concerns parents communicate with teachers can be disheartening, even when they arise from something other than scholastic goals.

About a month after Frank moved out of my class, another student accused me of “abusing my authority.” Brandy wanted a hall pass, and I said no. She thought she had a good reason to leave and that I was being unfair. Later that day, she came in after school with her mother. The three of us discussed her behavior, her grade in my class (which jeopardized her eligibility to play sports) and my teaching practices. The mother informed me that she had spoken to parents of other students from my classes. “It seems that your class is joyless,” she said, “and I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

I was terrified. Parents of my students were getting together to discuss how “joyless” my classes were? Immediately, I envisioned a mob of angry parents marching into the main office, waving copies of Frank’s petition at my principal and demanding termination. I responded by “joyfully” allowing her daughter to complete the extra credit assignment that had been offered to the class that week, thereby raising her grade and ensuring that she could

continue to play softball. Once Brandy’s softball playing was secure, Brandy’s mom had no further complaints. I realized that Brandy’s skills in English 9 were not the source of her mother’s concern. Defeated and humiliated, I wondered how much credence I should afford to the discouraging feedback of parents and students that criticize me. Should I ignore them and trust my own decisions?

For me, effective teaching means that students do not only develop skills and knowledge; they also feel comfortable, safe and welcome in my classroom. I know that teachers should not be overly concerned with whether or not they are “liked” by the students, but my personal vision of successful teaching incorporates a positive, reciprocal relationship grounded in the shared experience of making meaning. Could this happen in a “joyless” classroom?

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I decided to smile more. Later in the year, I asked all students to answer some questions about the class (what was helpful, what could be improved, etc.) in an anonymous questionnaire. Their responses became the assessment tool that I used to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning environment. Although a few negative incidents had wounded me deeply in the early months of my teaching career, these comments were mostly positive, and I felt secure about the decisions I had made. The student feedback proved valid, if not reliable.

Preparing students and parents for the conversations

I continued thinking about how to foster a reciprocal relationship with parents and students as I began planning for my second year of teaching. My assignment included honors students, who had a reputation for scrutinizing their teachers, so I

decided to preemptively provide explanations for the concerns that I could predict. By explaining some of the pedagogy to the students and parents, I hoped to create an atmosphere of camaraderie and to increase students' and their parents' faith in my methods. The challenge was to show them how we would make meaning together without inviting criticism. How could I encourage feedback without relinquishing my authority?

The fall curriculum night provided an opportunity to convince parents of my expertise and good intentions. My goal for the 10-minute sessions was to create trust, so I tried to demystify my strategies. Since drama-based learning activities are new to many of my students, I explained why I was using improvisation to teach literature. I explained how fostering awareness of seemingly simplistic reading strategies would help students decode difficult texts. The parents responded well to my plans, and I drove home that night feeling like the sun: glowing, beaming, bright. I imagined the students and parents, sucked in by the pull of my methodology, revolving around the aligned curriculum I set forth—a welcome change from the previous year when I reacted to their tugs and yanks. I had no fear of students going home and announcing that their English class was a waste of time.

To increase students' awareness of how I created learning objectives, I introduced the students to Bloom's Taxonomy and incorporated the taxonomy in the handouts that explain assignments and grading criteria. I hoped this would prove that no assignment is without purpose and that teachers know more than their content areas. I wanted them to buy in to the process of learning to the extent that they no longer needed a justification for every activity.

Since then, I have found ways to incorporate pedagogical sound bites that do not require much class time: I include my beliefs about reading and writing in the syllabus; I list goals, objectives and purposes on assignment instruction sheets; and I provide a list of frequent errors (identified by college instructors) to add authenticity to peer editing sessions. Most of all, I announce to the students which skills we are targeting. When they are asked to reflect on what they've learned, they explain the

purpose and they see themselves as responsible for their development.

However, some students still say, "I don't see the point of this," and if the tone of the comment slides just a little too far to the snotty end of the scale, I take offense. Without the wisdom that comes from years of experience, it's not easy to separate the well-intentioned comments, concerns and questions from the inconsiderate and insulting assumption that our decisions are not carefully planned. As a new teacher, I've found that explaining the principles that guide my decisions, stating rationales, revealing strategies and assessment criteria, and inviting participation increases the quality of the conversations I have with students and parents. I am learning to coax reciprocity, not shy from occasional attacks on my authority as a teacher.

About the Author

Colleen Tucker has taught English and communication at Heritage High School since 2004. She previously worked as a writer, editor and communications specialist.