

Teaching Idea 9: Pulling for More— By Honoring a Student's Thinking

The human mind's work, since it never can escape the strictures of trial and error, is, in transcript form, a terrible recursive muddle. What is more, the mind's *best* work tends, if anything, to be messier than normal. But students do not generally know these things. In the public world of well-organized, coherent "experts"—who always put their necessary messes behind them before they take to print or podium—students are liable to view the welter of questions, impressions, and contradictions filling their own minds as proof of their inadequacy.

Nor have most of them already had teachers who strive to counteract their misunderstanding of their own minds. On the contrary.

During four terms on my local school board, I sat in and observed more than 120 classes at the elementary and secondary levels, and I must report that many teachers do precisely as some critics charge: they reward only "right answers"—not good inquiry that does not, in the time allotted, produce right answers, but only right answers, regardless of how they are obtained. There are still math teachers (not all math teachers, fortunately, but many) who open class by asking their students to "call out the answers" on the previous night's homework and who respond to each wrong answer with that devastating one-word comment, "Class?" There are still history teachers who assign study questions at the ends of chapters and give

credit on interpretive matters (like, “What were the real causes of the Civil War?”) only for those answers that blithely, uncritically paraphrase the published text.

Once a student’s thinking is exposed to view and we can discuss it, we need, I feel, to counteract such well-intentioned, ill-advised teaching. We need to *honor* the student as a thinker—to affirm her membership in the same species that includes all the experts.

The student needs to know that discovering contradictory evidence is not a sign that his mind was deficient in coming up with its initial, flawed hypothesis, but, in fact, a sign that his mind is working well indeed. The student needs to know much the same about discovering ambiguity in the question at hand, about discovering gaps in his knowledge which need filling before he can make further progress, and so on.

Although this honoring might well take an explicit form, as in the first of my three teacher comments above (page 24), it can be effected just as well, or better, by implicit means, such as an uncritical *engagement* with the student’s thoughts. William Perry used to tell of a teacher of his who, in their periodic conferences, inspired Bill to take a certain project further and further just by sitting attentively across his desk from Bill and going, “Uh-huh, uh-huh.” Of course, he might have used words that conveyed more than “uh-huh” and still struck a perfectly uncritical note. He might have said, “Huh. Never looked at the question that way before,” or, “Now I think I see how this thinking goes back to the insight that you had last week about astrology.” The effect on motivation should hardly surprise us. Is there any response more reinforcing than another’s interest?

The pedagogical paradox here has not entirely escaped me, but I leave it to Peter Elbow to state:

When I had a teacher who believed in me, who was interested in me and interested in what I had to say, I wrote well. When I had a teacher who thought I was naive, dumb, silly, and in need of being “straightened out,” I wrote badly and sometimes couldn’t write at all. Here is an interestingly paradoxical instance of the social-to-private principle from Vygotsky and Meade: we learn to listen better and more trustingly to *ourselves* through interaction with trusting *others*. (1987, 65)