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Not Just Idle Chitchat

Recently I was sitting in a classroom with some early arrivals; I asked one student what her plans for the weekend were. She unhesitatingly told me that she couldn't do anything because she was grounded. She proceeded to tell me why she was grounded and how she would spend her time at home, all in an amazingly cheerful and open manner. I asked her a few more questions, careful not to be too intrusive, and she was equally as forthcoming. One or two others chimed in with their thoughts; they related similar experiences, and they were all equally forthright. I was having such a good time talking to these kids that it was an effort to stop and start the class. I realized, not for the first time, how much I enjoy chatting with students.

I am not a gregarious person by nature, but I find it easy to talk to students. Sometimes we talk about school events, politics, or baseball; whatever the subject, the conversation is always lively and interesting. In fact, it is easy for me to talk away an entire period, as I have done more than once (much to my students' delight.) I used to feel guilty about this "waste of time," but I have gotten beyond that. I now realize that there is more going on than simply chatting; my students and I are forming personal relationships. In this way I learn more about my students than I would from a parent, a student questionnaire, or another teacher. Most of my students freely tell me what they like and what they hate, how they like to spend their time, what they think of their siblings, and much more. There have been times when I have had to stop students from talking because it verged on the inappropriate.

While I am getting to know my students, they are, of course, also getting to know me. They soon realize that I have a sense of humor and interests outside of school; I don't just sit at home solving equations and reading math books! Occasionally, a passion of mine--an author or some music--coincides with a student's interest and this shared fondness forms a bond that goes beyond the classroom. I hope that the image of the forbidding person standing at the blackboard recedes and a kinder, gentler one replaces it. The rapport that we establish has real implications for how students learn.

A personal connection between student and teacher creates a powerful incentive for students to learn more effectively. Some students are so motivated that the teacher hardly matters; on the other hand, there are a few whose personal problems are so acute that nothing will help them learn as they should. But the majority of students, in my experience, work harder in classes in which they feel personally connected to the teacher. Not only will they be more attentive in class, they will be less reluctant to ask questions and more likely to see me outside of class for extra help. Student-teacher connection is one of the things that motivates reluctant students; it buoys their spirit when the going gets tough, and it helps draw the student into difficult work.

These student-teacher connections are not always easy to establish but they are worth the effort. When I was a new teacher, I was sure that teaching was all about the material; the students were just so many faces in the room. The longer I teach, the more convinced I am that the curriculum is secondary to the personal growth of students. Students react positively to teachers who care more about them than the subject matter

they are teaching. For this reason, I seriously doubt that computer or video learning can ever be anything other than a poor second choice to the traditional student-teacher classroom. Chatting with students--about trivial matters or serious issues--makes being in school is a lot more fun; I, for one, will continue to talk even if it means doing one or two fewer math problems.

We believe that one of the strengths of *Independent Teacher* is the variety of topics and levels addressed in the essays we publish and this issue is no exception; Mil Norman-Risch gives us a moving and insightful look at why *Catcher in the Rye* is so meaningful to adolescent students, Buck Johnson blends humor with sensitive pedagogy as he teaches grammar to six-graders (no easy task), and Marge Rockwell makes history come alive for her first-graders by exploring the history of one of the building on the campus of her school. Other topics in this issue include teaching poetry in high school, establishing positive parent-teacher relationships, the value of Harkness tables in facilitating discussion, and much more.

Our goal is for *Independent Teacher* to have an impact on your teaching and, perhaps, to inspire you to write about meaningful experiences you have had in the classroom. If that is the case, we hope that you will respond to one of our articles or submit an essay of your own to *Independent Teacher* at (editor@independentteacher.org).

What is the Sound of a Sixteen-Year-Old Boy Crying?
By
Mil Norman-Risch

My son Christopher was baptized sixteen summers ago in a small chapel in northern Germany. As part of this particular parish's baptism rite, each parent was expected to deliver a brief prayer declaring one wish for the baby. I hadn't prepared for this moment. At that moment when the pastor signaled for me to say my wish for Christopher, I could have said "May he live a prosperous and happy life," or "May he be blessed with good health." But did I say that? No. As I stood holding him there in front of that stone baptismal font, my wish was this: "May he be a boy who – as he becomes a man – continues to claim his right to cry."

I must have been nuts. The right to cry? That's all he'd been doing for six months, or at least whenever he wasn't sleeping or eating or playing with his toes. And even during the baptism ceremony, as I was there sanctifying the idea of crying, he was bawling.

That was sixteen years ago. After the baptism, I hardly thought about that impulsively formulated wish. And why should I have? Christopher, a normal, healthy toddler, was quite capable of crying, and of the whole range of emotional gestures and expressions, from giggles of delight to wailing sobs.

The wailing of course gave way to something more controlled. I remember when he got poked in the eye by another first grader, and I was called to the Lower School. The secretary gave me this message from Nurse Hall: "Christopher needs his Mommy." When I arrived, Nurse Hall assured me Christopher's eye was OK, but I couldn't help but

notice the wet streaks on his cheeks. "Oh, buddy, it must have really hurt." "Yes," he said. " I cried. But only a little bit."

When he was in eighth grade, he joined the wrestling team as the smallest, skinniest, youngest *kid* on the squad. "This sport is only for the toughest athletes," the coach said when he took me aside. "It's not like football. When a wrestler loses, the loss is painful. It's existential. It's deeply personal." One night, midseason, in the car on the way home, I saw him wiping tears from his face. No wonder he hadn't spoken to me. No wonder he had slammed the car door. I knew what to do: I pretended he wasn't crying.

I tell these anecdotes because they relate to some thoughts I want to share about J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Reading *Catcher* with my freshmen this year, I noticed that Holden's problem – aside from his grief over his parents' neglect, his loss of his dear brother Allie to leukemia, his failure to find meaning and value in the teachings and one-upmanship of school life --- is that he somehow realizes he has lost his language. He has lost his words for speaking his grief and joy.

Unlike young Phoebe and Allie, whose words might be silly or poetic or fully eloquent, Holden has unlearned all of this and is left only with the sounds of anger and *cool* cynicism, and with the knowledge that no one cares or understands. As he struggles to narrate a story of adolescent grief and nostalgia, the only tone, the only words that seem available to him, are those which hide the sorrow. And so, for Salinger, the story of *Catcher in the Rye* is a powerful story of what happens when a boy's language "comes of age."

Turn the pages of the book and what are the words you'll find? "Lousy childhood," "phony slob," "stupid moron" and worse. Who would know, by sifting carelessly through the pages of the book, rather than reading it and getting to know his soul, that Holden is a boy whose heart is as large and open as his loss is personal and deep. It may take patience in order to reach the boy Salinger understands so well. "I can't appreciate the book because I can't get past this awful language," some readers will complain. "Why is a book like this in the English curriculum?" some parents will wonder. "Holden is so negative about everything," some of my ninth graders have commented. But what if one of the story's purposes is to show that this may be the only language for sadness that a 16-year-old boy has, once he "comes of age"?

Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* has been popular for decades, probably because so many readers are touched and surprised to discover that someone understands this special adolescent language of grief.

One of the most moving passages in the book – and there are many – arouses sympathy precisely because we are confronted with Holden's struggle with words and tone. As soon as he gets close to saying the thing he means, he has to draw back and assume the voice of the worldly poser. He's remembering Allie, his younger brother, and he's telling us about his reactions the night Allie died.

At first we hear Holden tumble forward candidly, untroubled by the need to project a certain courageous persona. Then self-awareness intervenes, prompting him to use profanity as a sort of shield as he goes along trying to reveal himself, and at the same time trying to hide:

God, he was a nice kid, though. He used to laugh so hard at something he thought of at the dinner table that he just about fell off his chair. I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don't blame them. I really don't. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time, and I couldn't do it. It was a very stupid thing to do, I'll admit, but I hardly didn't even know I was doing it, and you didn't know Allie. My hand still hurts me once in a while, when it rains and all, and I can't make a real fist anymore – not a tight one, I mean—but outside of that I don't care much. I mean, I'm not going to be a goddam surgeon or a violinist or anything anyway.

At some level, Holden is aware of this return to phoniness, this poser-voice. Expressing neither range nor depth, this voice seems the only voice an adolescent is free to use.

After his failed conversation with Mr. Antolini, who calls him " a very strange boy," Holden walks out into the cold night. But we can hear the sadness despite the cursing and detachment. And we can also hear the sense of helplessness:

I thought what I'd do was I'd pretend I was one of those deaf mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody. If anyone wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper

> *and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life (198-99).*

Talking, after all, requires someone who can listen.

So who does understand the sound of a sixteen-year-old boy crying? Salinger does. And who helps this boy find a more fitting language for despair? Salinger doesn't give this answer, but he makes us think: about the coming of age of language and about its cost.

I end up thinking about my ninth grade students, who by now have learned the rules of acceptable public language. To move from childhood into adolescence and adulthood, one learns not to sound too imaginative or idiosyncratic or passionate. Generalized, all-purpose idioms replace inventions and discoveries of the particular, fitting word. In the newly acquired grown-up language, especially for boys, anger is the one acceptable emotion; ironic detachment is even better. "It's all good," "whatever," "I guess you had to be there" or just a meaningfully offhanded " uhmm, Dude" are useful ways of changing the subject and flattening out the emotional textures when things get personal. Sorrow, if it is expressed at all, is communicated not in speech, in words chosen in a moment of intimacy for a single listener, but in the vandalizing and anonymous word-acts of spray paint or tattoos. "Just for the hell of it," Holden tells us, he punched his fist through a car window. Right. But what else can he say? This is the sound of a sixteen-year-old crying.

As an English teacher at a private, college preparatory high school, I am astonished by the papers some of my ninth graders write. In many cases, the language is vivid,

idiosyncratic, honest, and even lyrical. In writing, they find a way to retain the richness and variety in emotion and language which they otherwise learn to repress when projecting the necessary coolness required in daily social interactions. I realize this is what I can do. I can encourage breadth and invention in language. At least their written language, as it comes of age, need not be infused with the phrases and sounds of boredom. And I realize now what it was I really meant to say in that baptism prayer sixteen years ago: What any boy needs, what any person needs, in those moments when cynicism and posing seem the only sanctioned forms of expression, is the freedom and guidance to rediscover language -- the language that expresses those very human feelings of loneliness, longing, pity, beauty, hunger, and despair. A paper written for an English teacher might be the one place such discovery is allowed. Why Holden consented to write Stradlater's English paper for him, we realize, has as much to do with freedom as with loneliness and despair.

Winner of New Millennium Writing's 2008 Creative Nonfiction Prize and also American Poetry Journal's 2007 American Poet's Prize, Mil Norman-Risch has published poetry in a number of journals,including Willow Springs, White Pelican Review, Sojourners,Freshwater, Valparaiso Poetry Review, Common Ground, and Avatar and Tipton Poetry Journal. A poem of hers is featured in Agha Shahid Ali's anthology, Ravishing DisUnities, (Wesleyan University Press, 2001). She teaches English at Collegiate School in Richmond,Virginia.

Discovering History at the Broadwell House

by

Marge Rockwell

I have taught in the lower school at Cincinnati Country Day School, a pre-k through grade twelve independent school, for eighteen years. History had never been my favorite subject, so the idea of teaching my first grade class about local early settler history did not immediately excite me. How could I engage my class in this historical study? In teaching six and seven year olds I knew that the teacher's enthusiasm for subject matter spoke to the students. I also realized that concrete hooks supported young students' ability to make connections to concepts and ideas. What concrete evidence of early settler life existed in our community? The Broadwell House!

On the Cincinnati Country Day School campus sits the stately Broadwell House (ca. 1804), a two-story limestone structure that served as a private home through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although previously used as a residence by CCDS Heads of the School, the house currently served as a place for various school meetings and functions, but I had not thought of it as a resource while driving past it to and from school. Then, while searching for a concrete historical hook, I realized that a class field trip to the Broadwell House could provide authentic support to a unit of study about early nineteenth-century settlers in the Cincinnati area. After all, wasn't this an actual early settler house? As I attempted to gather teaching material related to the Broadwell House I began to realize that the information did not exist in one neat and tidy bundle. When

library visits and communications with the local Indian Hill Historical Society yielded helpful but brief results, the enormity of answering what had seemed like very basic questions began to dawn on me.

Motivated by my own questions about the Broadwell family and house, I learned to access primary sources such as early deeds, census records, and old maps. I visited the Hamilton County Recorder's Office to search for 200 year-old property deeds, found the name Phebe Broadwell (d. 1865) on a broken tombstone in nearby Clermont County, and examined hand hewn beams in the Broadwell House attic. Experiencing the thrill of discovery, I developed an ever-growing passion for reading and researching late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century American History. Slowly the history of the Broadwell House began to emerge.

With my enthusiasm in place, I focused next on how to generate enthusiasm among my students: getting first graders connected to history can present challenges! Primary teachers know the significance of using "real-life" context in teaching, and the Broadwell House offered a genuinely real-life experience. It provides CCDS students the unique opportunity of working with a historical artifact on their own campus and abundant opportunities for authentic learning experiences. As a concrete resource, the house supports opportunities for students of all ages to construct meaning. Meaningful connections to history through a focus on the Broadwell House could be extended to students' own personal stories and stories of others. The house contains rich opportunities that could support a wide variety of learning styles.

CCDS first graders used the house to connect to several authentic learning opportunities. The early settler unit began by asking students to identify the oldest and newest CCDS structures. This question led to a trip to compare the Broadwell House and the newer CCDS Upper School. Although first-graders visit the Upper School daily for lunch, most had not visited the Broadwell House. During the trip, students carefully observed and noted similarities and differences in interior and exterior building materials, structure size, and architecture. With curiosity piqued, first-graders looked, touched, and discussed structural materials (limestone, wood beams, iron latches and fixtures), which helped them understand early Ohio settler home construction. Many questions arose, such as wondering where the building materials came from and how they were transported to the building site. Students wondered about the Broadwell family. Where did they come from and why did they come to Cincinnati? They thought about the types of transportation the Broadwell family might have used to travel from their former home in Morristown, New Jersey, to Cincinnati, Ohio. These questions gave students a curiosity for and connection with local early settler history. The house provides an abundance of questions and connections to ponder.

The house visit sparked several follow-up lessons. Utilizing information about early settler life learned through books, class discussions, and other resources, the students made further connections. The students imagined how the Broadwell House rooms might have been furnished and used in 1804. Tablet computers enabled them to draw early furnishings on photos of Broadwell House rooms. The class constructed a model stone Broadwell House and made furnishings including “corn cob beds.” First grade held an early settler exhibit in the old house and celebrated with a luncheon in the newer

Broadwell House conference room. Students demonstrated their knowledge and understanding in skits they wrote and performed about early settlers. First-graders teamed with CCDS sixth-graders to enhance the house's exterior by planting and caring for bulbs and perennials.

First-graders' Broadwell House focus has attracted the attention of the CCDS school community. CCDS has formed a Broadwell Committee that has begun the work of placing the Broadwell House on the National Historic Register, which has enhanced appreciation of the house. The committee has begun working with Upper School students to organize and display the school's history in the Broadwell House. The exterior and interior of the house have begun to reflect this increased focus and appreciation.

Although not every school campus has a Broadwell House per se, your campus environment probably has hidden resources that connect with your curriculum. If you are fortunate enough to identify such a resource you have the opportunity to experience an intense interest in learning, the thrill of discovering information, and the excitement of making connections that will translate to your students. You may be surprised by an aspect of your curriculum that now excites you. Answering questions that cannot be answered easily with a quick trip to the internet requires persistence, tenacity and the attitude that answers probably *can* be unearthed. As with most situations in life, the hard work and subsequent discoveries yield very satisfying rewards for both teacher and students.

Marge Rockwell has taught lower school students for twenty eight years, the last eighteen at Cincinnati Country Day School. Marge feels privileged to teach in an environment where her ideas and initiatives

receive support from the school community.

Captain Sybanof and Sergeant Owfladfs, Cartoon Grammarians

By

Buck Johnson

In last summer's Orientation English (OE), a six-week language-arts brush-up for rising sixth graders, Captain Sybanof and Sergeant Owfladfs were familiar foes. They wrangled within parts-of-speech and parts-of-sentence lessons, the captain sporting tights and a cape, his nemesis dressed in black. "Sybanof," originally an acronym for remembering the seven coordinating conjunctions, preceded Owfladfs. Summers prior he had morphed in my imagination from memory aid to superhero, animated to resuscitate slack-jawed eleven-year-olds rendered comatose by umpteen textbook iterations of "Find the adverb and what it modifies in the following sentences." A Captain Gramerica for the Sponge Bob set, Sybanof had home-grown appeal. Kids liked the silliness of his name (also his name's utility); they also liked his dweeby mission to rid the world of grammar ignorance. And most appreciated that he lived to make their lives easier, to spice what previously had been rather bland fare—so bland, in fact, that some had refused to swallow it, which explained their enrollment in OE.

But this cohort of OE students, five boys and one girl, differed from their predecessors. They were more rambunctious and differently able, and I met their singular needs by retooling lesson plans, slowing my delivery, and upping my assessments—to varied effect. What they also needed was a bad guy they could comically boo on occasion, someone who embodied their individual OE frustrations (and mine, for these kids were challenging to teach). Thus was born Sergeant Owfladfs. Like Sybanof he began as a memory aid; unlike Sybanof, he was grassroots creation, the brainchild of an ADHD-afflicted, pint-sized pistol whom I'll call Ben. On his own, Ben arranged the first letters of some hard-to remember prepositions, those you can't "do to a

cloud" (you can fly *in* a cloud, *over* a cloud, *through* a cloud, etc.). The result was o-w-f-l-a-d-f-s (*of, with, for, like, about, during, from,* and *since*), which Ben said was easy to remember because it sounded weird, like sybanof. Weird works, as any sixth-grade teacher knows, so I and Ben's classmates enthusiastically adopted his creation, first as a mnemonic, then as an expletive and finally as Captain Sybanof's antagonist, prompted by my dubbing him *Sergeant* Owfladfs.

Because it was therapeutic, the Sybanof-Owfladfs pairing seemed to boost student achievement. Sentences like "During their grudge match, Sergeant O. walloped Captain S." (from a subject-verb-complement exercise) helped ameliorate student grudge matches with the course material. In addition, Ben and his peers enjoyed seeing how the match evolved within the context of a lesson; consequently, they paid attention. Other make-believe oddballs inhabited last summer's teaching (Puffy the Hamster, Harry Potter and his cohorts), but they were surrogates for when the imagination necessary to conjure the duo ebbed. Owfladfs and Sybanof, however, were the perennial favorites. One boy, not Ben, was so smitten he brought a black-clad World Wrestling Federation action figure to class and announced that *this* was Sergeant Owfladfs. The doll stood in the chalk tray until summer school's end.

As pedagogy, Sybanof and Owfladfs worked for another reason: they stole the show by co-opting the drama that was OE '07. Teaching and learning are inherently dramatic, given learning-style variety and our obligation to address it. Stage directions abound—Mel Levine's program is one—mandating we accommodate the Bens of our world. To the degree that I was able, I did this. However, it occurred to me that each class *as a whole* deserves a novel approach, a narrative crafted for a particular body of learners who have landed in your classroom at a particular stage in their development and schooling. This crafting occurs not at a class's beginning, for the elements are hidden, but later on, perhaps weeks into a term. Even then, the

elements tend to be sketchy; you get a sense that the class needs something, but what exactly? The answer, of course, lies with your students. They'll tell you what they require, not in explicit terms, but in how they behave, and in what they say. Ben provided the answer with an original term, which grew into an original character who shared center stage in a virtual drama that became a metaphor for the class.

A certain vibe energized last summer's teaching, the result of a harmonious convergence of real and imagined personalities. This was an accidental blessing, one that I can't replicate. Granted, I can resurrect the superheroes, have them don tights and square off (and I have), but absent Ben and his classmates, the slapstick falls flat. This said, however, it occurred to me that what I achieved, albeit unintentionally, was a student-subject synergy, something I might harness in my August-May gig, eighth-grade English. Again, my aim was a novel approach, one suitable for each section of eighteen students, so I literally took a novel approach, using popular characters from novels we read (and short stories and plays) to tailor grammar, usage and vocabulary lessons. Here's an example from a comma-usage exercise incorporating people from *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "Dill hopped a train joined a circus and proposed to Scout who eagerly listened to his tall tales." (Student directions: "Place commas where needed and specify the applicable comma rules.") And another from an appositive-phrase lesson with *Great Expectations* characters and select vocabulary words ("callow," in this case): "A callow boy, Pip was flummoxed by Estella's beauty."

Middle grades English instructors regularly combine the discipline's various aspects—grammar, vocabulary, writing, literary analysis--into daily lessons, and such holistic pedagogy benefits learners. Language arts artistry (and fun) lies in uniquely mixing these elements, adding

ingredients from your own repertoire (“sybanof” and “flummoxed,” for example) while capturing the inherent nuttiness pervading a middle school classroom. Time and class size are limiting factors. You need time to muster the energy and imagination necessary to craft comprehensive lessons incorporating classroom novelties--or novels. And, as a general rule, the ease associated with infusing a class’s personality into a particular lesson, or series of lessons, is inversely proportional to enrollment. Small enrollment also facilitates tapping the richness of a Ben-like personality and sharing his wealth. In a sense, you leverage the class clown.

Recently I shared my OE teaching with a colleague, a thirty-year English veteran and acknowledged grammar guru. Sharing with her the Owfladfs phenomenon, I was fishing for a pro’s affirmation. “You know,” she said, her tone noncommittal, “there’s another preposition mnemonic, one that reminds kids of the nine most common prepositions. It’s waffotibo.” I mimicked her pronunciation, “*waf-oh-tee-bo,*” accenting the third syllable. I repeated it to myself, silently paring letters with words: *with, at, for, from* . . . Characters began to coalesce: Colonel Waffotibo? Private Waffotibo? Maybe General Waffotibo? I sat at my desk, imagining the possibilities.

Buck Johnson teaches middle division English at Berkeley Preparatory School in Tampa, Florida. He also serves as the assistant middle division director in charge of curriculum.

Instructive Poetry

by

Carolyn Praytor Boyd

"Look at people not like you. Listen to conversations that don't concern you. Think about things that touch us all." With these instructions, I send out my junior English students to begin the process of becoming poets and, I hope, more attentive and empathetic people. Rather than talk about the assignment itself, I would like to explain the words and thoughts behind my introductory directive and how they focus this particular assignment and, to some extent, our entire year of writing.

"Look" that first word for the old see-and-say reading text. "Look, Jane. See Spot run." Nothing can come before Jane looks and really sees Spot. "Look," what every parent says to his or her child. "Look at the bird." "Look at the big fire truck." And yet in the poetic sense, we are, more than likely, poor lookers. In late March, I ask my students if they have noticed anything unusual on their way to school. In The Woodlands where I teach, the medians and roadsides are seeded with wildflowers, and our red clover marks the beginning of spring. Without exception no one has noticed and after several days of asking and describing, I stop on the shoulder and illegally harvest several specimens to share. For a few weeks after that, class begins with comments about the wildflowers they have noticed, magically there with both the coming of spring and the coming of seeing.

"People" In our culture of labels (students, Hispanics, seniors (both the elderly and the lordly upperclassmen), homeless, CEO's and geeks) students can easily pigeonhole types. This assignment asks them to consider people as humanity without type. Looking at others as part of the broader class, more of the same, others in the same boat, *peopleness*, gives them a new perspective. It opens up the gates to the party for all comers. We tie this discussion into Emerson's call for a truly American poetry when we reconsider his statement that 'the idiot, the Indian, the child and the unschooled farmer's boy stand nearer to the light by which nature is to be read than the dissector or antiquary." Students who have not read much contemporary poetry regularly respond that they don't have anything to write about. If they have not suffered for love or experienced the death of someone near, they couldn't have the building blocks of poetry. The first step into opening their poet's eye to the world around them begins with their discovery that a poem hides in the smell of the new car, or the lost keys, or the guy at the carwash.

"Not like you" Returning to the classification system on which teenagers rely, this phrase gets them out of themselves and their comfort zone. Mothers tell their children, don't stare. This polite lesson quickly becomes translated into don't look at all, not only as a guise for politeness but also as a relief for responsibility and empathy. If we don't look at the child throwing a tantrum in the grocery store, we don't have to consider the frustration of the totally dependent and the weariness of the constant caregiver. If we don't take the time to really look at the business traveler waiting in the airport, we can't empathize with the parent who comes home devoid of energy to share with his or her family. If we don't look with an open mind at the man with the "I'll work for food" sign on the feeder road, we can't really understand ourselves as we eat dinner at the pleasant restaurant. From the artist's perspective, the looking comes without the

weight of cultural induced judgment. I ask my students not to assume that they know what is good or bad, what lifestyle or situation is desirable or painful. This stance allows them to see both the grandeur in sleeping under the vaulted ceilings of an overpass and the cultural sterility of gated communities. But not just that, a truly empathetic view allows them to write fully and openly about the panhandler in the Starbuck's parking lot and their own first run at Snow King.

*"**Listen**"* starts with clarifying of the difference between that and hearing, as in "I hear you, I'm just not listening." We tend to think that teenagers have mastered the art of hearing without listening, but it patently isn't true. Students are great listeners; they just are selective listeners. I have been appalled over the years by what students remember me saying years before in jest or exasperation while the words of wisdom about Eliot were never recorded. This, then, becomes an exercise in mindfulness, in deciding to listen to everything they hear for a period of time. Like a quick weight loss program, this has a time limit because it is difficult to do. A training period is required. In a world where cell phone conversations flood over us, we have learned to filter most of what comes into our ears. This assignment gives them the directive to attend unfiltered to the world around them.

*"**That don't concern you**"* again appears to fly in the face of good manners. We discuss eavesdropping, but admittedly writers do it all the time, and certainly we want to avoid a stalking mentality that reduces others to prey. Having clarified that, it is easy enough in any coffee house, airport, cafeteria or checkout line to hear phrases, topics and *non sequiturs* to spark a dozen poems. I advise students to carry small, inconspicuous notebooks for copying those great finds. I share with them some of the better bits in my own palm size lab notebook and the

poems that have come from them. This is also a great exercise for acting students as well as writer. It is not only what people say, but how they say it, the expressions, wording and inflections that open our minds to the variety of life and language around us.

*"**Think about things**"* suggests one of my favorite words for class activities and assignments, *ponder*. I once had a parent, upset about something else, take me to task for asking students "to ponder." The word, she said, was an adult word and not something teenagers did. I spent some time of my own pondering her remark, and I decided she was wrong. Teenagers ponder quite a bit although they may not call it that. Thinking about things, or worrying, or sulking, or daydreaming are all forms of pondering, that slow mental process of letting an idea percolate and turn over slowly in one's consciousness without a specific end in mind. Many assignments ask students to engage in closed circuit activities (write a paragraph, work some problems, observe a reaction) which have a beginning and an end. To ponder something is open ended. It asks us to bring back time and again an idea or observation and deal with it repetitively, each time somewhat differently because we are somewhat different each time, our knowledge and experience having changed in the course of a day or maybe even an hour.

*"**That touch us all**"* If the student has been successful so far in the assignment, this one is self-fulfilling. Once we are able to see and hear the world we live in with this unanimity, we are, in a sense, tuned into the greater life. No longer isolated in our own world with its pressing concerns and obligations, we are synchronized with what it feels like to be isolated or frustrated or awed or loved. Because these represent the human condition, this exercise allows us to both observe its manifestations in others and touch its wellspring within ourselves.

At the end of the week, students come back with an amazing array of poems. They write about things they have seen and heard and experienced in their greater world. Still they have not objectified these because they have not come to them through only themselves. Instead, they have for a time tuned into others, whom they discover are not, in all their permutations, so different from themselves. I take this as a goal, no matter the quality of the student's poem, well worth the achieving.

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Introducing and Using the Discussion (aka Harkness) Table

by

Brian Mullgardt

International affairs expert Fareed Zakaria has recently suggested that America's edge in education comes from its habit of making students *think* rather than just memorize and regurgitate (191-195). Discussion based teaching (also called the "Harkness method," after the oval discussion tables designed to facilitate conversation) challenges students to sit at the center of education, making meaning of new information together, talking, listening, and ultimately *thinking*. While some schools have relied on the method for many years, others, like mine, have not. In such cases, introducing this style of learning, in which no student can hide, can be difficult if students aren't used to it, and making sure it's productive also presents challenges. However, once included in a curriculum it allows students to more deeply understand material and think for themselves.

When I began my job at an independent school six years ago, my pedagogical style was very open, but I held to one vow: no more teaching via discussion. Having previously taught in university History departments, I had come to view discussion based teaching as slow death, doled out in fifty minute blocks characterized by silence, blank stares, and lidded eyes. However, knowing that to perform well in college my high school students needed to be experienced in discussion (see the Center for History and New Media's www.chmn.syllabi for a large repository of university syllabi that include discussion in the averaging of grades), I decided to integrate it into my syllabus.

The first step to consider if you wish to effectively introduce discussion is enrolling in the Phillips Exeter Academy Humanities Institute (www.exeter.edu/summer_programs/9398.aspx). Held every summer on Exeter's campus, teachers gather to share ideas about and model discussion based teaching. Most helpful to me was the red binder of materials the Exeter teachers had collected, including articles about the Harkness method, and tools for assessing discussion. In particular, the top-down diagram of the discussion table used to track who spoke to whom encouraged me to bring more discussion to class because now I could more accurately assess it.

I teach mixed ability 11th graders in U.S. History, some of whom would resist being forced to sit around a table facing each other and sharing ideas for a grade. They were used to participating in class, but not engaging in a totally student-centered, assessed activity. If I were alone in bringing this new and challenging style I'd look crazy, villainous, or both. On returning to my school in the fall, I shared my experiences with colleagues, and two agreed to include more discussion in their English classes. Enlisting others to include discussion is the next important step to introducing it: with two other teachers of the same grade level using discussion to teach and assess, it gained credibility and offered students practice in other classrooms. When a couple of students decided they had "the right to remain silent," saying that this was cruel and unusual punishment, they also saw that other teachers valued it. It is important as well to get your superiors on board; I spoke to mine to explain why and how I was integrating it, so he could field any phone calls from concerned parents.

The next step was to prepare students for their first round of totally student-centered learning. If they arrived to class cold, unaware of what was expected of them, silence

would surely follow. So, I designed each discussion day around one essential question, posed on my syllabus. I then took a day of class to allow students, in pairs, to brainstorm about the first question ("Why would colonists want to wage war against Britain?"), jot down ideas, and think of other questions to ask the class. I also gave them a handout titled "Guidelines for Discussion," taken right from the Exeter red book (thanks to Ralph Sneeden) with important tips such as "collaborate, don't compete" and "do not address everything to the instructor." This provided some friendly tips, and some ground rules.

On our first day of discussion, students sat around a large table facing each other, and I sat several feet away from it, allowing them to figure out where things would go while I charted who spoke to whom. One of the first tips offered at Exeter was "let go," and it's the next important step in discussion based teaching. I've learned that my previous style of "leading" discussion was more Initiation-Response-Evaluation, in which a teacher offers Socratic questions in a call-and-response format, telling the student if he/she is correct, rather than a true discussion, where the role of the instructor is minimized to make room for student exploration (Levstik and Barton 21). Now, I "let go," and interjected only to move them from topic to topic, correct erroneous information, or to ask a student to clarify a point. The class was initially silent, as the scenario was, to them, awkward. But the silence was uncomfortable for them, especially since their performances were to be graded, and this forced them to think on their feet and address that day's materials.

The initial results were better than I expected. In a class of 17 students, approximately 15 spoke, some more than others. At the end of class, each student filled out and turned in a confidential peer review of one other student, assigned by me at the start of the hour. I

then showed them my diagram of the table, noting that, on that day, students were more comfortable speaking across the table to each other than turning to speak down it. The diagram allowed them to more fully understand the number of individual contributions (throughout the rest of the term I hung each subsequent diagram on the wall for comparison). We ended with a five-minute discussion of the discussion itself, assessing strengths and weaknesses to think about for next time. As the year progressed, students who previously loathed history told me they came to like it, because now it concerned ideas, not “just names and dates.” One group of twenty asked that they be split into two sections of ten so that each student would have more opportunities to speak, and I supported their request by holding class over lunch.

After that first year of intermittent discussion in all sections, I moved my Advanced Placement U.S. History class to an all-discussion format, jettisoning lecture entirely. As the year progressed, I witnessed discussions not only of past events, but watched students make connections throughout history, and relate the past to their lives. They also began to discuss the textbook itself. Knowing they would be evaluated on the quality of their participation, they read the text nightly (I suspected they did not when I lectured). By mid-year, they were talking about the author’s perspective and voice, which led to discussions about how American history is viewed and written in a post Watergate and Vietnam world. This showed me the benefits of discussion outside of merely preparing students for college. The practice hones their interpersonal skills; they have to find collegial, mature ways to disagree. They have to listen to others, connect points, and police their own conversations. Shy students, while uninspired or terrified by group talks, can build their confidence. Above all, students have to *think*.

Discussion based teaching has taken root at my school, but problems persist. In my regular U.S. History courses I do not offer discussion every day, saving it for Fridays so I can differentiate my instruction during the week. This leads to some students, knowing a grade is attached to discussion, to take it *too* seriously. This can cause anxiety, competition, or chatter for the sake of chatter in hopes of a high grade. I've moved from grading each weekly discussion individually, to assigning a cumulative grade at the end of each month to relieve pressure and encourage more natural discourse. Some students are still shy, even when their classmates are warm and helpful to them ("Would you like to add something, Tommy? It's okay."). For the chronically shy, I tend to go easier on them the first term, but I tell them that I will not continue to do so after that, instead working one-on-one with them in my office prior to discussion to reassure them. And I occasionally face a large section (16 really is maximum for this type of instruction), that requires me to police things more closely to make sure all can be heard, if they wish.

No longer do I eschew discussion, but seek new ways to make it more engaging, whether it be adding a few minutes of documentary or movie footage to get the class thinking, challenging them to "Make me interested" in a subject (then giving them time to huddle up and strategize before we begin) or handing out new primary sources on the spot to read aloud and discuss. Should this teaching style appeal to you, consider the following:

1. Don't introduce it alone, if possible. Try to get colleagues to offer this challenging approach with you. It legitimizes the technique, and gives students practice in other classrooms. Additionally, talk with administration.
2. Post essential questions ahead of time, and work to get students thinking about discussion before it happens.

3. Silence is your friend. Let students reflect and think before they talk. Ultimately, "let go" so *they* can make sense of information.
4. Assess discussion. Students need feedback as to when they're making thoughtful comments, and when not. Track who speaks to whom, and have peers offer input. It also motivates.
5. Do it frequently, or forget it. Including a discussion day every three weeks won't do; students will become rusty, or will place so much emphasis on doing well that one day that it impedes the natural flow.

I still suffer from the occasional flashback of a baseball-hat clad undergraduate, half-asleep at 8am on a Friday morning during discussion. But more often I experience the excitement of watching students talk, agree, disagree, stumble, and recover while making sense of the past. Discussion based teaching has become a central component of my teaching kit-bag, not just because it is good preparation for college, but because it hones thinking skills.

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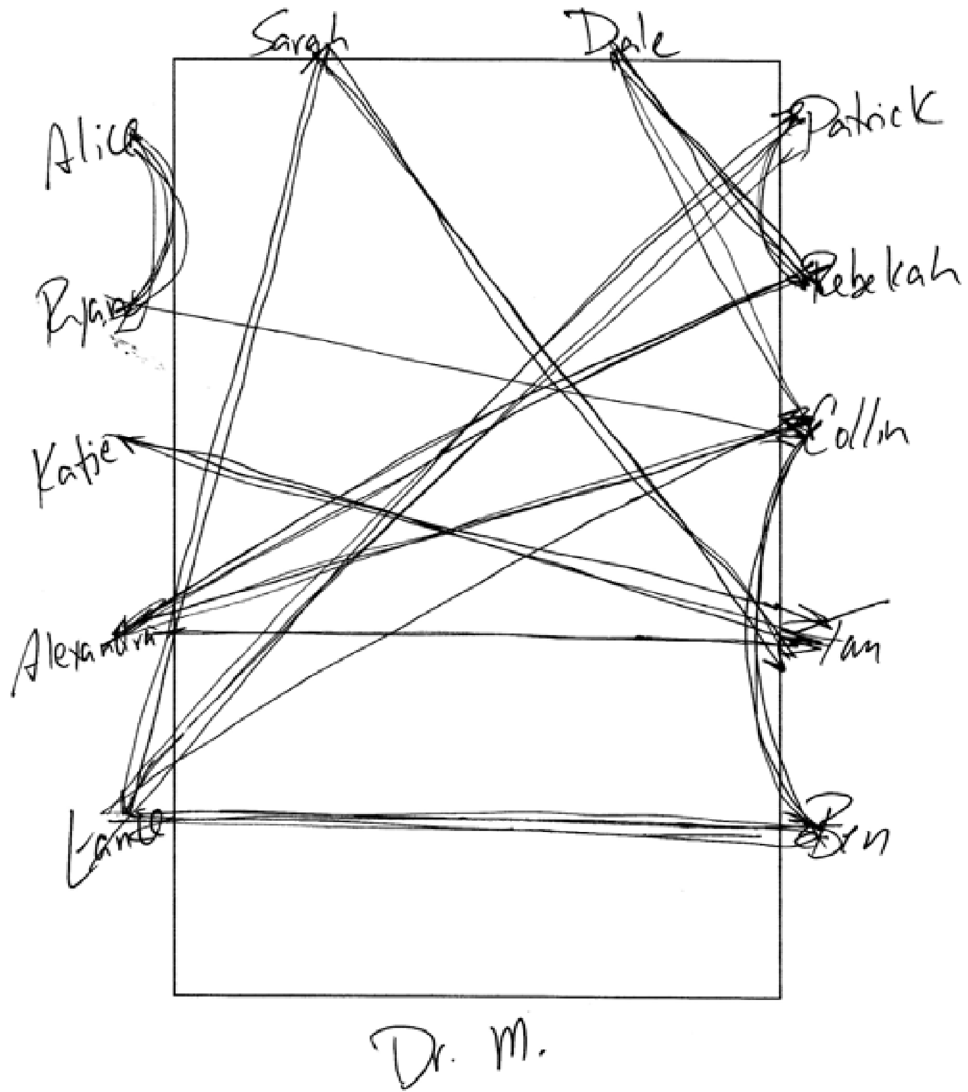
Class: U.S. History
Date: 9/21/06
Topic: American Revolution



Dr. M.

From Adversaries to Allies:

Establishing and Maintaining Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships

By

Ezra Adams

The teacher-parent relationship is rarely simple. A parent's perception of the teacher is rooted in the parent's own childhood. A teacher's best intentions are easily marred by a child's allegations that “she doesn't like me”, “he doesn’t like boys/girls”, or “s/he is a bad teacher.” The parent's interactions with school administrators also affect that parent's relationship with other educators in the school community.

As teachers, we are not responsible for external factors affecting our relationship with our students' parents – yet the quality of that relationship has extraordinary significance for everyone in the school community. A parent's greatest ally is a supportive and positive teacher; a teacher’s greatest allies are supportive and positive parents. Preventing adversarial relationships with parents comes through positive beginnings, planned interactions, and preservation of personal dignity.

Positive Beginnings

While his fifty-five rules for maintaining classroom discipline may be more than most independent school teachers require, Ron Clark's counsel - “no matter what, the first contact with the parent [must be positive]” - is an important reminder for the first days of school, when first impressions are created and standards first questioned.

At the beginning of the school year, contact your student's parents with an upbeat, positive

conversation about the year to come. Embrace your professional role to “create opportunities where parents and teachers can learn that they both have children’s best interests at heart.” Some teachers visit their children's homes for the initial contact; most teachers will make their first contact with their students' family in a brief telephone conversation. Veterans and rookies alike may benefit from scripting the initial contact. Anticipate questions about yourself – your experience, education, and expectations for the first day of class. Above all else, remain positive about teaching their child during the upcoming year. Parents want to know that their child is valued and valuable, and your positive attitude in this conversation will go far in assuring the parent that you value their child.

Planned, professional interactions

Jeffrey Fox wrote of a salesperson who

> spent fifteen straight eight-hour days researching and planning a fifteen minute sales call. The call was on the CEO of a leading company in a new industry. If this company adopted the...product, almost certainly the other companies in the industry would follow. The sale [became] a case history to close other customers.... and led to years of success.

Consider the ramifications of this experience to the teacher. As educators, we sell our personal credibility to our students and parents. Taking time to sell the parents – especially during the first and most crucial meetings – is inestimably important to the teacher's future success with that student.

Unlike Fox’s example, we cannot invest two weeks in planning each interaction with our parents. However, we can devote significant time seeking to understand our families and their perspective. We can plan parental interactions with the same deliberation as a lesson plan. Fox further comments, “A precall plan...is like a preflight check for an airplane pilot. The great

pilots never miss a single checkpoint before taking off or landing. If a pilot misses something, that pilot may be missing. If a salesperson misses something, the order may be missing." Likewise, if the teacher misses something in preparing for parent contacts, support may be missing later.

This "preplanning checklist" loosely follows the elements in Fox's preplanning checklist for sales.

1. Have a specific objective regarding the student. Report specific strengths and weaknesses in an objective manner. "Too often our communications with parents focus on [our needs] as educators – 'I need Johnny to stop disturbing others' …when our real concerns are that Johnny won't be [successful] if he continues to disturb his classmates."

2. Have questions about the child. How is the student sleeping at night? What extracurricular activities does s/he enjoy? Aside from additional insight into the student's life, these questions reveal that your primary concern is about the student.

3. Have something to show the parents. At your initial meeting, include an age-appropriate syllabus. Depending on the student's age, share work from your previous classes or photographs from an exciting field trip destination. Later contacts might remind parents of information on your website. Email could include examples of their child's work or photographs from classroom activities – particularly if following an exciting success.

4. Spend time anticipating the parent's concerns and preparing strategies to relieve those concerns. Poor grades? Social difficulties? Pending application to a selective program – and the ever-present specter of college acceptances? The teacher's investment in anticipating parental concerns is essential in reducing anxiety, which in turn creates a

relaxed environment around your parental interactions.

5. Be certain to state the benefits of parental support to student success in the classroom. Parents who are business owners will understand the concept of "investment return analysis." How will the student and family benefit from your suggestions?

6. Brainstorm strategies to reduce parental concerns about your efforts in the classroom. How can you put the parents at ease? Remember, being nice costs nothing. Respect, cordiality, and good manners are free. Parental interactions are not a matter of winning or losing, but of helping children and families reach (and exceed) their potential.

7. Never finish a parental contact without "asking for the close" – in your case, asking for specific parental commitment to supporting their child. If the parent's essential question is, "How can I get a teacher to help my child?", the teacher's essential question might be, "What can this parent do to support his/her child's success in school?" Fox comments that less than ten percent of salespeople actually ask their clients for the order. Why? Because "ordinary salespeople…do not understand the customer's role in the buying process."[i] Ordinary teachers do not understand the parent's crucial role as an active supporter of student learning; good teachers provide parents with tools to support learning; extraordinary teachers ask parents for commitment to specific use of learning tools in an active, supporting role.

8. The Boy Scouts and Coast Guard make their reputation on preparedness. Anticipate surprises – and plan your response. The French general Napoleon is often credited with this statement: "If I always appear prepared, it is because before entering an undertaking, I have meditated long and have foreseen what might occur. It is not genius where reveals

to me suddenly and secretly what I should do in circumstances unexpected by others; it is thought and preparation."

9. Finally, maintain flexibility. Fox reminds his Rainmakers, "Don't be so intent on following your plan that you miss a customer's cue. Be flexible." Likewise, we must remain sensitive to our families. If a parent is apparently anxious about another appointment, offer to reschedule. The inconvenience to your schedule will be compensated by a relaxed parent, already grateful for your understanding. "To do this, you must watch and listen to your parents as sensitively and intently as military spy equipment monitors enemy movements and communication. Like the most sensitive of receivers, you must be on high receive. Let nothing get by you; even the casual, offhand remark may offer clues." With parents, sometimes the casual remark is the only clue.

Preserving professional respect and personal dignity

The teacher's nature is to respond to questions, to comments – and to insecure, immature, or offensive behavior. Reactions and responses need not be identical. Internal reactions to a demeaning comment or sarcastic question should not become external reactions.

We do not expect to barge into our doctor's office and demand treatment; we do not enter an attorney's office and insist upon immediate consultation. As a matter of courtesy, parents should not expect to speak with teachers without a scheduled appointment. Headmasters and division heads must support teachers in this professional expectation.

Unlike any other profession, teachers may be asked for professional consultation regarding their patients (the students) without any notice. Some teachers handle this with aplomb; the rest of us

must do our best. Listen carefully; show empathy; promise attention to this matter immediately upon your return to your office (classroom). Disengage yourself as gently as possible; if a parent's questions will not wait, excuse yourself to the restroom for the moments necessary to gather your thoughts and composure.

If a parent appears at your classroom with an urgent concern, use your best judgment in managing the interaction. Should the parent appear aggressive or confrontational, disengage as quickly as possible – abruptly, if necessary - and report the event to your supervisor. Teachers are never obligated to endure abuse.

“When the balloon goes up”: maintaining the clinical approach

Early in their training, psychologists learn to remain “clinical” about their patients' comments. We would do well to embrace a clinical approach to conversations with our students' parents. Make a conscious decision to remain calm in the face of a parental explosion. The teacher's nature is to respond to questions, to comments – and to insecure, immature, or offensive behavior.

Visualization is an excellent tool for implementing this suggestion. Sitting by yourself in your classroom, close your eyes and create a mental image of an enraged parent storming into your room for verbal battle. See yourself actively engaged as a reflective listener who remains calm in the face of the tirades.

Your ability to maintain a professional demeanor and a clinical approach to your clients does not mean that you should tolerate abusive behavior, nor tolerate such behavior towards your colleagues.

Epilogue: Tracking contacts

Teachers hate dehumanizing activities. Creating a chart and checking off contacts feels dehumanizing – but a checklist will not lie. Think of the checklist as a great truth-teller – it will tell you that each student and each parent deserve a certain amount of attention, and it will tell you what you must do to guarantee that amount of attention to those under your care.

We live in a litigious society, where lawsuits and threats of lawsuits are commonplace. The effective teacher maintains documentation of parental contacts and conferences, including messages left on answering machines and emails sent. Little detail is necessary – date, time, student in question, and brief summary should suffice.

“8 Sept. 2005. 4:15 p.m. Rafael Salazar.
Sent email re. Rafael's 72 on anatomy test, invited call if any questions.”

“20 Sept. 2005. 4:10 p.m. Rafael Salazar.
Email re. 86 on yesterday's test, a laudable improvement of 20 percent.”

One effective teacher manages these contacts by sending emails to himself, employing the subject line for notes such as “Phone call to Rachel Salazar re. Rafael’s performance (72) on anatomy quiz.” If lengthier notes are required, the teacher records those notes in the body of the email. A well-designed set of email filters organizes these emails into folders for later reference.

Positive relationships with parents are creations and miracles of design, not happenstance. Your efforts building these relationships outside of the classroom will bring forth bountiful fruit in your students – a result that is the best hope of our labors.

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Permission to Play

By

Emily Stanley

In my first year of teaching in a small independent elementary school in New Hampshire, my co-teacher and I, then in our early twenties, gained a reputation for antic behavior. We would come to class and spend the day as characters from our social studies theme, speaking little or no English and inviting children to pretend along with us as we learned the customs of a new land. We invented games on the spot, sometimes using the stuffed animals or action figures that kids had brought from home. Other times we would announce that we were spending the entire day under a magical tree, and that to be granted permission to do so by the local gnomes, the students had to help us think of gnomish ways to do math and read. After a few weeks of this, one little girl said, in wonderment, "You two are just big kids – all you want to do is play!" At the time I found this mildly amusing, but today, it is harder than ever to earn such an accolade. Play has become a serious business.

In those early years, I migrated from one independent school to another, each with its own flavor of play and learning, before finding the place where I could do what I've come to consider my lifework. This is a small school for dyslexic children founded on a philosophy of multisensory, experiential learning. It began as a summer tutoring camp at a farm, and when it evolved into a school, it retained the playful flavor of camp life as well as the hands-on practicality of farm living. For many years, chickens and goats roamed the campus freely, homemade go-carts sputtered around the playing field, and the surrounding woods became a land of recess

adventure. Forts were built and zip lines strung between tall oaks, while stream-walking led children away from the intensity of classroom learning, and brought them back refreshed.

I know this not only from the school lore I've gleaned over the last twenty years of my own teaching, but also from the interviews with alumni that I've been conducting in my final year of doctoral research into the meaning of play in school. Times have changed, the "anything goes" 1970's and 80's are history, yet the flavor of freedom lingers in the atmosphere of this school. Children have two recesses during the school day and are allowed to play freely around the campus, including in the nearby woods and stream.

As most independent school teachers would attest, recess duty is one of the required joys of a teacher's daily schedule. I used to say that with some cynicism, especially on those bitter February days when all I wanted during recess was to nurse a cup of hot chocolate in my quiet classroom. But now there is a measure of real joy in pulling on my rubber boots and heading to the woods amid a swarm of excited children. As part of my research, which includes interviewing parents, administrators, and teachers, I have been observing my students hard at play outdoors, talking with them about what they are doing, and reveling in the sense that what scholars describe as "activity for its own sake" (Reed, 1996) is as creative as it is exuberant, and as restorative as it is inspiring. A real children's culture has sprung up here, as they collect and trade and build and explore this environment that most adults in their world have never seen and never will. Friendships are solidified as children work out the protocols of their particular fort, games of hide and seek take on new significance among the trees and bushes and boulders on the steep hillside, and the material and symbolic value of plants, rocks, and wildlife is constantly examined. All this occurs in a few precious moments that are never recorded in the official annals of gradebooks and reports home.

This play truly is serious business to its participants. I have heard testimony from every quarter of the school – from every constituent group that I've spoken with – that such freedom and encouragement to play is what makes our school unique and wonderful. It's not just outdoors, either. Walk into any classroom, of any age group, and you will find teachers demonstrating that learning through play removes barriers, opens doors, and encourages creative, divergent thinking. We play with objects, numbers, concepts, words and, most importantly, with each other. These are not the competitive (and, for any child with a learning difference, demoralizing) games that I recall from my own childhood school experience of spelling bees and rapid-fire math facts tournaments. Instead, these playful activities are designed to place children in a position of eminence and agency, enabling them to "stand a head taller," as Vygotsky put it, than they normally would.

Playing demonstrates to children that we see the learning process as open to an "as if" perspective, which harnesses the power of imagination in engaging real life possibilities. Introducing absurdity is an immediate signal to children that we are shifting into play mode. In one of our first grade science classes studying animal classification, we rely on children's delight and skill in pretending for a game that we call "Animal Court." With suitable gravity, the plaintiff, who may be a teacher or a student, presents an animal (a tortoise, for instance) to the court: "Your Honor, I have here before me a…bird. See? It has a beak." Students, suppressing giggles, are asked to offer logical arguments in response to this unlikely "case," using empirical evidence, prior knowledge, and the concepts that they have learned in class. Such playing with reality suspends a teacher's authority of ultimate knowledge and places it in the hands of students, who can then proceed with the fun of pretend roles while using observation and critical thinking to demonstrate their understanding of the unique features of the animal before them.

This offers confirmation for children that adulthood does not mean the abandonment of spontaneity, but that we who lay down the law in our classrooms are also capable of laying aside our own rigidity and rules. By so doing, we invite our students to move from the "as if" of pretend play to the "what if" of imagining new possibilities. What if I had presented an aquatic turtle to the court and called it a fish? What if a bat was believed to be a butterfly? This is play in the interest of true *recreation*, a quality of life that even dour John Locke acknowledged "as necessary as Labour or Food" (Locke, 1693/1968, p. 211)

Teachers are supposed to have an educational agenda before them at all times which focuses on instructing children in important knowledge and skills. How that instruction is delivered can make the difference between an enthusiastic embrace of new and challenging ideas, and their relegation to the junk heap of the difficult and meaningless. Vivian Paley, whose insightful writings on young children's fantasy play are based on her own classroom research, observed that children's play should be regarded as a teacher's work. I would add that the reciprocal is also true: teachers' play should provide a model for children's work. This includes flexibility of thinking, recognition of multiple possibilities, willingness to step into a variety of roles, and celebration of the inherent pleasure in learning.

We teachers often offer play as a reward for work, blatantly signaling our own classification of what is "fun" and "not fun." This creates a distinction on the part of students between "good" and "good *for* you," which, in the concrete world of children, is easily translated into the metaphor of dessert and vegetables. It also means that if one of these must be given up, due to time or other constraints, it will be the one considered frivolous and lacking in nutritive value. I believe that a false dichotomy exists in this pervasive characterization of work and play in school. Instead of representing a momentary break between bouts of "real" learning, playful

activity should be seen as nourishing both cognitive and social development, and should be as purposefully woven into the fabric of our pedagogy as the adept management of a classroom, the insightful analysis of test scores, or any other essential practice.

Playing in school is an increasingly endangered activity. Frightening statistics demonstrate that recess and other activities perceived as non-academic have gradually evaporated in many public schools fighting to maintain achievement standards. Independent schools are affected by similar selective pressures, both in and out of the classroom. Do those of us who are veterans in our schools fully recognize how much we need to continue playing, and why we should model it for our younger colleagues? Play is not the sole purview of twenty-somethings. In my experience, it is often the senior members of a school faculty who are comfortable enough with both the subject and the reciprocity of the teaching-learning process to relax and have fun with it. My daughter's 7th grade social studies teacher, an otherwise staid older gentleman, declared every Thursday "Game Day" and challenged teams of students to develop fun, creative ways of reviewing the week's material. His spirited participation in their games was the highlight of the activity.

All of us, regardless of age, need to recognize the opportunity to continue learning more about those who are central to our mission as teachers. Plato has been quoted as saying, "You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." Over and over, as I observe my students at play, and when I play along with them, I am amazed at what I never knew. This child playing a rhyming game is a budding poet; that one constructing a cardboard roller coaster immediately intuits potential results. We teachers don't need to be just big kids – we can't go back there, nor should we try – but we need to take play in our schools seriously, and

not assume that it will exist simply because we have children in our midst. We need to grant our students, and ourselves, permission to play.

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