

# TEACHER SELF

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1, I think of teaching as if I were directing a play – an improvised play in which there is no lines for the players to read or only a few at most. There is, however, a specific structure that allows for and encourages all of the players, the teacher and the students, toward goals. Some of the time a teacher can act in a traditional manner. Other times, students can teach themselves in small groups. Most of the time, the teacher's predominant role is that of a director. The script is a set of notes, and at every juncture, detailed directions on how to proceed are given. What unfolds, in contrast, is undetermined and can be surprising. Paradoxically, the structure of the play has to be quite precise, while the hand of the director must be mostly invisible. This lecture describes the rhythm in a classroom over a semester.

2, To begin, teachers must build a climate of respectful relationships, between teacher and students and among students themselves. This is a key element that makes it possible to have a sense of control while creating conditions that allow for addressing a wide range of student differences. The teacher's role is to encourage thinking and self-expression. For a director, the belief in students' ability to guide their own learning should be stronger than an emphasis on right answers.

3, In this learning environment, students might mistakenly believe that there is no pressure to do assigned work. As with any style of teaching, though, a clear structure is essential. Without regular preparation, improvisations are flat or, worse, simply opinionated. For the dialogue to be energetic, focused, and constructive, students have to conscientiously do their class assignments. Then, students will speak their lines in the play with strength and understanding.

4, Along with pressure to do their work, students should feel a teacher's caring and trust. This does not mean that students are peers. Somewhere between friendship and constrictive authority is a classroom leader who facilitates the development of commitment and community. Students feel special when they understand that the value of a teacher's ideas is not so dominant that the value of theirs is lost. What teachers say and do is important, but it is also true that people learn best when they are given choices and encouraged to express their own views.

5, Together, teachers and their students need to be engaged in joint learning ventures. This attention to interpersonal interaction and desire for mutual cooperation reflects a core tenet of humanistic education. In this philosophy, the priority of person is higher than curricular goals. Both are necessary, but students' needs come first. One challenge is finding ways to successfully respond to each student's individual needs.

6, Because a typical class has twenty-five students or more and only one teacher, this is a tall order. There is no question that giving attention to one student can conflict with the needs of others. Furthermore, the major concern, rather than to meet the needs of students, can often be the problem of maintaining control.

7, For some teachers, the concern is sufficiently ubiquitous that they are guided mainly by fears that students will cross the boundaries that they want to set. But when students feel they are special, there are fewer behavior problems.

8, Instead of worrying about control, I focus on conversation. Within the structure of the play, classroom interactions, from the outset, can demonstrate the social rules of the learning environment-better than the words in a handout or what might be posted on a blackboard. These conversations establish what is expected of students and what they can expect of the teacher.

9, When students first enter a classroom, the teacher can bank on them wanting to know about expectations because students want to succeed. Even a student who has the habit of doing as little as possible will be interested in what will happen. Students are curious about the personality of the teacher, the rules of attendance, what has to be read, what written, the work that will be assigned in and out of class. Tapping students' curiosity about their own welfare is an easy place to start. But for a teacher to suggest that the curriculum could be changed as a result of an opening conversation would be misleading. Just as social interactions require boundaries for mutually respectful relationships, they are also needed so as not to lose sight of the curriculum. However, a conversation that invites interpretation and additions, and shows room for choices, demonstrates the realness of a joint venture.

10, The mechanics of designing classroom activities so that discussions like these flow smoothly, and do not get seriously off target, are unfamiliar. They depend on a teacher's attentive listening as well as creative instructions that clarify the limits within which the discussion will feel relevant-to the teacher and to the students. The listening works if there is a high level of acceptance of a student's thoughts and a commitment to reframing what is unacceptable in terms that bring the teacher's and student's thinking closer together. As the teacher models listening, students will feel special because of the careful attention to what they are saying.

11, The instructions that guide an activity must include questions for which a wide range of responses make sense and contribute to the discussion. These I call true questions. Not every student necessarily will want to answer them, but anyone could because the answers reflect personal thinking and opinion. In this way, students learn that what they have to say counts. Once a student has had a turn or two, the teacher must also insist that he or she listen to others.

12, Relevance is maintained most easily when the social and academic boundaries of-classroom activities are broad enough to be rarely breached. In the event that this happens, it is an opportunity for the teacher to gently exercise authority. The students' experience of being carefully heard builds receptivity to the exercise of authority. It is a kind of slack that allows any relationship to function with less difficulty. A sense of psychological safety is also increased from knowing that the teacher is in charge when conflicts arise.

13, Students, too, can be directed to ask questions of each other. They do not come to a teacher as blank slates but, rather, with varieties of prior knowledge. Honoring this knowledge establishes that learning is not solely dependent on the teacher. It helps to clarify that the role of the teacher is as someone who sets the stage for learning, rather than the one who is the only source of learning. Asking students to talk with each other about what they know enables them to

share information, experience the value of listening to others, and realize that they also guide their own learning.

14, Once students are comfortable with the way the class functions, the focus on the curriculum can be heightened. The first concern is to make sure that students are finding personal value in their work. There is always a need to evaluate whether assignments have been done correctly, but more important is helping students to see that their efforts are meaningful. Compelling texts, choices, open-ended questions, and assigning homework that is an integral part of classwork involve students in their learning. Directing students to notice where their work is strongest helps them to identify aspects of the curriculum with which they can feel connected. What students learn must be about themselves as much as it is about the larger world of knowledge they are attempting to master.

15, Tasks that relate to students' everyday experiences reveal connections between individual needs and the goals of a lesson. Such tasks create a common language for discussion between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves. These experiential assignments make it possible for students to relate the curriculum to their lives. The assignments need to be tilted so that success is likely, but regardless, talking about these experiences is usually not difficult for students. Because they are about work that has been assigned, discussion will satisfy the teacher's goals equally well.

16, The natural interest that people have for talking about their own experiences makes it comfortable for students to share their learning. The discussion can be facilitated by the teacher in a traditional manner. When one thinks about teaching as a play, though, there are endless numbers of small group activities that can be invented to structure a discussion that is both entertaining and instructive. The advantage of group work is that the teacher, released from traditional responsibilities, can attend fully to the role of a director. While moving from group to group, there is time to listen, make brief comments, and redirect the focus of the discussion when it loses sight of larger learning goals. There are times when asking students to work in small groups causes tensions in a class, so it is also the director's job to modify instructions occasionally to minimize interpersonal conflicts. After a while, most students notice that working together is fun and productive.

17, Inventing a highly motivating activity that keeps students on task tempts one to use it over and over again. In my opinion, a successful activity should not be repeated within a semester with the same group of students. The probability is that it will soon lose its power to focus students' attention. A rule of thumb (which I admit to breaking occasionally) is to introduce new and different activities every week. With experience, the flow of activities can be sequenced to build a dramatic effect, as in a play, over the course of a semester.

18, Building drama, however, does not mean steadily upping the challenge. When the curriculum is in the center of students' attention, there is room to introduce a learning climate that feels easier for a while. This allows for finding increased fit between the curriculum and individual learning styles. With less pressure, students are free to explore ways of contributing to class that suit them best. They also reveal to the teacher their uniqueness so that future lessons can be targeted toward each student's potential.

19, or me, the use of visual communication and mental imagery with which it is strongly connected is an avenue to this ease. Visual tasks are fun. They are a welcome change from familiar classroom communication that revolves around spoken and written words. Though unfamiliar in classrooms, imagery, present in every human mind, can be adapted to activities that have special personal involvement. Also, imagery shows connections with other ways of communicating that are not centered on linguistic and logical modes of thinking.

20, We need only follow the example of teachers of young children who readily introduce drawing, music, and kinesthetic activities into their classes. It's a mistake, though, to think that there are not learners in every class of students, however old, who need opportunities to learn in other than traditional ways. The variety itself is attractive to students. The least difficult place to begin is with drawings of diagrams and pictures. What is striking about adding them into the ongoing conversation is how many more students participate. There is a shift in classroom interaction that comes from the playfulness of drawing itself and the ways in which pictures and diagrams allow students to see lessons from a different perspective. Even quiet students are sometimes eager to speak about what they draw.

21, When using imagery, the classroom climate becomes more relaxed. It is similar to what happens when students play games as part of their classwork. They are attracted to games as if by some gravitational pull. Likewise, with activities that stimulate visual and other nontraditional thinking, there is a compelling ease that surrounds them. This relaxed interchange of ideas enhances the ability to improvise. Playfulness and the idea of teaching as a play intertwine.

22, Students are receptive now to both intellectual and emotional challenges. The history of mutually respectful conversations has led to the development of relationships with the teacher and with each other that make it reasonable to expect a greater willingness to risk. Activities can be introduced that temporarily restrict the normal broad parameters within which the class operates. These activities restrict the freedom to participate or not-to choose what a student wants or doesn't want to do. Tasks insist that students suspend their worries about making mistakes and try to do what they imagine they can't do. As in role-playing, a person tries on ways of thinking and acting that are not in one's repertoire.

23, When a teacher pushes harder, though, heightening the risks that are involved, students can become unsure of whether their needs for safety are being met. For example, when roleplaying is introduced as a learning activity, a student might feel pressed to play a role that turns out to be highly uncomfortable. Partly, the expansion of the slack that has been growing in class helps to compensate for discomforts that are engendered, but the teacher also risks that some students will be upset.

24, One avenue for soothing feelings is to sensitively adjust the difficulty of an activity while it is in progress—for the class as a whole, for a particular group, or for an individual. Some students feel that this is manipulative and/or unfair, but these adjustments are a legitimate responsibility of the teacher. When pressed, I have said to students, on occasion, "You don't have to *want* to do this task, but you have to do it." I once told a competent, articulate, likable student-whose participation regularly crowded out others in class—that he was not permitted to speak during the

first half of a discussion that was meant to draw in several quiet students. My demand at that moment was an affront to him and a few other members of the class. But after the discussion, they were better able to understand why I made the decision.

25, Still, difficult learning carries the potential danger of painful embarrassment. No kind of teaching is immune to causing pain that interrupts the learning process. I think this is because learning in many ways is essentially a reimagining of self, and all of us have to contend with a strong desire not to change. The function of these activities is to help students discover whether long-standing images of themselves are interfering with learning new skills. One relatively safe strategy is to make the making of mistakes normal. Teachers have to communicate to students that it is possible to make mistakes, and laugh at oneself, without penalty or loss of respect. In this context, mistakes are productive and insightful. Not all learning is easy, and some learning means moving outside of a comfortable space.

26, Another strategy is to change how small groups function. At the outset, it works to form new groups every time a new activity is initiated. Students get to know many of their classmates better. As a result, they develop preferences for whom they would like to work with closely. With this information, as a part of heightening challenge, it is practical to form long ... range groups in which students can develop stronger ties with each other. These ties serve to increase the amount of support individuals will receive from fellow students. The teacher can have higher expectations and count on students to develop a commitment to working together over a period of time.

27, The greater commitment to working together enables students to take turns teaching other group members. The idea that the best way to learn something is by having to teach it has ready application in this situation. The distance between the level of knowledge of the "teacher" and that of the other students is reduced because they are peers, yet the challenge motivates everyone in the group. There is less stress and more learning for more students because independent thinking and self ... expression have already been encouraged. Responsibility for teaching substantial parts of a lesson plan is feasible. The sense of productive independence is sometimes exhilarating.

28, At the same time, the teacher's role as a director is further widened because of increased opportunities to interact with students and groups individually. For a director, there is time to assist students in their preparations for teaching. Students can also be observed more closely, and a teacher can reflect on his or her actions as a facilitator-even as the play progresses.

29, The willingness to accept challenge starts with emotional strength and ends up stretching the intellect. It is necessary to balance these aspects of learning. Traditional approaches to education give us little practical knowledge about how to achieve this balance. When I assume, however, that important learning of any kind requires mental restructuring, then I can see that resistance is normal. The habit has been for teachers to view resistance negatively and simply push harder on students irrespective of how often this approach leads to failure. If learning involves a restructuring of self, the teaching activities need to be designed to support the process. The teacher's work is to reframe resistance so that students' negative behaviors become useful to the lesson.

30, As the end of a course of study nears, attention turns to evaluation. This is an opportunity to consolidate learning. Evaluation is important for both teachers and students, but in viewing it only as a means of judging students' progress, one runs the danger of missing students' needs to capture and reflect on what they have learned in a larger context. Learning that is not attached to such to such a context is less likely to translate into stable, practical knowledge. What works for my classes is to use the evaluation process for pushing students harder while helping them see their learning in a multitude of connections. In raising the level of challenge to its high point, the classroom play is brought to a dramatic climax. This feeling of drama reinforces the restructuring of self.

31, This is when many students are given full responsibility as teachers, not only of their groups but of the entire class. Of course, the teacher/director must continue to design activities with boundaries. As always, some must be in place. But here, the teacher only works closely with students to be sure that they are thoroughly prepared. Acting as teachers, students are then given more responsibility and freedom than ever before. This is an exciting time because the outcomes are largely unexpected. Yet two things are sure to happen: When students are teaching, they maximize the power of their knowledge because they are in charge, and the other students sense their own authority because the teacher is a peer. Finally, I ask students to draw what they have learned over the course of the semester. In my case, this is a task that consolidates what has been learned about the art and science of teaching. This is the denouement, and the activity works wonders. Every student becomes articulate in front of the whole class. Students standing in front of their-drawings talk freely about what they have learned about teaching and themselves as teachers-and this knowledge is always important.

32, What follows are experiences of a teacher and his students that illustrate and explore this approach to teaching. For the final paper of an undergraduate education course, called the "Art and Science of Teaching," the students were asked, to write short stories that revealed their learning during the semester. I chose some of these papers as a basis for writing my stories. After these were combined, each student author read and approved the final version. We were able to agree that the interwoven stories you will read are fair accounts of what actually happened.

GROUP	PARAGRAPHS	
1	1, 2, 3	Teacher's role, climate of learning environment
2	4, 5, 6, 7	Caring and trust, interpersonal interactions
3	8,9,10, 11	Conversation, play, listening, questioning
4	12, 13, 14, 15	Relevance, questioning, Connections
5	16, 17, 18, 19	Natural Interests, Drama, Imagery
6	20, 21, 22, 23	pictures, play, imagery, relationships
7	24, 25, 26, 27	Adjust difficulty. Images of themselves, working together
8	28, 29, 30, 31, 32	Teacher interaction, emotional strength, reframing resistance, responsibility