



Real Listening as Real Teaching

There was a period in my public school teaching years when I spent a good bit of time reading about what it meant to create a “thinking classroom.” I learned useful things about the hallmarks of various types of thinking, strategies to support thinking, and so on. But I gleaned more valuable insights when—to gather information for my dissertation—I spent two months watching a really fine 8th grade English teacher interact with her students.

From my first day as an observer in Dianne’s class, I was struck by the thoughtful and thought-provoking ideas her students generated. I realized quickly that this soft-spoken teacher engaged her students’ minds in ways that were powerful for them. Because what Dianne did was subtle, it took me a while to figure out her “power source.” It was simple and profound.

She entered her classroom every day—and every class period—with clear and unequivocal respect for her students. Dianne believed that each student brought to the classroom wisdom born of experience and that teaching provided her the opportunity to help these students discover their own wisdom and that of their classmates.

Powerful Questioning, Exquisite Listening

Beyond that powerful conception of the nature of teaching, Dianne exercised two other strengths characteristic of thought leaders. First, she was a probing questioner. She knew that every idea a student shared was the corridor to another and richer idea—and she regularly led her students through those corridors, never stopping at the threshold of an idea. Second, she was an exquisite listener. Any student who was speaking to Dianne was, for that time, the center of the universe

for her—and that student felt valued in a rare, affirming, and nurturing way.

Quickly, her students became her understudies. They began to talk with one another the way she talked with them—with intensity, respect, and great expectations. Most days, discussions in Dianne’s classes had the feel of holy ground.

I recall a day when I looked up from taking notes in the back of the room during a class discussion of a short story. The conversation was

moving along briskly, idea leading to idea, when I realized Dianne was no longer in the front of the class. Surprised that I hadn’t seen her leave the room, I was even more surprised to realize that the students were continuing the discussion in her absence with no lessening of interest or intensity. My surprise peaked, however, when I

saw Dianne seated in the middle of the classroom among her students—a learner among learners.

Understanding What Really Matters

Although she was nearing middle age, Dianne was a new teacher. She’d elected not to begin her career until her three children were teenagers. So despite her maturity, she was a novice educator. From time to time, as is the case with all novice teachers, she’d teach a term incorrectly or approach a segment of learning awkwardly. For example, I watched Dianne teach the literary concept of *point of view* as a synonym for the more generally used term *viewpoint*. I had the sense that at least some of her students caught these occasional errors, but no one ever raised an issue. The students simply continued to follow her and one another on a journey of discovery.

As is often the case, a student provided me with the insight I needed to understand more fully what

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made Dianne such an effective teacher, catalyst for discussion, and thought mentor. I interviewed a good number of her students—many of them several times. One day as I interviewed a boy who seemed particularly attuned to details and undercurrents in the classroom, I asked him gently about Dianne’s occasional content missteps.

“Last week, you and your classmates were talking about point of view in literature,” I said. “I wasn’t quite clear on how this term was being used in the class. I’m wondering if you could share your understanding with me.”

Without hesitation, he replied, “Well, I think Mrs. W. used the term in a slightly different way than it’s used in the book” and proceeded to explain the distinctions.

“So,” I asked, “is it a problem for you that you had to figure out that your teacher was defining this term

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in a different way than how the book defines it?”

“Oh, no,” he responded with a firm shake of his head, “it isn’t a problem at all!”

Perhaps following in Dianne’s mode, I probed deeper: “Can you help me understand that? You and your classmates clearly value this class and its teacher, despite the fact that occasionally some of the information she presents is a bit inaccurate.”

With eyes that matched the intensity of his teacher’s, and with conviction, the student responded, “Ms. Tomlinson, for seven years, teachers have told us *what* to think. This teacher has shown us *how* to think. That’s what matters here!”

The experience was, and remains for me, a benchmark moment in understanding great teaching. **EL**

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