

"Tale of Two Teachers"

John and David are similar in many ways. They are active boys sharing a love of outdoor activities, and are easily bored indoors. The boys have learned to manipulate their respective parents with whining and disobedience when they are restrained, and only allow them peace when the boys obtain their own way. Their parents are often embarrassed by the public displays of disobedience, but they see the situation as temporary, and they frequently console themselves with the knowledge that their children are also very loving, are sure to grow out of their disobedience, and have never been in any real trouble. The boys began school in the same year and are in different grades at their parents' request. Interestingly, they have been placed in two contrasting classrooms in which the teachers have quite different educational philosophies and beliefs about the role of the teacher in the education system.

John's teacher, Amanda, is a relatively recent graduate, and is imbued with the modern approach to teaching. She views students as natural learners and sees the teacher's role broadly as that of facilitator. She expects that children will learn most school skills in a natural way as long as she can provide an enjoyable, challenging, and stimulating classroom. That they learn at different rates is of no great moment - most will catch up later when they see the benefits of doing so. Amanda is convinced that learning cannot be forced, instruction is usually counter-productive, and that children are largely the determiners of what they will learn, and when they will learn it. Thus, she provides an enormous variety of experiences for her students - from scheduling visiting dance troupes, excursions to historical sites and museums, and weeklong class themes on topical events ranging from elections to the Grand Prix. Students in her class develop projects based on these themes, often in groups. Extended discussion of such events is seen as valuable language work, which will lead to children wanting to learn to read and write.

In her view, children's attitudes to reading, and to learning in general, are far more important than their attainment in these areas. She places great emphasis on students feeling comfortable in her classroom so that they will be prepared to take risks in learning. Since Amanda sees learning as student-directed she is careful not to risk damage to their esteem as learners; hence, she does not enforce systems of discipline or correct their errors. The students' effort is all important to Amanda - issues like accuracy in word reading or convention in spelling are best left until later years when students are less vulnerable to disillusionment and its resultant opting-out of learning. She believes that error-correction is a very destructive process, reducing the preparedness of students to attempt tasks for fear of failure. She considers that errors are merely an indicator of growth, a phase of development that precedes a gradual (though inevitable) increase in self-correction. By a process of closer and closer approximations, children's reading, writing, and spelling will come to meet society's conventions.

Amanda is concerned that John appears not to be progressing, but is prepared to wait until her strategy - that of inviting John to see himself as a learner - has begun to take effect. John's parents are becoming increasingly anxious about his lack of basic school skills - especially that he demonstrates no apparent conception of the purpose of print. When he can be cajoled into looking at a book, he guesses the story's meaning from the accompanying picture, and if asked to follow the words with his finger, the words he uses bear little resemblance to the print. Amanda has explained to John's parents that story meaning is negotiated between author and reader and that John is actively transacting with the print - not mindlessly regurgitating the author's words. John's parents, especially his mother, are most uneasy about this notion. In her daytime occupation she recently produced a workshop safety manual for a new machine, and she hopes her words will be read quite literally, rather than depend on the life experiences of the reader for the manual's ultimate meaning. John's parents feel intimidated by Amanda's enthusiasm and reassurances. They feel out of their depth when she argues that teaching reading today has dramatically advanced from the bad old days when they themselves were taught to read by drill-and-kill methods. Those ancient crude methods have long since been replaced by an approach that is at once exciting to students but also respectful of their already formidable talents.

Amanda is unsupportive of John's parents' desire to formally assess and actively teach him the skills they feel he requires if he is to flourish in school. In Amanda's view, teaching decisions can only be made in the

moment that issues arise in the classroom, and only by the teacher who is continuously observing the process of John's education. Planning implies the development of an artificial environment, hardly appropriate for the authentic experiences available to the student when the teacher is responding sensitively with moment-by-moment judgements. Amanda considers John's uninterested behaviour is his major problem and the reason for his current lack of progress. When the time is right for him, and not until then, he will accelerate and catch up to his peers. John's parents are becoming restive as time passes with no discernible improvement. They are reluctantly considering whether a new start in another school would help – now feeling angry and powerless about what they see as uncaring treatment from their local school.

In the meantime, David has been a member of Monica's class. She has been a teacher for ten years, and her early training was quite different to Amanda's; although, she did participate in an inservice course with an approach similar to that in which Amanda was trained. Monica derived considerable benefit from her in-service course. It challenged her beliefs and she decided to try it whole-heartedly several years ago. A number of its features have remained part of her practice, but she found the approach incomplete and based on vague philosophical principles rather than the "whatever works" pragmatism with which she felt more comfortable. Monica noticed, for example, that a sizeable proportion of her students (like David) displayed little evidence of their being natural learners, and she felt that it would be unconscionable on her part if she were to wait to see whether they would ever become so. She had, over the years, noticed that early lack of progress was strongly predictive of students' continued failure in her school, and she even looked at research confirming that her classroom observations matched those of many researchers and teachers.

Monica has become alert to students who do not make progress in her class, and more recently has tried to determine who they might be, even before they have the opportunity for failure. Her reading of education literature extended to a list of warning signs, for which she routinely checks among all new students. Some of these involve informal observation, and some formal but simple tests. She is interested in their mastery of basic language concepts such as colours, position in space, understanding of time. She wants to know whether they can follow the language of the classroom - those words that teachers use regularly on the assumption that their students are familiar with them. Monica is interested in students' developing understanding of the structure of language - especially rhyme, alliteration, and knowledge of the alphabet. She tried to obtain this information from David's previous teacher, but was frustrated by the lack of information upon which to make her judgements. At her school, she has found that some teachers' observations are vague, unsystematic and made irregularly. If one believes that learning is a natural process and consequently direct intervention is not helpful, then careful record keeping of achievement can be seen as less important than information about attitude and self-esteem. Despite this difficulty with obtaining detailed information, her own observations were sufficient to decide that David was possibly a student at-risk.

Monica believes that David's progress at this stage of his schooling is largely her responsibility. She certainly does have students who are mainly self-directed learners, and she has a similar goal for David; however, she recognizes that at present a structure must be provided to ensure David's movement in that direction. Currently, David has neither the behavioural self-management skills, nor the basic academic skills to elevate himself up to the academic level of his peers. Because he needs assistance to ensure his attention to the task of learning, Monica developed a clear set of rules and consequences for each of those daily activities during which David has difficulty cooperating. In fact, these are simply a more explicit version of those she maintains for her whole class - designed to create the orderly conditions within which, her experience tells her, learning is more likely to occur. An agreement between Monica, David and his parents involves daily two-way communication (at least initially) for the purposes of enhancing the behaviour-stabilising effects at both home and school, keeping David's parents informed about progress (behavioural and academic), and allowing them to talk about what actually happens day-by-day.

David has always been close-mouthed about his school day, and this has frustrated his parents who desperately sought a genuine partnership with the school to help him progress. They are also able to provide a home-based incentive for David to help maintain his effort over the term. As he accrues achievement-stickers and the much valued appreciative comments that accompany them, he pastes the tokens on a chart at home and receives support and encouragement from his family. At the conclusion of this venture, when the chart is

full, a new pitching glove is the negotiated reward. David is beginning to appreciate that his minute-by-minute behaviour throughout the whole day contributes towards his desired objective - an important insight for him as he journeys toward self-responsibility. Monica has never felt comfortable about providing such incentives for students who should really be responsible for their own behaviour and effort. However, she considers that she must accept David's inability to do so at present, and her resultant responsibility for providing the framework. She intends to phase out this artificial structure as David's appropriate behaviour begins to become habitual - maintained by improved school progress, teacher and parent encouragement, and his own developing self-esteem. Monica's experience with students similar to David had convinced her that as he is not yet able to manage his own classroom behavior, she should step in and provide the conditions in which self-management is more likely to develop.

Just as Monica considers it her responsibility to assist a student to move towards behavioural self-management through her own direct intervention, she also adopts a similar approach to the teaching/learning process. She considers the process as a collaboration in which the degree of teacher input is high when the student has less to contribute. This division of load is not static, but shifts as the student develops competence and confidence. She has noticed that David does not readily associate new learning with what he already knows unless this relationship is carefully pointed out to him. An array of experiences tend to remain just that, and because of the lack of associations made, can be easily forgotten, or at least of less educational value than the teacher had hoped. Approaches based on a discovery learning model seem to make little impact upon his progress. To enhance his academic progress, Monica presents him with scaffolds and strategies for solving the various problems faced in class. She teaches him a series of concrete steps which, when memorised or provided in diagram form, outline procedures he must follow to achieve his objective. When given a relatively unstructured task such as "Write what you know about your favourite basketball team", David stares fixedly at his blank sheet of paper, seemingly paralysed - unable to begin. In fact, he has not learned how to break a task down into its parts and to plan how to construct the requisite product. Monica has provided him with a template that adds sufficient structure for him to attempt the task. One such strategy involves a series of questions he must ask himself, the answers to which create the assignment sequence that when viewed as a whole had seemed impossible. It is figuratively a road map that he has memorised, and has been taught to use in such circumstances, to travel from the question to the answer. For the essay, he is using visual imagery and a story map. Both are task-specific rather than content-specific strategies, and he has been taught how to use them in other similar tasks too.

Monica has noticed that the way in which she designs any given teaching sequence has a marked effect on the ease with which students acquire the knowledge or skill. This applies to at-risk students like David, but she is interested to observe, also has an impact on the learning of other students. She is so pleased with the results when she incorporates certain principles that she has begun talking to her colleagues about some simple techniques often overlooked in the day-to-day rush of classroom teaching. Monica was asked to produce a summary checklist, which other teachers have begun to examine with interest.

She describes her teaching approach thus "I always tell the students very clearly what it is I am going to teach them, why and where it fits in with what they already know. I check that they do already have the pre-skills and knowledge that they need to comprehend today's teaching. I now present material in smaller steps than I did formerly, and check for understanding after each step. I incorporate student practice after each step to reduce memory load, and I provide instant corrective feedback to the students in a cheerful way. I know that David may take longer to master any given step so I pre-teach the difficult steps to a small group of similar students earlier in the lesson. I also include the step in the parent-communication book so that David can obtain the additional practice at home needed if he is to incorporate this new skill into his bag of tricks.

In the past, I always felt frustrated that David completed fewer practice items than the grade's academic stars, when he really needed to complete several times as many as they did. I have found it important that the initial practice is supervised so that errors do not become entrenched. Adequate massed practice is crucial for David because it takes him longer than most to master anything new. Following this guided practice phase is the step known as independent practice - a feature necessary if he is to remember what he has just mastered. The third teaching element involves distributed practice, in which the skill is scheduled for practice over the

following weeks with increasing time in between. This last feature helps David develop the skill to automaticity - the ability to use it fluently and almost effortlessly. Until recently, I tended to ignore the importance of practice. It was when I decided to add a topspin backhand to my range of tennis strokes that I realised how we acknowledge the importance of practice in just about every other walk of life except education.

My teaching has improved since I noticed that the rate at which I introduce material could help or hinder students' concentration and ease of learning. I keep to a brisk speed when possible because it helps maintain my students' attention, only slowing when I know the task is difficult or the feedback I receive indicates overload. I am also very careful about the wording I use - so as not to introduce ambiguity. I was surprised to hear, on a tape-recording of one of my lessons presented several years ago, that frequently there were several possible interpretations. If there is more than one possible interpretation to what I said I know that David will adopt the wrong one. As regards correcting errors, I think I have done students a disservice in the past, as I was reticent about seeming too negative. I now believe that society's spelling and writing conventions should be explained to students as important objectives from the beginning. I feel that unless teachers are firm about this students develop the belief that accuracy is unimportant.

I explain to class that my feedback to them is a normal part of teaching and they seem happy to accept that explanation. I thought that error-correction might discourage David, but I told him that when he makes a mistake I look for ways to teach better not to criticise him. I now think that it is David's appreciation of his real progress that is enabling him to take risks with his learning. Previously, no matter how attractive my classroom environment, I could not gain enthusiastic work from him. I have learned about a variety of corrections relevant to different types of error, and now feel that I was in error myself in being reticent about such feedback. My demeanour during correction is very important however, and I am careful to avoid irritation in my voice when the same error is repeated often.

Earlier in my career, I was attracted to the idea that if I could improve David's self-esteem he would develop a desire to learn as a consequence. Over the years I have learned from my students that their failure cannot be disguised by well-meaning, but ultimately condescending, self-esteem approaches. Certainly, when I tried the approach nothing beneficial happened. Now that I am committed to ensuring that learning happens and continually focussing on what I do to achieve that aim, I find that David, and other at-risk students are learning much more readily, and that their attitudes and self confidence are improving as a consequence of improved competence."

David's parents are very pleased with his progress this year and particularly with their close cooperative relationship with his teacher and school. They recognize that they have been very fortunate to meet a teacher of Monica's expertise and attitude. They are also aware that David's difficulties will not be resolved in one year and are planning how to maximise the gains he has made this year. His parents are hopeful that Monica will again be available for David next year, although they have heard that Amanda may be the teacher assigned to that class.

It is interesting to note that both teachers share a similar view about the aims of education. Each wants their students to be capable of succeeding in the world, to be able to be able to participate fully as a member of society, and even to make a significant contribution to it. Where they differ is in beliefs about the role of education in the achievement of those objectives, and stemming from that, the practices that are necessary to do so. Teachers, supported by an enlightened administrations, have the capacity to make a significant difference to the full range of students in their care, including those at-risk. Sadly, the most influential culture of education and teacher training is at odds with the sort of practices that Monica describes. They may be well supported by research; however, research has had only minimal impact on teacher training curricula and, thereby, on classroom practice.

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