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Up to the Task

It has become apparent to me that when a teacher, one the first day of school, scans the thirty faces of her students and sees each of these faces as a blank slate waiting to be filled, that she is making an enormous and grave mistake. Along with their pencils and notebooks, students pack to the classroom *all* of their prior experience and knowledge. This includes their prior knowledge and theories about the class subject, about school and teachers in general, about their ability to succeed, what it means to be a student, as well as knowledge about how they are perceived by those around them and how they in turn perceive themselves. This is merely a partial list of a multitude of possible factors students bring to the table, all of which help determine what and if students will learn in the classroom.

This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that these determinates are themselves in a constant state of flux. Just as the structure of a teacher's given discipline can change as she continues to compile new experiences and formulate new ideas, students are constantly adding to and modifying the bulk of their experience. What motivates a particular student to perform on a given occasion may not motivate them on subsequent occasions and this is the case for each of the students in a teacher's classroom. Assuming that this information is true, how can a teacher structure her lessons, assignments, and assessments so as to motivate the majority of student towards high achievement? What about those students who fall outside of the majority; how can she work toward engaging them as well? What reasons may lay behind student's

“failure” to engage in a particular subject or in a particular classroom? How does a teacher take the multiple perspectives of her students and utilize it in the development of her curriculum?

The following discourse is an exploration of these questions. My intent is to critically examine and synthesize theories concerning student motivation, classroom task development, and assessment techniques, in order to develop one possible personal approach toward effective teaching. With that as my motivation I now turn toward the task.

Since many of the questions above derive from concerns about what ideas and beliefs learners bring with them to the classroom I want to first focus on some of the ideas students bring that are aversive to the learning teachers would typically like them to do.

In an essay by Herbert Kohl he describes and defines a tactic that many students utilize, for a variety of reasons, in order not to engage in the activities of a classroom. He defines this practice as *not-learning*. Kohl explains that typically educators show a “lack of respect for [students’] ability to judge what is appropriate learning for [themselves]” (*I Won’t Learn from You*, 10). Teacher often see a students “failure” to engage in a subject as either a lack of ability or a lack of effort. Rarely do educators look beyond the surface of failures to find the true reasons behind them. Students could be struggling to adjust to the culture and language of the classroom which is totally different that the culture and language they go home to at the end of the day. They could have conscious social objections to school or to authoritative society in general. Kohl exemplifies this in his story about Rick, the student who purposefully and methodically not-learned algebra.

I had a similar not-learning experience in high school as well. Struggling in Algebra II, I constantly bombarded the teacher with questions which he felt got in the way of his lecturing. Instead of asking me to see him privately to work out my problems he became exasperated. During one lecture he told me to shut up and stop asking so many stupid questions. I immediately turned my quest to understand Algebra into a not-learning vendetta. In order not to learn from this man I instead wrote parodies of him during class. I used the classroom graphing calculators to write choose your own adventure stories with this teacher as the villain (they were a big hit). I turned in my semester final within one minute of the start of the test with, "I took the liberty of grading this for you: '0'," written at the top. When I handed him the test he looked up at me in bewilderment. I took my 'F' in the class as a personal (looking back now a somewhat useless and petty) victory. I choose to not-learn algebra because I felt slighted and unsupported by my teacher.

Students could, likewise, object to what they see as the racist agenda of the classroom which can be, and often is, representative of the racist society at large. Often students who become activists and stand up for what they believe in are looked at not as free and critical thinkers but rather as trouble makers and rebels. We also can take a student's resentment toward schooling that has no personal connection for them, as a personal attack against us (or what we feel we represent). Instead of dealing with what that student has to say, we label them as "dangerous" and marginalize them. This is exemplified in the experience of Akmir as related by Kohl. Kohl's final assertion is that, "until we learn to distinguish not-learning from failure and respect the truth behind this massive rejection of schooling by poor and oppressed communities we will not be able to

solve the major problems of education” (46-47). The teacher, under Kohl’s premise, must reevaluate her position on student failure and look for reasons beyond lack of motivation or mere behavioral issues and attempt to give students the opportunity to help determine what will be learned in the classroom and also how it will be learned.

John Nicholls outlines such a strategy in his essay, *Students as Educational Theorists*. He argues that the thoughts of our students, in regard to what activities and teaching strategies work best for them, are largely ignored by teachers and researchers. He states, “It seems strange that researchers on motivation have generally sought to improve student motivation without asking students what sorts of subject matter and what associated teaching methods make sense to them” (282). It does indeed seem odd for teachers to avoid engaging students in a dialogue about what works best for them; after all, secondary students have years of experience in classrooms and will have developed some notion of what methods have been engaging for them in the past. We tend to discredit students own knowledge about learning. Nicholls points out that, “young children are capable of spirited discussion of the nature and point of what they learn in school and can see such discussion as a valuable way of figuring out what matters in school and how to learn” (280). A teacher who is unaware of students’ potential to assist in navigating the course of learning, fails to harness a powerful learning tool for students and leaves behind a powerful opportunity to supplement her curriculum with authentic student concerns and questions.

Nicholls’ argument continues with the assertion that when students are allowed to enter into such discussions, two general categories of motivational orientation become apparent. They are *ego-orientation* (which is motivation that derives from a competitive

stance where the purpose is to prove ones ability on a given task is superior to others) and *task-orientation* (where the motivation lies in the possibility of gaining important knowledge and the opportunity to perform at optimum personal levels irregardless of how others do [270-271]). It is important to note that students are not apt to be either one or the other, but rather correlate on independent scales for each of the two categories, and also that a student's personal orientation may vary depending on the subject, the assignment, and the teaching style (271-273). In other words, a student may tend to be highly ego-oriented when in Ms. Distributives' Math class, but be equally ego and task-oriented in Mr. Stovetop's Life Skills class. How do we discover students' particular orientations in a class? We ask them.

In asking students about how they would like to learn a particular subject Nicholls and other researchers discovered that when subjects where primarily focused on ego-centric motivation it fosters "feelings of inferiority" in many students minds (280-282). This makes sense considering that there usually can only be one "best" learner in a system whose goal is essentially to find that learner. Those who do not "measure up" in the eyes of such arrangements are left feeling marginalized and have little motivation to reenter the struggle. In contrast to this, Nicholls' article points out that by allowing students to focus on meaningful tasks (possibly created by students and teachers together) more students will find the work of the classroom engaging than when they are set up to compete against one another (284). By adopting this practice it appears that teachers have more of a chance of engaging all students in the task of learning.

If dialogue and collaboration between students and teacher is used as a primary source of motivation for learning as well as for the development of tasks, it appears

appropriate that students be an integral part of assessing the learning they are gaining from these tasks. Giving students the means to track the process and progress of their learning, after all, is a major part of task-oriented motivation. According to Dennie Palmer Wolf in her paper *Assessment as an Episode of Learning*, she claims that assessment functions best when it is, “neither measurement, nor endorsement but an occasion for learning” (4). The main point of her argument is that assessment should not simply be a tool for quantifying learning, but rather a tool of learning. Wolf echoes much of what Nicholls points out about ego-orientation in regard to testing practices used by schools, districts, and states. She claims that such standardized tests “fail to inform learning” because they do not allow students and teacher to discover what went wrong or the opportunity to correct, or often even identify, particular mistakes. Students simply know they performed poorly, but do not have any clear reasons for why.

Wolf calls for our assessment techniques to become much more formative in nature, focusing on an ongoing process of assessment, rather than the summative forms so often used as the sole measurement of learning. In addition, she sets out ground rules for assuring that such practices are successful: 1) assessment is part of an ongoing work that the student finds meaningful 2) it focuses primarily on the process rather than the product of learning 3) that emphasis is placed on excellence as a composite of many different factors including “know-how”, “pursuit,” “force,” and “accomplishment” (8). This entails that students be included in all stages of assessment and that it become transparent to them that the goal is to bookmark the course of their learning for all involved to see.

Wolf’s is an assessment grounded in task orientation, and the portfolio she outlines in her work, reiterates the notion that all students can succeed when we provide

them multiple models of attainable excellence. Her work is supported (and vice versa) by Nicholls because both encourage a dialogue with learners about their learning.

Similarly, Nancy Sommers calls for dialogue to ensue specifically when teachers are commenting on student writing. She asserts that when teachers focus their attention on the compositional errors (such as diction, spelling, and punctuation) in primary drafts, rather than on the ideas, content, and structure of the work, we in essence change the role of the student from writer to nothing more than an error repair person (150-151). The focus of writing shifts from the creation of texts to the task of giving the teacher what he wants.

In tandem with this, Sommers also notes that this practice forces students to see their writing as “a series of parts- words, sentences, paragraphs- and not as a whole discourse” (151). By doing so, teachers are obstructing the important dialogue between the writer and the reader. Designing criticism based from the viewpoint of a reader, rather than an editor, communicates the effect that a student writer’s work has on an audience. Likewise, comments that *encourage* specific suggestions for revision of ideas, arguments, and content will be much more effective than simple correction of errors, in improving the writing of students. Such comments send the message to students that their emerging ideas are worthwhile and that rethinking an idea is important as it often leads to better writing (156). These ideas were well exemplified in the “writing comments” activity and resultant discussions in our class.

I strongly believe that the theories discussed above work in tandem with one another to create a classroom where the beliefs and ideas of students are the starting point for learning. In addition these theories allow the implementation of other pedagogical

theories into the classroom. One example of such a theory is the cognitive apprenticeship model, as outlined by Collins, Brown and Holum. In an article titled, *Cognitive Apprenticeship: Making Thinking Visible*, the authors outline a process that establishes the teacher's task as one of coaching students in the processes of writing, problem solving and reading. The teacher helps students learn the steps in each of the processes through scaffolded instruction, and then coaches students as they apply the procedures to authentic classroom performances (6-11, 38.). This model asks teachers to make all the thinking that goes on in the classroom transparent (such is the case with Sommers' ideas about commenting), that the activities of the classroom are related to student experience (Kohl and Nicholls both touch on this point), and that a range of scaffolding tasks be issued (incorporated in Wolf's assessment and portfolio ideas). Since so many of the elements necessary for cognitive apprenticeship are incorporated throughout these theories its implementation would further enhance the activities of the classroom as the teacher models many possible approaches to the tasks at hand.

By creating a task based environment which models for and engages students in a multiplicity of approaches for developing and assessing assignments, students are given something that often is neglected in their learning. They are presented with choice. Students empowered with personal choice in their learning are engaged in the task of discovering personal excellence and, given the tools, can track for themselves the process of their climb toward excellence, each step of the way.

