

## Reflections on Student-Centered Teaching

For the past 35 years, I have been privileged to be a classroom teacher; I have loved holding this all-important position more than any other thing I have done in my lifetime. But, I almost quit teaching during my first practicum as a student teacher.

The cooperating teacher who had been assigned to me was a young, enthusiastic, and effective teacher. But, his method of teaching was the polar opposite of what I would later adopt for myself and my students. He would use intimidating and often humiliating methods to maintain classroom discipline and learning.

I remember sitting in the back of his room during the standard observational period for new teachers. Whenever a student stepped out of his behaviour standards, his response was lightning fast with cartoon-like death rays coming from his eyes and loud, aggressive verbalizations of reproach. Once the altercation was over, he would turn his back to the class and continue his work on the blackboard. Inevitably, students would give him the finger or some other jeering responses he could not see.

When I took over his class as required and tried to mimic his style/methods, it was a disaster. I could not control the class as he had done. I went home dejected and depressed, feeling that teaching was not for me.

Fortunately, I had a talk with one of my professors who told me that I had to give it another chance. This wonderful professor encouraged me to not lose faith in a method that he believed in and taught by example. He called this method, "Student-centered teaching."

I felt that this professor cared about me and my success. He would never belittle me, ignore me, hurt me, scare me, or be indifferent to me. He was the kind of teacher I wanted to become! So, I went back the next day, not wanting to let him down. I would do my best and try to be a student-centered teacher, like him!

My first assignment was to teach the junior band class for the entire month of December and prepare them for the school Christmas concert. Before long, I started to love what I was doing, and most of all, love these wonderful students who were all so unique and full of promise, energy, and life!

I will never forget that Christmas concert. We had worked hard, and the students played beautifully. Instead of leaping off the stage and back to their lives after our songs were done, they stayed on stage and gave me a standing ovation as I tried, but failed, to fight back my tears.

At the time, I had no clear concept of why this had happened. Even now, it is difficult to explain. All I knew was that I had tried to help these students do their best without resorting to fear or intimidation.

A short few months later, my first teaching position was a grade eight home room with 42 troublesome kids squished together. It was to be, and still is, the most difficult class I have ever had. I remember dealing with discipline multiple times per day at first, but things began to turn around as they realized that I cared about each of them and wanted them to succeed, but not through fear and intimidation.

The principal of this school was a large, formidable man who also was a good man/teacher, and we got along wonderfully. As with my first practicum teacher, he cared deeply about his students and school, but his method of teaching and managing his school was fear-based. When he walked down the hallways at noon, students shut up and behaved, but when they were behind his back, out came the familiar f-you fingers and sneers of derision.

A couple of months into my first term, he called me into his office to congratulate me on my teaching and classroom management. He told me, “I don’t know how you are doing it, Marv, but keep it up.”

At the time, I could not articulate why I was able to control this class as I had. All I knew was that I was working hard for them—harder than I had ever worked in my life! Yet, to see that spark of learning and transformation in their faces was a reward that made all my time and effort worthwhile. I loved it, and the harder I worked, the more I received. This carried onward for the next 35+ years in the classroom!

I learned quickly that student-centered teaching requires loads of enthusiasm, kindness, attention, caring, giving, and forgiving. Literally, everything I had to give! But I also saw how all these things were given back to me with interest; whereas, my fear-based teaching colleagues would get back, with interest, their own methods.

I also learned how student-centered teachers are tough and have high expectations and genuine faith/belief that their students are capable of wonderful and great things. Looking back on my earlier experience with teaching that grade seven band class and our Christmas concert, this was the operative principle. I was not then, or at any other time in my career as student-centered teacher, trying to be popular with the students.

All I have done over my career is to give it my best shot: caring for each student and maintaining faith in the power of classroom learning to create awe-inspiring transformation in my students' lives.

I have loved being at the head of the class and being in daily contact with that divine spark that is learning. I have tried as much as possible to encourage each student to see and reach for his/her potential. I have shared ardently in their successes.

I am thankful to have had such a remarkable and privileged position for the past 35 years. If I can pass on some advice to other teachers it would be this: Do not lose faith in student-centered teaching and your ability to make the classroom a place where respect, kindness, love of learning, success, and positive transformation rule far above fear, rote-learning, intimidation, and failure.

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