Listening to Student Voices

The best teachers learn from their students...

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Every teacher wants his or her students to do well in class, whether it is English, history, math, or science. Often, reality will interfere and a teacher will recognize that not every student will succeed. However, one can’t always blame the students for failing a course. A mutual respect between teachers and students is needed in order for students to fully comprehend and learn the lessons at hand. In order for this mutual respect, teachers must keep their minds open to students’ ideas. Paulo Freire’s book, Teachers as Cultural Workers, suggests that teachers should talk with their students rather than talk to them. For example, students’ essays would be better written if they had more of their own voices in their writing. The same concept applies to all other subjects. A few students will discover an alternate way to solve a math problem or answer a question, but some instructors will accept only their own methods. Teachers need to have open minds towards students’ views.

From middle school to college, I have struggled with having a voice in the majority of my classes. There was one project I remember doing in the sixth grade where I was allowed to use my opinions and do my own research without objections from my teacher. The project was to give a presentation about a country of our choice. I chose to do my research on Cambodia, since it’s well-known to me and my family, but not to others. My teacher, Ms. A, gave us a very broad outline on how to do our presentation. Since this was a topic of my choice, I had so much interest in finding out more about Cambodia. During the few weeks I had to complete this assignment, I grew passionate about the research. Finishing the project turned into a secondary goal and expanding my knowledge became my primary goal. Because I grew so zealous about the assignment, the finished product contained abundant information that was well formatted into a four minute and thirty-five second presentation. When Ms. A was done grading everyone’s project, I received ninety-five percent. I was marked off only because I had used notecards during my presentation. Other than my lack of memorization, my final result was very satisfactory. Having passion for this project created more effort on my part and produced an amazing piece of work that earned me a successful grade. Doing this myself meant that I was one step closer to being independent and ready for
the next step in my academics. I wanted to have that same passion for all my other projects so they wouldn’t feel like chores.

In my high school, teachers became more and more reluctant to listen to me and my classmates. I can’t remember an assignment that allowed me to include my thoughts. In my junior year, I decided to take Honors Human Anatomy with Mr. B. However, the entire year my grade suffered severely due to his lack of understanding his students. In all of his homework and test questions, the only answers he accepted were the answers he thought of. A majority of my tests in his class consisted of essay questions from the chapters we had studied. The answers I had were correct; they were mainly summaries of the book. However, I was missing the “key words” Mr. B wanted. All Mr. B did was talk down to the students the whole year and he never accepted a variation to an answer. As a result, there were low test grades from me and my classmates.

I’ve witnessed other students struggle to have a voice as well. During my senior year in high school, I was a peer tutor, which is similar to a teacher’s assistant. I assisted students in Honors Algebra 2/Trigonometry. Helping each student, I realized that they all had a different way of grasping the concept of the lesson. One student, Billy, had his own method of solving each equation. It was shorter and completely different from the way the teacher taught. His answers were correct as I graded his homework. But when it came time for the test, the teacher, Ms. C, marked him wrong because his method didn’t show a sufficient amount of his work. Benny believed that math came easily to him, so he added his own voice to his work to save time. However, Ms. C didn’t accept his way of solving the problem. On one of his tests that I entered in the grade book, he received a seventy-two percent even though all his answers were correct.

An anonymous professor, Professor X, demonstrates he thinks very lowly of his students in his article “From the Basement of the Ivory Tower.” He believes “few of [his] students can do well in [English 101 and 102]. Students routinely fail; some fail multiple times, and some will never pass, because they cannot write a coherent sentence” (1). His students did not fail because they lacked the ability to write. He refused to listen to his students and talk with his students, so there is no surprise that most of his students did not pass his class. He sat with one of his students and “worked on some of the basics. It didn’t go well. She wasn’t absorbing anything. The wall had gone up, the wall known to every teacher at every level: the wall of defeat and hopelessness and humiliation, the wall that is an impenetrable barrier to learning. She wasn’t hearing a word I said” (2). In this case, it was not the student’s fault for not understanding the concept or the assignment. Instead of talking with his student, he constantly tried to tell her his way of doing the paper. With no connection or passion for an assignment, there’s a greater chance of a student not doing well.
Author Paulo Freire discusses the importance of listening and talking with learners. He believes, “If, however, educators choose to be democratic and if the distance between their discourse and their practice becomes ever smaller, then in their scholarly daily lives...they live the difficult but possible and pleasurable experience of speaking to and with learners” (114). I notice how he uses the word “learners,” instead of students, and “educators” instead of teachers. Using those words as an alternative strips the roles of authority and minority. My Cambodia research project was challenging and uncomfortable for me because the instructions were purposely vague. But I worked past my comfort zone and developed an enjoyment for the project. Everything became more interesting. I realized that my entire project was so much stronger without a rigid outline to follow given by the teacher.

As a result of Ms. A allowing me to write freely on a country of my choice, it diminished the student–teacher barrier between us. She didn’t look down upon me or show that she was superior to me. She hardly interfered with my research; she checked up on me and my classmates only to see if we were doing our work. Everything was extremely liberal and it made all the difference. Because of the freedom I had with my project, I felt there was a better connection between Ms. A and me. With a strong bond between learners and educators, the outcome will benefit both greatly.

Sadly, a majority of teachers are “consistently authoritarian, then they are always the initiators of talk, while the students are continually subjected to their discourse. They speak to, for, and about the learners” (Freire 114). Through my experience, the grades of students suffer because they are prevented from using their voices. If teachers want their students to succeed in their classes, they need to give their students a chance to express their methods and ideas in their work.

Teaching isn’t black and white. Giving students a voice in their work will allow students to see concepts in their own way, thus improving their academics. The best teachers learn from their students as well as the students learning from them. Students need to have drive other than simply getting a good grade. Grades should be more of a secondary concern, while passion towards their assignments should be the primary. Practice doesn’t make perfect; passion does.

Works Cited