

Nagging — The Uncelebrated Teaching Skill

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It is interesting that the Spanish word for “to nag” is “*sermonear*.” I have never heard anyone refer to sermons as a form of “nagging.” Au contraire, sermons are usually accepted as words of wisdom intended to lead one on the path of righteousness. Yet, in English, nagging has suffered an unfortunate reputation, with the word itself possessing a somewhat negative onomatopoeic quality, while certainly not being viewed as holding any respectable power or pedagogic value. I, however, see it as an uncelebrated teaching skill.

Nagging connotes insisting, repeating, reminding, harping on. These constitute a portion of a teacher’s repertoire of necessary skills. In most instances, this behaviour is performed not as scolding, nor with a hostile attitude or tone, or even without respect. Interestingly, it is mostly used out of a genuine desire to bring about a positive change in students’ behaviour or attitude. It is perhaps more easily resorted to because in its rawest form, it requires neither guile nor creativity. But it is in ignorance of its complexity that its usefulness is lost to many.

First of all, let us consider the genres of nagging. Nagging is most commonly practised in the oral genre, using varied tones, volume, and phraseology. Many teachers are quite versed and even expert at functioning in this genre. The written genre tends to be used more often by administrators and policy makers, who feel the need to nag through the formal medium of letter heads. Circulars and memos are the favourite formats. In the school context, I have found the artful oral form to have more success than such written modes, but it really depends on the esteem in which the “nagger” is held. And then there is the silent genre. This is reminiscent of the “silent treatment” meted out to one half of a couple—more often to the male by the female. It is a silence that is heavy with meaning, which the receiver hears only too well since the message is one that has been transmitted more than once before, in a genre other than silence. In the classroom, this genre may be accompanied by appropriate body language, which usually ensures that the right message is delivered.

For teachers who understandably rely on this skill of communication, it may be worth their while to consider the use of the varied styles that are available to them. To many, it will be quite obvious that the monotonous tone does not achieve much success and leads to impatience, boredom, and irritability, both on the giving and receiving end. Such a tone is not result oriented. Rather, a more varied, creative, and skilful approach to this art is recommended. This can be achieved through the use of interesting and atypical vocabulary, tone, and gestures. Analogies, similes, metaphors, rhyme, and rhythm are also useful ways of nagging with style.

Teachers at all levels feel the need to nag. Those at tertiary level ought not despair that they feel compelled to use this skill from time to time. In my own experience, my students in the Foreign Language curriculum area of the postgraduate Diploma in Education programme have been nagged (artfully!) about planning, journal writing, and

creating context in lessons—so much so that any of them reading this might enjoy a chuckle in agreement.

While teachers may not have formalised their purposes for using it, nagging is a technique that can be seen to have objectives and outcomes. Its judicious use helps to maintain structures and frameworks that are useful to students in one way or the other. It does so by reviewing their purpose, students' role in their implementation, and the benefits to be derived by students. Some simple examples of its use are in the context of doing homework assignments, classroom and school norms, class equipment, and courtesy and etiquette issues. I recall one teacher reciting time after time: “Your dictionary is like your underwear. Don't come to school without it!” I thought this was a particularly clever way to repeatedly make a point about the importance of a requirement. Of course there would be the occasion when a student would announce: “I'm sorry, Miss. I forgot my underwear today.” What an opportune moment for humour and destressing in the classroom.

Though there may be those who scoff at the notion of nagging as a useful technique, teachers ought to be aware that just as there are “teachable moments,” so too are there “naggable moments.”

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