

Teachers as Learners

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It is hard to say, “I don’t know.” As teachers, we repeatedly assure our students that there are no stupid questions. It is perfectly understandable and acceptable for students not to have all the answers. After all, that is why they are in school in the first place; to satisfy their quest for knowledge by finding answers to things that they do not know. But what does it mean when a teacher does not have all the answers? Does saying “I don’t know” imply an admission of incompetence? Or can we as teachers use our own lack of knowledge to facilitate student learning?

As teachers, particularly science teachers, we very often find that students are quite curious about the “why” of things after we have explained the “what” and the “how.” My observations of secondary school science teachers have revealed that our teachers are very competent at teaching science concepts, and at providing students with excellent examples to reinforce the principles taught and to show applications in everyday life. Teachers are usually very good at keeping ahead of students by preparing for class well in advance of the actual teaching. However, despite all their prior preparations and anticipation of possible questions that might arise in the classroom, many teachers are unprepared to respond to students when faced with questions for which they do not have an immediate answer.

Frequently students will ask questions like, “Are there any other techniques that can achieve this same effect?” or “If that argument is true, why don’t we see the same effect on land and sea?” When they find themselves unable to answer such questions, many teachers respond by saying something impressive like, “We’ll be covering that soon,” and immediately after class they find themselves desperately searching for the answer in order to address the question in a subsequent class.

Teachers believe that it is embarrassing to acknowledge ignorance about subject matter. After all, they are supposed to be all-knowing; the sage on the stage! Teachers are also afraid to admit to a lack of knowledge because they assume that this would be taken as an admission of inadequacy. Perhaps most importantly, teachers don’t want students to know that they too have unanswered questions.

In my own experience as a teacher, I found that even after a number of years teaching the same course, there were questions from students that I still could not adequately answer. Saying “I don’t know” is difficult the first time, but it becomes increasingly easier to admit that teachers are not all-knowing and that teachers, like students, are lifelong learners.

Instead of delaying responses to students with the excuse that the answer will be taught soon, admitting that you do not always know will open up numerous possibilities in the classroom. Teachers can ask if other students in the class have an answer or a possible suggestion. Sometimes other students do have suggestions that are never shared in class

because the teacher is too busy making up excuses or attempting to provide baseless explanations that may either confuse students or compromise the teacher's position.

An admission of "I don't know" could result in at least two positive outcomes: 1) the development of a trusting relationship between students and teacher, and 2) the stimulation of student participation. An important implication of these outcomes for students is the provision of opportunities for learning through meaningful student interaction. Teachers' admission of a lack of knowledge shows students that they too can be less afraid or ashamed to admit their own ignorance and uncertainties. Teachers' knowledge imperfections can demonstrate to students that teachers are also human beings and that they are not lean, mean disciplinarians or marking machines. This can make students feel more comfortable and confident about approaching teachers with questions and ideas. It provides a way to break the teacher-student barrier that exists in many classrooms, where students expect that teachers will have all the answers and that teachers' answers are to be unquestionably accepted. More importantly, teachers' ignorance offers students the opportunity to enlighten others with their own information, thus giving them a sense of empowerment and allowing them to realise that it is possible to learn from each other.

For teachers, it means that we allow ourselves to learn from our students without feeling threatened, insecure, or inadequate. With the wealth of information available through the Internet, and the increase in access to this information afforded by the expanded provision of computers to homes, schools, and libraries, many students are able to explore issues and ideas in great detail. Students can be empowered to act as facilitators of learning in the classroom if they are allowed to share this knowledge when the opportunity arises.

Realisation of the fact that teachers are not all-knowing and do not always have all the answers has to extend beyond subject knowledge. It is also true about pedagogical knowledge—the "how to" of classroom teaching. Many teachers believe that subject knowledge makes the teacher, but education theorists have convincingly shown that excellence in teaching is defined more by the methodology used to deliver the curriculum than subject knowledge. Students usually remember and speak of teachers as "good teachers" not because they knew their subject, but because they were able to inspire, interest, and motivate students to learn. Students are more likely to remember and respect teachers who were able to climb down from their pedestal to the students' level, even if they had to admit on occasions that they could not answer the students' questions.

And so, with the present shift in education away from a teacher-centred approach to a more student-centred approach, it might just be that a teacher's admission of "I don't know" could be an excellent source of motivation for students to aspire to inquire and discover. Such behavior, if properly channeled through effective teacher guidance and monitoring, may be exactly what is needed to make student-centred classrooms a reality.

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