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The Curious Case of the Teacher-Learner Divide,
and What We Can Do About It:
A Reflection on Education

An Editorial

As both educator and learner, the teacher might seem to be one of the most obvious walking contradictions. And yet, there also seems to be an overwhelming perception that educators and learners, by some definition of these roles, are divided. The students become a mass to tame into someone’s idea of success (“learning”), and the teacher becomes the almost-all-knowing means to do so (often to the not-so-subtle displeasure of the students). To the students, the teacher is far from being on their side. To the teacher, the students are other.

But what if it didn’t have to be this way?

What if teachers and students were partners in learning? What if teachers were managers of classrooms as facilitators, maintaining their position of helping students learn, while also learning? What if students were involved in this learning, and their own?

From my experience, they can be – and they are. During my work in education at Cornell, I have realized this. From the example of teachers who embodied this, and the cohesiveness and progress enjoyed when I tried to channel this in my own teaching, I have seen from both the student perspective and the teacher’s that it can and does work – and works best this way.

Now, of course, this is not to say that teachers and students are the same (or should be). Any educator has at some point (hopefully) learned a valuable lesson (or two, or three…) in the importance of classroom management, and respect for their role. At the same time, it is this respect, I feel, that should be mutual, even if functionally different. And one of the biggest ways
I have found that kids feel respect is by having their own knowledge, ability, and selves acknowledged in a way that does not contradict, but affirms, both theirs and the teacher’s. It is not, then, a paradox, this teacher-learner relationship. Students and teachers are not the same, but have certain similarities we can’t (and shouldn’t) forget. Teachers are not only teachers, but also learners, and learners are teachers, too. They are different, yet part of the same team. It is with this in mind – and in action – that we can navigate this infamous teacher-learner divide.

Throughout my work in education at Cornell, I have taught, and I have learned. I have learned that engagement is not only important, but must be tailored to student needs in order to be effective – and it is crucial to learning that it is varied as such. I have learned that learning which things to balance and which things to go about uncompromisingly (and how) is difficult, but a worthy and necessary pursuit. I have learned that you do not have to be a seasoned educator in order to gain respect and teach effectively – but learning from those who are, and are not, can certainly help.

I learned about the necessity of varied engagement styles when I was working with a small group of students who were producing a film as part of an afterschool program. When the time came to put a major prop together, even with the many different things to add to it and tasks to fill in order to finish it, certain students seemed to check out more easily. Thanks to this experience, I realized that engagement isn’t enough to engage. Students need more than the teacher’s effort to engage them, even if it seems like there are many opportunities to get involved. Rather than many options within the same style of engagement, students need to have styles of engagement that make sense for them, in line with their strengths, who they are, and how they work best. This is certainly not to say that students should not be challenged to do things in ways that are more difficult for them, or that teachers should give each student a different task. Rather, students need an overall classroom environment that engages them in various ways. Keeping students engaged takes different things for each student, and these needs can be met by both creating an environment that engages them (which involves actually getting to know them) while keeping expectations high and the class a community. This involves teachers and learners acting as both, even if in different ways, while mutually respecting these different people. Doing so requires a balance, but not necessarily a contradictory one.
Learning about when to balance and when to be firm was, perhaps, even more of a process (and still is). But I remember learning about this when observing students talk to one another during filming for the aforementioned project, and also when I heard about another teaching group’s issue of damage done by one student’s hateful comments to another. I realized that although it can be difficult to decide which things should have a more balanced approach and which things should be hard lines, it is important to navigate these issues and develop a stance that does both justice. This requires stepping up as a teacher who can manage the classroom, while also doing so in a way that everyone can respect – and respects everyone. Rather than being in conflict, the two are necessary to each other.

I learned that you don’t have to be an experienced educator in order to build this mutual respect and teach effectively when about the new teacher’s potential to teach effectively with mutual respect while reading Fried’s *Passionate Teacher*, learning from my co-teachers and experiencing the humble gratitude of seeing visible effects on our teaching group’s students (and their work). The reading encouraged me by showing many different teachers who had been able to build this environment and to teach with impact. The results at the end of our work as a teaching group encouraged me as I looked back on the dynamic of respectful and careful listening, enthusiastic contributions, and a product that both took into account what the teachers had taught the students and exhibited a flair that was all theirs. In a short time, with lessons from those who were experienced educators and those who weren’t, we were gifted with an impact.

Through the daunting, exhausting, exhilarating, trying, and joyful experience of teaching, I am thankful to have learned a lot. I have had no shortage of humbling experiences, and I’m grateful for the things I’ve been able to learn because of them. Humility, I think, is what we need to address the teacher-learner divide. When we focus less on ourselves and more on the kids, we open them up to a willing exchange. It is then that teachers can both teach and learn, and learners can both learn and teach, with each respecting the other. I’m thankful for these lessons I’ve learned, and I’m perhaps even more thankful for the fact that I am still learning them (and many more).