One

Teaching is the best job in the world, a daily adventure into student thinking. It is a profoundly creative act, an art that brings learning to life. Throughout my career, I've relied on student feedback to refine my teaching practices. One year, during a mid-year survey, I posed a question designed to spark reflection: "What advice would you give teachers to bring out the best in students?" Among the many insightful responses from my Year-9 class, two stood out and have stayed with me ever since:

- *"Don't always plan really far ahead. Ask the kids what they want to do and see if you can make it happen. Don't always do what you want."*
- *"Let them grow into themselves instead of making them be something else."*

I remember feeling pride in my students for their thoughtful comments, even as I felt an unexpected sting, like a sucker punch, at the same time. Their responses were not only entertaining and eloquent but also deeply challenging, compelling me to confront my own assumptions about teaching and learning.

In response to their challenges, I have shifted my teaching practices to make thinking more visible, allow students to be confused, work hard to build relational connections, and ask deeper questions than 'guess what's in my head'. I have concluded that if I really do want my young learners to 'grow into themselves', then I need to relinquish the desire for control.

MAKING THINKING VISIBLE

Teacher-centred instruction is deeply ingrained in schools; teachers as authorities at the front of the room delivering information. Despite calls for more child-centred approaches echoing through the teachings of Socrates, Montessori, Freire, Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Malaguzzi, Dewey, and Foucault, the traditional view of teacher and student roles has proven remarkably resistant to change.

In contrast, I have gradually learned to trust the minds of learners by really listening for, valuing, and trying to understand their thoughts, experiences, and insights, and then using them as a starting point. It is only by thinking that people get better at thinking, and everything that I do either supports or diminishes my students' reliance on their ability to think.

How do I know when my students are thinking well? Active listening and thoughtful questioning are the foundation of constructive classroom interactions, and the heart of these practices is respect for and interest in students' thinking. I need to be genuinely curious about what sense a learner is making and how a learner understands something. This requires asking questions without steering them towards a predetermined response. Duckworth (2006, p. 162) warns, "We cannot learn anything about what children think if we signal to them what we hope they will say." Too often the conversations in my class revolve around students attempting to guess what's in my head.

By observing closely and listening carefully to the thoughts of my students, I gain the information necessary to ask them good questions in the first place. It is my role to pose questions, to push learners to see where their answers hold up and where they do not hold up, to ask the right question at the right time in order to press a learner's thinking. When we make thinking visible in our classrooms, we ask less factual recall questions and more constructive questions: What do you notice? What puzzles you? What are you wondering? How does this connect to what you already know? Can you show me? Where do you see that? What do you mean? Why do you think that? How did you get that? What makes you say that? What else?

When I make students' thinking visible, the balance of power shifts, transforming the dynamic between my students and me, and fostering a relationship built more on trust and respect. I become a student of my students, driven by curiosity about their learning and the desire to make my teaching responsive to them (Ritchhart, 2020). When students realise my genuine interest in their thoughts, they become more inclined to willingly share them.

NAVIGATING CONFUSION

Confusion and conflict are needed in order to learn, and failure is a necessary building block for ultimate success. Thinking is difficult and doubt is the basis of all good thinking.

Exploring wrong ideas is always productive. A wrong idea corrected not only corrects the error but also enriches understanding more profoundly than if the misconception had never arisen in the first place. By considering alternatives and working through them, learners come to master ideas more thoroughly. I have learned to be less impatient for my students to develop clear ideas, because putting ideas in relation to each other is confusing; and I need to give that confusion time. We all need time to dwell in our confusion if we are to build a solid base of breadth and depth that provides significance to our knowledge (Duckworth, 2006).

Perhaps one of our most constructive approaches is to build the capacity of young people to embrace discomfort. I vividly remember teaching a Year-12 class about the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Following a discussion about the atrocities that occurred after the Khmer Rouge victory, I introduced the perspective of a left-wing historian who posited a counter-narrative. He argued that the Khmer Rouge's decision to evacuate Phnom Penh in 1975 might have been driven by genuine fear of US bombing and the inability to feed the population. One student furrowed her eyebrows and grasped her head in her hands, exclaiming, "Now I don't know what to think!" And I recall thinking to myself, "Perfect, now she is exactly where she needs to be." Placing the student right at the heart of the muddle resulted in deeper and more meaningful learning.

RELATIONAL CONNECTIONS

My foremost job is to connect. Students learn best when they feel known, valued, and respected by both the adults in the school and their peers (Ritchhart, 2023). Classrooms that build community cultures where students are intrinsically motivated and committed to supporting one another are at a significant advantage.

The most important thing I do to build relational connections is to commit to knowing all student names by the end of the first class. This effort signals genuine interest and lays a strong foundation for fostering meaningful rapport. I set the tone for each class by welcoming students with a relevant thematic song (such as Split Enz's 'History Never Repeats') when they enter the room. Lessons can also be started with quick team-building activities like Rock, Paper, Scissors, or Crazy Handshakes. Short role plays and simulations to start a class serve a similar purpose. A two-minute role play depicting factory work during the Industrial Revolution

adds an interactive element and sets an engaging and constructive tone for the lesson.

One of the profound realisations that slowly dawned on me is that problem children are not problem children. Rather, the system produces exactly what it is designed to produce. Young people often struggle to focus on tasks they consider irrelevant, they become bored with the sterility of standardisation, and now they have less patience than previous generations. This is not a medical condition.

Something fundamental has shifted in modern childhood and the culture of school. The relationship with school has become more optional, and young people are voting with their minds. Attendance rates in schools are on a downward trend, accompanied by a rise in disruptive behaviour and disturbingly high levels of mental health issues among students. Over three-quarters of Australian students have reported they didn't fully try in the latest Pisa tests (Cassidy, 2023). ATAR is now not used by more than 75% of our young people (Learning Creates, 2023). Australian parents are now homeschooling more than 43,000 children (Bita, 2024).

Many young people seem to intuitively sense, even if they cannot explicitly express it, that the current educational offerings fall short in adequately preparing them for the challenges of the future. Instead of recognising these signals as indicators of a systemic issue, the default response tends to blame young people. What if we interpreted their behaviour as a form of feedback, signalling that something is wrong? Rather than assigning blame, we might introspectively ask: What are they telling us?

We can learn to become intentionally curious about resistant young people in an effort to understand them. After all, should we not teach young people that sometimes there is a need to break the rules, to challenge authority, for disobedience? In her brilliant book *Troublemakers*, Carla Shalaby (2017, p. 168) writes, "If adults were better at bearing their responsibility to see and hear children, the need for children to rely on disruption as a strategy for visibility might decrease."

While there are countless strategies teachers have developed to connect with young people, an easy and effective one is the Two-by-Ten (McKibben, 2014). The premise is simple yet powerful: dedicating two minutes daily for ten consecutive days to engage with a disruptive student. The intentional investment fosters a connection, breaking barriers, and building rapport.

THE ART OF QUESTIONING

In Seymour Sarason's (1971, pp. 105–106) seminal work, he observed:

1. Teachers ask between 45 and 120 questions per half-hour.
2. The same teachers estimate that they ask between 12 and 20 questions per half-hour.
3. Between 67% and 95% of all teacher questions require a straight recall from the student.
4. Every half an hour, two questions are typically asked by children in the class.
5. The greater the tendency for a teacher to ask straight recall questions, the fewer the questions initiated by children.
6. The more a teacher asks personally relevant questions, the more questions students ask in class.
7. These results do not vary across IQ level or social class.

What if the culture of the classroom was question-centred? Inviting questions in class is not the same as intentionally teaching the skill of designing good questions. Teaching students the art of asking powerful questions might be one of the greatest gifts we can bestow.

When students generate their own questions, a thought-provoking query on the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign: "What were they hoping to achieve?" can become a recurring focal point throughout a unit. Students can come to understand that questions are more important than answers and that it is OK to ask questions that we might not know the answers to. It's about fostering the disposition of curiosity and acknowledging that different people bring different questions to the table.

Questions are one of the pivotal ways we engage with students. According to Ritchhart, "Our questioning helps to define our classrooms, to give it its feel and energy, or lack thereof. Questions are culture-builders, linking students, teachers, and content together" (2015, p. 221). When teachers focus on developing a culture of thinking, their questioning tends to swing away from procedural and review questions towards more constructive and facilitative questions that push student thinking and make thinking visible. I have long felt that the best focus for any classroom observation is questioning: What sort of questions are being asked, and, more importantly, who is asking them?

Too much classroom questioning is the conventional Question-Response "ping-pong" style of questioning. Much more valuable is

collective basketball questioning (McIntosh, 2012), where teachers pose a question, pause, ask another student to evaluate the initial answer response, and then ask a different student for an explanation of how and why it is right or wrong – more like a basketball game where "we have lots of players taking turns with the ball, rather than a simple back-and-forth with the teacher" (Ritchhart, 2015, p. 104) and "the ball (question) is passed around and ideas are bounced off one another, as the ball is moved down the court" (2015, p. 213). Empowering students to share thoughts and insights sparks a shift towards collaborative inquiry, distributing power across the class instead of centring it within the teacher.

Engaging students in discussions about this research can transform the way that they talk and learn as a group. Several years ago, one of my classes coined the metaphor of building on each other's ideas like "ice-cream scoops," instead of individually "pop-corning" their own individual thoughts. They even went as far as self-assessing themselves at the end of a class, with comments like, "We did too much pop-corning today and not enough ice-creaming."

EMPOWERING LEARNERS

I often find myself doing lots of the thinking for my students, raising questions about what tasks I might be withholding from them and what valuable learning experiences they may be missing out on. The biggest change to my teaching practice is that I now bring students into processes that teachers typically control, like assessment, leading discussions, and the choice of topics. When students are empowered as co-constructors, a sense of ownership and engagement is fostered in their learning experiences (Ritchhart, 2023).

Integrating peer feedback and self-assessment into the learning process yields significant benefits. Listen to Year-9 student Hamish, "I have learned how to provide better feedback to my peers. When I read their work, I learn how I could improve my own writing, and this helps me take more responsibility for my own learning" (Paterson, 2022). If you ever believe that children are too young to provide each other with effective feedback, watch the inspiring video "Austin's Butterfly" (EL Education, 2016).

Assessment is usually something that is done to students, so an empowering shift is to co-construct assessments with them. This involves them in the evaluation process and puts assessment criteria into

student-friendly language rather than cryptic teacher-speak. By involving students in the 'secret teacher business' of forming assessments, we empower them to better understand expectations and take a proactive role in their own learning. Year-9 student Spencer articulates the impact of this, "We designed the marking guide as a class. It helped us know what was needed before we did the task, instead of being told what we did wrong when it was too late" (Paterson, 2022).

Additionally, empowering students to set their own classroom norms can be a transformative practice, and the use of restorative practices offers effective solutions for behaviour management and discipline. A concluding class at the end of the year represents an opportunity to distribute lesson planning documentation for students to leave warm and cool Post-it note feedback to collaboratively co-create a curriculum vision for the upcoming year. In fact, almost anything that a teacher can think to complain about can be solved by empowering young people.

Many of the workload concerns voiced by teachers are missed learning opportunities for students, often because educators underestimate the capabilities of young people. However, young people possess a remarkable capacity to teach, assess, offer feedback, facilitate discussions, plan curriculum, and even handle disciplinary issues. Yet, most teachers insist on shouldering all these responsibilities themselves. At a subconscious level, teachers may find a certain satisfaction in their workload, as it boosts their professional identity. However, research suggests that the most successful learning environments are those in which leadership roles are shared between the teacher and the students (Schmuck and Schmuck, 1992).

Teachers do too much of the learning and thinking for students. It does not have to be this way. When we work harder than students, young people become inculcated into coming to school to watch us work, but genuine learning and thinking cannot be outsourced. While the instinct to rescue students in the face of challenges is common, teachers who prioritise autonomy actively seek opportunities to step back, encouraging students to take the lead.

When given some independence, young people tend to become more independent. They live up or down to expectations. If we want them to take responsibility for the culture and feel of the classroom and school, we need to invite them into the conversation, and even step away and let them take the lead.

Reflecting on the student responses at the start of this chapter, I've come to realise that not every decision has to be mine to make. I'm also getting better at allowing students to grow into their authentic selves, rather than shaping them into something else; always an ongoing process.

Teaching isn't about following a medicalised 'evidence-based' Science of Learning script or wielding judgemental performative measures; it is a creative art that thrives on curiosity, listening, and relational connections. The transformative approach presented in this book represents a profound shift in mindset; an intentional transfer of agency to students by actively listening to their voices and genuinely valuing their thinking.

Elise Heil, a Principal, aptly captures the transformation teachers undergo – from content delivery to skilfully facilitating thinking – through a less controlling approach. "Teachers now listen more than they speak. It's made teaching more interesting and more enjoyable. Teachers don't feel like they constantly have to perform. They don't have to plan every minute detail. Teachers are more relaxed and happier. We have to unlearn the desire for control" (Paterson, 2019, p. 20).

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