

Chapter 3 A Question of Feeling

Learning has to be felt for it to be effective . . . It is this essential feeling level that is often either not recognized or ignored by teachers. Only when work is at an experiential feeling level can a change of understanding take place.

—Gavin Bolton (1979, p. 31)

. . . effective pedagogy is enhanced by context in which there is an engagement between thinking and feeling, at personal, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

—Roslyn Arnold (1998, p. 115)

In the negotiation between teacher, subject, and learner, students often read the teacher's emotional engagement with them and the material more effectively than the teacher is aware of the students' emotional engagement with her and the material. Students may not understand what the teacher is talking about, but they are always aware of the emotional sub-text. It has not occurred to them to separate thought from feeling and yet, as pointed out in Chapters 1 and 2, education has been attempting to do that for a long time.

Learning springs from curiosity, from the *need* to know. A good teacher capitalizes on that innate feeling by attracting, maintaining, and satisfying the attention of learners while giving them something worthwhile to think about. It is the learners who actively go about learning. This appetite is very much like the appetite for food. The first question comes from the one who is hungry, "What's for dinner?" The job of the cook is to provide a meal which is attractive and nutritious and then to stand by offering more when it is needed, suggesting items that might have been overlooked and providing an ambience which encourages digestion. But it is not the cook who picks up the knife and fork and eats. The active engagement of learners with their "food for thought" is what concerns us here.

Professional teacher training concentrates on the cognitive and the physical because they are both capable of measurement and observation. The study of feeling, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1962, p. 144) points out, is "complicated by the fact that the event being perceived is *not open for direct inspection* by others." Despite this apparent difficulty, teachers—if the quotations in the margin have validity—must pay attention to the fact that their students have lives of feeling. Effective teaching and learning can occur *only* when teachers recognize that thought is unavoidably harnessed to feeling and when they know how to read the signs of that feeling engagement.

The Taxonomy of Personal Engagement

Anyone who is a teacher or who has been a student knows that there are different levels of involvement in any learning experience. We have identified these degrees of involvement:

Henry Mintzberg is talking about management but he could just as easily be talking about teachers when he says that an engaging style is demonstrated when “people are involved, they’re personally engaged, they’re not disconnected. As a result, they are able to engage others.” (In Murphy, 2006, p. 528)

interest: being curious about what is presented;
engaging: wanting to be, and being involved in the task;
committing: developing a sense of responsibility towards the task;
internalizing: merging objective concepts (the task or what is to be learned) with subjective experience (what is already owned) resulting in understanding and therefore ownership, of new ideas;
interpreting: wanting and needing to communicate that understanding to others;
evaluating: wanting and being willing to put that understanding to the test.

These levels of involvement we call a Taxonomy of Personal Engagement (Morgan and Saxton, 1987, pp. 21–30).

It is possible to recognize the signs of feeling engagement, which point to degrees of involvement. What is gathered from a reading of those signs can inform the teacher so that she can adjust her teaching to the state of her students’ engagement. In 2004, the National Survey of Student Engagement (an initiative of the United States) was introduced to Canadian universities. If you were to check out the Internet site, the survey would appear to be exclusively about universities and community colleges; however, it is easily applicable to any educational institution and a useful general guide for those interested in examining how effectively a school is engaging its students. What we are describing below is local and particular to every classroom.

Interest

Curiosity is hardly ever idle. What we want to know, we want to know for a reason. The reason is that there is a hole, a gap, an empty space in our understanding of things, our mental model of the world. We feel that gap like a hole in a tooth and want to fill it up. It makes us ask How? When? Why? . . . When the gap in our understanding is filled, we feel pleasure, satisfaction, relief . . . the new piece . . . fits in the gap like a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Once in place, it is held in, it can’t fall out.
—John Holt (1982, pp. 87–88)

You will recognize that there are different levels of student involvement in what you are teaching. Some of your students will not be interested, perhaps because what you are offering seems irrelevant or because some private agenda inhibits them from becoming interested. Their lack of interest may be of two types:

- aggressive—yawning, talking to a neighbor, reading a book; and
- passive—more difficult to detect because students often take on the shape of interest but there is “nothing behind the eyes.”

Some students will be interested because they like the topic, enjoy you as a teacher, even though the topic doesn’t interest them, are curious and want to learn, or like you and are prepared to give you a chance.

Student interest may be evidenced by their willingness to

- make and maintain eye contact; and
- make verbal and non-verbal responses in a supportive, congruent, and appropriate manner.

In other words, students are watching, listening, and responding.

Emotions occur automatically and unconsciously. They are the complex reactions the body has to certain stimuli. *Feelings* occur after we become aware in our brain of such physical changes; only then do we experience the feeling of, for example, fear.

—Manuela Lenzen (2005, pp. 14–15)

Engaging

Then there are those students who are interested enough to do whatever you want them to do: perform a task, contribute to a discussion, listen actively, and so on. Their engagement is evidenced by their willingness to

- participate;
- follow instructions;
- follow the rules of the classroom; and
- work independently of the teacher, either by themselves or with others.

Students who are engaging with the work generate a positive atmosphere of achieving. This is what principals and head teachers are always hoping to see when they show visitors around the school.

Committing

Other students are really “in gear.” They are prepared to accept responsibility for their work by finding and maintaining a focus for themselves and by generating their own ideas, attitudes, and points of view about the material. Their commitment is reflected in these ways:

- absorption in the work (they are often reluctant to move on to new work within the lesson or to abandon it when the bell rings to end the lesson);
- ability to control and manipulate the material for themselves;
- confidence to challenge the direction of the work; and
- the emergence of creative ideas.

Students who are committing demonstrate a high degree of personal investment in the work, something that makes it possible for the next level to come into play.

Internalizing

Nothing is easier to recognize or more difficult to describe in behavioral terms than what happens to those students for whom “the lights are going on.” This level of engagement, described by Bruner (1986), Vygotsky (1986), and others as *internalization*, is crucial to long-term understanding. If it is not reached the student will be engaged only in short-term learning and what appears to be understanding will melt away when the need for it disappears. For example, knowledge crammed for a test or examination is forgotten before the holidays have scarcely begun.

In internalizing, the drive to understand is fuelled by feelings of excitement, concentration, perplexity and, often, anxiety. It is followed by feelings of relief, satisfaction, and calm: the mind has moved from confusion to order, from a state of unrelated pieces to a connected whole. The experience is rather like finding the piece of a jigsaw that suddenly reveals a

To puzzle and stumble, to know what it feels like to be lost, to keep going, then to know what it feels like when you do understand, that vibration of excitement and pleasure, and the addictive need to feel it over and over.

—Ken Dryden (1995, p. 25)

When education is understood as the construction of meaning, rather than merely the transmission of knowledge, the primacy of the student's engagement in the process becomes self-evident.
—William Garrison (2003, p. 526)

section of the puzzle. You may see this in students as their facial expressions change from concentration to relief or their posture changes from tension to relaxation. Sometimes, the merging appears to be instantaneous: a revelation, the light bulb going on, or, as one student described it, “a sort of gut-thunk!” On the other hand, it may be that you can “see the wheels slowly turning” until that flash of understanding—“Just a moment, everyone. I think I've got it! . . . (pause) . . . Right! Now, I know it!” Here it appears that the student feels he knows, but has to wait for a little while for the intellect to catch up.

Other students intuitively recognize that what they are learning has meaning for them, but it often takes much longer for the personal, empathetic relationship with the new knowledge to develop. It is not until they try to express that meaning (see *Interpreting*) and to test it out (see *Evaluating*) that they realize that they do know what they now know.

The result of making these connections is a new realization, a different way of understanding. It is this which establishes for learners a sense of control over what they are learning. Both teacher and students “will have no difficulty in knowing that a shift in understanding has taken place. Call it a ‘moment of truth,’ an ‘aesthetic experience’ or ‘peak experiencing’” as Maslow (1968, p. 79) does, we do not need a “check list of behavioural evidence to verify that internalization has occurred” (Morgan and Saxton, 1987, p. 25).

Interpreting

Once students have begun to make connections between their own experience and the material they are studying, they can and need to move into another level of engagement. You will recognize those students as the ones who are willing to talk about the work:

Without language, what concept have we of past or future as separated from the immediate present? Without language, how can we tell anyone what we feel or what we think? . . . without language, how could [we] reach deep inside [ourselves] and discover the truths that are hidden there or find out what emotions [we] share?
—Robertson Davies (1998, pp. 70, 71)

- They are anxious to hear what others think and feel and are prepared to defend their points of view and to share their own feelings and opinions.
- They are willing to reconsider their responses and adapt their conclusions in the light of new information and ideas.
- They have the confidence to submit their feelings and ideas for analysis and consideration by others.
- They are anxious to make predictions and to consider the implications of their thinking.
- They are gripped by the possibilities of their new understanding and are eager to make it concrete in some way, perhaps by writing, graphics, debate or applying their conclusions to other situations.

It is worth noting that some students who have undergone a deep internalizing experience will not want to share their thoughts and feelings right away, and sometimes not for a long time. A sensitive teacher will respect this need for privacy and distance.

Evaluating

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2004), one of the indicators of active and collaborative learning is the willingness to discuss your reading or classes outside of class with other students, family members, or co-workers.

The final level of engagement is revealed when students want to test their new understanding on someone who has not been involved in the process. Students confirm it by trying it out in a more public forum:

- by talking at home about what they understand (often misconstrued by parents as “being preached at!”);
- by discussing it with their peers in school but outside the classroom;
- by introducing the ideas in another class; or
- by writing an article for the school paper, and so on.

Ownership through deepening engagement

Placing students’ efforts to understand at the centre [means that] the relationship between student and teacher becomes one that is more interactive, complex and unpredictable. This is nothing less than a “re-culturing of the classroom” but one that is important to a “democratically-oriented vision of schools.”
—Mark Windschitl (2002, pp. 143, 164)

As indicated earlier, a *taxonomy* is a way of classifying and is cumulative in nature: the next level always builds upon the one before. Because what is happening in a lesson depends on the manner in which you offer the material and also on your students’ past experiences and knowledge, students will not likely engage at the same level at the same time; they may also shift back and forth through the levels during the lesson. Students must always move through the sequence, though, if they are to capture the full significance of the work for *them*. Sequential progression is necessary to the deepening of their engagement with, and their eventual ownership of, the material. This “process of ownership,” as Malczewski (1990) and Woods (1987) describe it, encourages students to find fresh perspectives and to gain understanding about the issues and materials being explored. This sense of owning, of being in control of their learning, gives students a feeling of increasing satisfaction as they see that what began as the teacher’s is becoming their own; as they move from “seeing themselves as people to whom things happen to seeing themselves as people who can make things happen” (Schaffner, 1983, p. 40). Effective teaching requires more than knowing what you are going to teach, why you are teaching it, and to whom you are teaching it. It means recognizing that all students bring their feelings, as well as their minds and bodies, into the classroom. Understanding how you can engage and capitalize on this internal state of needs, preferences, anxieties, curiosity, and excitement will be the dynamic that transforms the classroom into a place where learning is recognized by the students as something to be valued for itself rather than as a means to someone else’s evaluation.

True ownership occurs when we see ourselves in the thing owned and recognize that it is an integral part of us.
—Juliana Saxton and Patrick Verriour (1988, pp. 9–10)

The role of the taxonomy in questioning

Here is an exercise: the class is beginning the study of earthworms as part of a unit in Environmental Studies. If you were a student knowing little or nothing about earthworms, which questions would have the greatest potential to engage your interest?

- 1 How is the earthworm valuable to man?

- 2 Charles Darwin brought our attention to the value of the earthworm as a preserver of our heritage. I wonder what he meant?
- 3 What do you use at the end of your hook when you go fishing?
- 4 Which would you rather take for a headache: an aspirin or an earthworm?

Why did you choose that particular question?

If you chose 1, it might be because you thought you knew the answer. On the other hand, you might not choose it because you think it's a stupid question—isn't that what you suspect the unit will be about?

If you chose 2, it might be that you wanted to find out the relationship between the lowly earthworm and the Parthenon—a genuine curiosity. On the other hand, you might not choose it because you don't think Charles Darwin sounds very interesting.

If you chose 3, it might be because you learned how to worm a hook this summer and want to share your accomplishment. On the other hand, you might not choose it because you know the answer (doesn't everyone?) and you can't see where the question is going.

If you chose 4, it might be because you had a visceral reaction and are attracted by the macabre. On the other hand, you might not choose it because this book, so far, has given you a headache and the last thing you want to do is to take two worms with a glass of water!

Questions attract students for an infinite number of reasons.

Questions interest them because there is something in them that connects with what is being presented or offered. John Holt (1982, p. 163) writes that learning happens when it becomes important to ask, "What's that, what's it for, how do you work it?" Or to put it another way, learning happens when we are provoked to question. Unless the question holds the possibility of an answer with personal meaning for the student, there can be no change in understanding. The more you know about students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences, the greater chance you have of choosing a question that holds that possibility.

Let's take another example.

You and your English Literature students have just seen a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Which of the following questions would have the greatest potential for engaging their interest in discussion?

- 1 How did the production reflect the atmosphere of the period?
- 2 What part of the play did you like best? Why?
- 3 There are many television shows and movies about demonic possession. How do they compare with *The Crucible*?
- 4 From watching the play, what new insights do you have into the failure of the marriage between John and Elizabeth?

Now, look at all four questions and decide why your students might, or might not, be caught by a particular question. To do this, you do not need to know the play, only to see clearly what each question offers in terms of what you know about the students you teach.

“What attracts my attention as I observe and what I find myself recording is information to help me answer questions that I may not yet have consciously asked.”
—Glenda Bissex, quoted in Hubbard and Power (1999, p. 23)

How to use the taxonomy to help frame questions

When we use the taxonomy as a guide for inviting and sustaining students’ engagement with the material, we ask ourselves the following:

- What questions shall I ask to attract their attention? [*Interest*]
- What questions shall I ask to draw them into active involvement, where their ideas become an important part of the process? [*Engaging*]
- What questions shall I ask to invite them to take on responsibility for the inquiry? [*Committing*]
- What questions shall I ask to create an environment in which they can reflect upon their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, points of view, experiences, and values in relation to the material? [*Internalizing*]
- What questions shall I ask to invite them to express their understanding of the relationship between their subjective world, the world of their peers, and the world of the subject matter? What opportunities shall I provide to enable them to formulate new questions which arise from their new understanding? [*Interpreting*]
- What questions shall I ask to provide them with opportunities to test their new thinking in different media? [*Evaluating*]

We can see from the Taxonomy of Personal Engagement that a successful lesson depends upon a teacher’s awareness of the levels of student engagement and her responses to what she hears and senses as she observes the students working with their peers, the material, and herself. The taxonomy functions in these ways:

- It is the means by which a teacher generates and maintains student involvement in learning.
- It is the agent through which the objective world of the material is brought into a relationship and made congruent with the subjective world of the student, allowing for the possibilities of meaning making.
- It is the process through which students come to control and own their learning.

What are the implications for the teacher?

You will have to learn to see the feeling climate of the classroom as an important indication of the quality of the learning. You must understand that implicit within the Taxonomy of Personal Engagement is the notion of transfer, or *hand over*. Edwards and Mercer (1987, p. 23) call this “the action which signifies the end of the need for a teacher or tutor . . . students come to take control of the process for themselves.”

You will find that working with the feeling climate of the classroom will remove you from an adversarial position and put you in a partnership with your students. As they begin to control how they are learning, you, in turn, can spend less time in the roles of disciplinarian and classroom manager. You will be free to take on other teaching stances that can offer you, as well as your students, rich opportunities for learning.

Let us now look at a lesson . . .

. . . when [teaching] is sensitive, intelligent, and creative—those qualities that confer upon it the status of an art—it should, in my view, not be regarded, as it is so often by some, as an expression of unfathomable talent or luck but as an example of humans exercising the highest levels of intelligence.
—Elliot Eisner (1994, p. 156)