

WE'RE PSYCH-ED

“Ready” to Learn

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Let's assume that every learner sees himself or herself as capable of “self-direction.” Every learner would also want others to see him or her in the same way. Self-direction is one possible definition of maturity.

What this implies is that, as teachers, we need to create a climate of openness and mutual respect if we are to successfully identify and truly understand what students want and need to learn. Many children, as well as adults, really enjoy planning and carrying out their own learning exercises. The teacher's role, therefore, is best described as a learning reference or mentor, rather than as the traditional instructor. Telling students “how I do it” rather than “this is how it's done” becomes a mechanism by which teachers can establish a collaborative alliance with students. Instead of “talking down,” the teacher encourages the student to regard himself or herself as a self-starter and a decision-maker, rather than as a mere “sponge” who mindlessly absorbs what the “expert” knows.

Readiness to learn is a key concept because it relates to the learning materials and your expectations. “Learning readiness” is a vast and complex area of study, and a simple web search can yield scores of readings and research on this topic. For our immediate purposes, let's think of readiness as the “ability to do” and the “need to know” that resonates with each student's personal and social development. These concepts have a strong correlation with readiness-to-learn and “teachable moments” that make your job, as teacher, so potentially rewarding.

Suppose one of your students has, thus far, resisted being taught anything about thirds, fifths, or reading music. That student also has a favorite grandparent who absolutely loves “Taps” because of the memories or recollections it brings. All of a sudden, you and your student have a wonderful readiness and “teachability” moment on which to capitalize. Remember that no questions are stupid, and that the student's “need to know” can be a tremendously powerful force in helping that student (and you) overcome previous resistance to any type of learning that might benefit the student.

Children and adolescents, as well as adults, bring a lifetime of experience to the learning situation. Each student defines himself or herself in terms of what has been learned and what has happened in his or her own lifetime. That is how they know “who they are.”

We must try to understand how our students perceive these life lessons since there are a myriad of interpretations and meanings that people assign to what has happened to them. To reject or fail to utilize the life experience of your student is equivalent (subtly or subconsciously) to rejecting that student as a person. Unfortunately, many students have not yet learned that mistakes are key opportunities for learning, rather than indications of inadequacy or worse. Assisting them to under-

stand and constructively interpret what has happened is a rich learning opportunity.

It is critical for you, as the teacher, to try to assume a problem-oriented perspective. The most important focus must be on what *students learn*, not what *teachers teach*. Most learners are gripped by the urgent need to understand how to resolve a problem, whether it is fingering, technique, or mastery of the bass clef in a particular piece. Helping the student learn how to solve the problem is a sure way to build rapport, support the student, relieve anxiety, and eventually pave the way for going back (once the heat of performance has lessened) to review the theoretical or pedagogical basis for what you want the student to learn.

Keep certain points in mind—

- ◆ We are always learning. Most of the time that comes from imitating role models.
- ◆ Learning must take place naturally. Coercion, confusion, boredom, or too much perceived difficulty in early stages are all significant inhibitors of learning.
- ◆ Learning must be meaningful to the student in his or her living context. It must be something the student feels that he or she “needs.”
- ◆ When we learn things that “make sense,” much additional learning about the world and our environment takes place.
- ◆ Learning is most often a partnership or collaboration between a teacher and a student. Programmed learning and instruction plays only a very small part in “living education.”
- ◆ The relevant outcome of learning is “what we show we can do,” not how we score on tests.
- ◆ Learning always involves feeling, which can be positive or negative. We are not machines—we have “hearts.” Learning must be something we feel we own and cherish.
- ◆ Try to make the learning environment as risk free as possible. Encourage students not to feel threatened by learning but to think of it as a natural part of living. That is one of the most critical aspects of our role as teachers. ■■■

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