The Teacher's Enthusiasm

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Abstract

Social relations are often seen as transactions between individuals. The dynamic teacher, accordingly, is one who gives energy and knowledge to students. Because this understanding fails to appreciate the relational forces at work in the lively classroom, it produces unhealthy attitudes toward education. Teachers who try to live up to it will not only burn out, they will distort their students' educational development. The vitality of the classroom comes from an energy that is created between teachers and students; it is an energy in which both teachers and students share, but for which neither is individually responsible. The successful teacher must be able to receive if they are to be able to give. This argument is advanced using interviews with Australian teachers and students, all of whom were asked to describe the teachers who changed their lives.

Researching 'teachers who change lives': a grounded phenomenology

This article is based on a research project on 'teachers who change lives' for which we interviewed 13 well-known Australians and 22 teachers, the latter coming from all levels of formal education and a diversity of disciplines, including maths, languages, sciences, humanities, theatre, music, art and sport. In semi-structured interviews, we invited all interviewees to talk about their experiences of life-changing teachers, and the teachers to talk about their own teaching practices and experiences. We encouraged all participants to re-enter and recount specific experiences.

The aim of this project was to develop a relational understanding of education, addressing the questions: What happens *between* teachers and students in effective, engaged learning and teaching? What are the implications for teaching practice? Thus, we took the relational tradition of phenomenology as the basis of our conceptual framework and methodology. In phenomenology, participation is the principle of

knowledge: we know, not as subjects observing objects, but through our being in the world. In other words, the site of knowledge is the relation. We know and learn 'with' rather than 'about' others. Avoiding abstractions, phenomenology is concerned with direct and specific descriptions of experiences, of the space and time of our relations with others (Bachelard 1969, Merleau-Ponty 1962).

By allowing us to accurately explore the relational conditions underlying everyday life, phenomenology raises valuable new conceptual issues. In the present case, for example, we will be showing that the lived experiences of classroom energy do not match the conventional understandings of the words used to describe these experiences, words like enthusiasm and passion. To understand the classroom, we must be more precise about what these words mean. Conceptual precision about classroom dynamics is the aim of this article.

Grounded phenomenology is to be distinguished from conventional social science methodologies. Our interviews, for example, were not designed to be representative or to provide data from which generalisations could be drawn. Rather, the aim of our empirical research was to provide details of particular experiences and situations, through which we might gain an understanding of the universality of good teaching. An appreciation of the particular is gained through participation, which, for us, as interviewers, involved attentive listening to students and teachers. Interviewees commented favourably on their experience of 'feeling heard'. Through this encounter, both we and they learned more than we had previously known about learning and teaching.

Phenomenological writing is guided by the same participatory principle, aiming to evoke the quality of experiences so that they might resonate with those of the readers. By inviting readers to reflect on the similarities and differences with their own experiences, this evocative form of writing allows for a creative dialogue with the text.

Classroom energy

> What good teachers have is passion. The spark. Sharing their passion. Kids pick up on their excitement, and that makes them curious.
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> She was so enthusiastic, she was just such an inspiration to me, and I think she ignited something in me.
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> There was a teacher who made a big difference in my life, who really turned me on to English. It was his enthusiasm. That's the memory that comes to me immediately.

These quotations are from interviewees describing the teachers who changed their lives. They affirm a claim made in a recent *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial (18 August 2005). 'There would be little argument', the editor averred, 'about what makes a good teacher. Most [people] could nominate a dynamic teacher from their own school days who brought out their best. Even decades on, such teachers are recalled with a fond smile.'

Although people easily and fondly recall life-changing teachers, our research found that, unless students went on to become teachers themselves, they were usually unable to explain their teacher's efficacy or understand the source of their dynamism, passion and enthusiasm. People who could readily recall their childhood experience of relations with their teachers were often unable to re-imagine that relation in a way that included the teachers' points of view. As a consequence, students ascribed teachers with powers that the teachers themselves did not know they had and, more importantly, did not try to use. While the students claimed that their teachers had God-like capacities, the teachers insisted that they worked in the dark, not knowing how successful they had been or how success could be measured. Whereas students spoke of the energy received from good teachers, the teachers spoke of being energised by students.

Such disparities, we discovered, are at the heart of good teaching, highlighting that its efficacy arises not from the input of individual teachers but from the relations that students and teachers create *between* them. A good teacher is not one who provides all the energy that a class needs; good teachers are those who allow the production of an energy that is not the teachers and not the students, but shared between them. Energy is only given when it can be received. It involves flows and circuits and feedbacks that undermine interpretations of teaching based on the inputs of individual agents.

The newspaper editor is right to imply that this creative energy is found in many classrooms, but wrong to assume that it is easily understood. Even in sociology, the discipline that is supposed to deal with relations, there is a strong and hidden presumption that social events can be explained in terms of the actions of subjects on objects. Consider, for example, Howard Becker's generally useful guidebook *Writing for Social Scientists*, in which he repeats the standard advice that active verbs are grammatically preferable to passive ones (1986, p.79-80). Becker reinforces his injunction by saying that it is a matter of conceptual accuracy as much as style. It is the sociologist's duty to determine who was responsible for the action, and a sentence that isn't clear about subjects and objects is inaccurate. Becker, in other words, is *insisting* that life is only lived in the realm of active and transitive verbs. We would say, to the contrary, that Becker's strictures preempt the most significant issues in sociology, and in pedagogy, by refusing to acknowledge the irreducibility of relationship.

In this article we will focus on the dynamics of classroom relations, but this is only an entry point to other pedagogic questions. Once we get past thinking in terms of the separate inputs and outputs of energy by teachers and students, once we accept the importance of the relational nature of classroom energy, we must reconsider many of the assumptions underpinning contemporary debates about education.

I-Thou and the realm of intransitive verbs

Elsewhere, we have distinguished two ways in which students can be seen, either as entities with definable talents, or as unique beings for whom no definition is adequate (Metcalfe and Game 2002, 2005, see Levinas 1985). These two ways of seeing arise from two ethical forms, which the philosopher Martin Buber spoke of as I-It and I-Thou. These terms help us understand the different relational situations that arise in teaching.

The hyphenated form of I-It and I-Thou indicates that the I is not a fixed identity. In different relations, we are different people, with different capacities. The I of I-It is a subject who, in aspiring to stand alone, surveys the world in terms of his or her own position and desires. Whenever the world challenges the subject's knowledge, the surprise is taken as a threat to this position. The acquisition of knowledge is designed to maximise control by minimising surprise.

Rather than standing alone, the I of the I-Thou relation is connected with others. In this relation, the world is not a set of external things but a whole that is always emerging through meetings. This is a situation where things happen relationally without arising from a subject's volition. Students are no longer entities to be controlled by teachers, but learning, nonetheless, occurs, both for students and teachers. As Buber put it, 'The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some *thing* for their object' (1958, p.4).

Buber's point is that many of the most important relationships are unbounded, involving neither subjects nor objects:

> *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.
> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation (Buber 1958, pp.4, 11).

When Buber says *the speaker has no thing*, he is referring to states of epiphany characterised by wonder. These are the states that allow teachers to *see* their students, and allow students to see the potential of their studies. When Vicky Yannakouros describes what she sees in her Kindergarten students, she talks of this boundless no-thingness:

> The little children, they just look at you with this look of wonder about the world. They have these innocent faces, very open, and this incredible thirst for and love of learning. They want to hear what you've got to say. They think it's really exciting. And then they want to tell you what they know about what you're talking about. It's beautiful. It's like they're hearing about something for the first time ever. It's when I realise this that I am blown away yet again by this incredible job that we have. It's quite goosebumpy stuff.

The way in which these children and this teacher are present to each other exemplifies the directness of the I-Thou relation. They know each other's names, each other's faces; the teacher keeps meticulous files on the progress of each student. These are all necessary I-It forms of knowledge. But on this occasion, teacher and students see beyond these things to the undefended essence of each person. Without denying the objective truth of I-It claims, the I-Thou reveals that the whole person is more than this collection of attributes.

Vicky's goosebumps arise from the wonder of such meeting. These children and this teacher, each so different, have come together, though they couldn't have imagined this a year before. Each happily places their life in the hands of others, who amaze them by allowing them to be really themselves. The goosebumps are awareness of the love and respect that allow the teacher and students to know each other's boundlessness directly, through a meeting with difference. Such a meeting, says Buber, is where life happens. Through this encounter we may develop objective knowledge about the other and yet, amazingly, this growing familiarity doesn't diminish the other's difference.

Clearly an instance of an I-Thou relation, the encounter in Vicky's classroom is based on a mutual respect for the vulnerability, openness and innocence of all participants. Clearly too this respect is not people simply affirming each other's identity. The respect of the I-Thou relation is, instead, awareness of Thou's unidentifiable essence, Thou's difference even to the way they identify themselves. Respect is always respect for this mystery. This is why it is not earned or forfeited. To carry out her teaching duties, Vicky must occasionally identify and rank children, in I-It mode, but it is the I-Thou that guides her, regularly reminding her of what teaching is really about. In this mode, Vicky could not treat children who have misbehaved with less respect than well-behaved ones, nor clever children with more respect than less gifted ones.

Vicky highlighted this point when she elaborated on the significance of the teacher's love:

> Love isn't about just thinking that the students are cute. It's the fact that I want my children to be validated as human beings and as individuals. I want my care and love of them to show to them that they have an important part in this huge crazy world. Love is about respect and

> validation: that you matter enough for me to listen to you and accept what you've got to say and that you've got a contribution to make. It doesn't matter who you are. I want that bond to be real, so I need to be real with them. I need to show them also that respect is a two-way thing. I do respect them as people, as I hope they respect me.

When she *validates* students, Vicky accepts them just as they are, whole unique beings. They belong in this huge crazy world because they make an incalculable difference in it. This is a form of respect that avoids the jealousy and competition that go with the finite logic of I-It. Because the I-Thou is boundless, respect for one child is not a threat to others: it is respect for all beings, acknowledgement of the different contribution that each makes.

Vicky's account of classroom ethics makes a crucial pedagogic point. The respect of the I-Thou relation is not only respect for other participants in the classroom, it is a respect for the surprises that must exist if there is to be learning. The I-Thou relation allows Vicky and her students to appreciate what amazing things they can learn from each other, and what amazing things they are still to learn about the world.

Whereas the I of I-It sees encounter as a frustrating loss of control, the I of I-Thou is grateful for the world that encounter opens. This is the world that makes us whole, that draws out our potential, that educates us. Only when wonder makes us aware of difference can we learn. We cannot learn, then, and we cannot know that there is more to learn, unless we learn with love and respect.

Giving

When teachers try to supply energy to students, they are operating in the realm of I-It relations. They want something from the students, the students are inadequate as they are. Because this is a form of energy that students cannot receive, the effects are unhealthy, as Raimond Gaita explained:

> [T]eachers who set out to inspire have their attention in the wrong place and are too distracted from their subject to be able to offer anything deep no matter how many hearts they set afire…. Just as charity is corrupt unless it is motivated by the needs of another rather than by the desire to do something charitable, so teachers inspire their students into a proper love of what they are doing by the manner of their attention to their subject rather than by setting out to inspire them.

Imagine a conscientious teacher worried about the students' ability to cope with the curriculum. 'I sometimes look at my kids,' a teacher told us, 'and feel overwhelmed by how much they need to learn.' The students are now seen for their insecurity rather than their potential. Moreover, this overprotective concern with the students' weakness awakens in teachers their own fear of inadequacy. Their response is panic, a feeling of exhaustion masked by adrenalin.

This feeling of inadequacy is common throughout the educational system. At university, for example, lecturers often go into overdrive to fill the gap between what students know and what they need to know. As a lecture draws to an end, they speak faster; rushing between Powerpoint slides before students have had a chance to read them. No longer aware of the students' ability to comprehend, such teachers are focused entirely on what they need to say to fulfill their obligations.

If students *feel* lectured, they feel disrespected, and usually respond with bored disengagement or defiance. In course evaluations, they talk of lecturers who go too fast, lecturers who go too slow, lecturers who just go on and on, lecturers whose lessons are irrelevant, and lecturers who just do not care.

A more complex dynamic arises if teachers are charismatic, delivering high adrenalin lectures that impress and excite students. Proud to be associated with such teachers, students may feel energized by their desire to be equally knowledgeable. Yet this thrill can not last. When students put teachers on pedestals, they put themselves down. Although temporarily motivated by the teacher's virtuosity, they become exhausted and fearful when alone in the presence of their work. Overwhelmed by their teacher's prowess, they are also overwhelmed by their distance from this achievement.

Whether students are bored, defiant or star-struck, these dynamics have the same relational basis. Teachers who see students in terms of lack are disrespecting students, by measuring them against desired outcomes, and overrating themselves, by taking personal responsibility for getting the students to measure up. The teacher's pride, however, turns easily to a sense of failure; students are insatiable when they are too anxious to receive what the class offers. Faced with students who seem resourceless, teachers feel their energy constantly being drained. The infinitude of the I-Thou relation is reduced to a parsimonious awareness of quantities.

It often happens that teachers try to supply the classroom energy. But this is a sign of relational and institutional malaise. When the classroom is working, teachers feel invigorated by their students. Sharon Cheers told us that she feels that she receives more than she gives: 'The special moments and the giving you receive have an

immense impact, so ultimately *they* are changing my life and keeping the sense of wonder alive for me – indeed a precious gift'.

When students attribute the passion of a lively classroom to teachers, it may be because they are not aware of their own contribution: they assume the energy they feel is coming from the teacher, but actually a more awesome and relational process is at work. Just as you cannot point to a relation, you cannot point to the source of the enthusiasm of a classroom.

Passion

As a young teacher, Sharon Cheers was inspired by a senior colleague, Alison Pegus, and it was the dynamic of Alison's classroom that particularly impressed her:

> As soon as you walked into Alison's classroom, you could tell it was working. There was lots of movement, lots of different things happening, but there was still a sense of calm. It's a feeling more than anything. You could tell she was not just listening for the sake of listening, but really listening to understand what's going on for that child. I suppose her passion came through everything she did.

Passion is a word commonly confused with desire, but Sharon's insistence on the significance of classroom atmospherics indicates its basis in an I-Thou relation. Passion, enthusiasm and inspiration are all concepts from religious tradition, pointing to a spiritual and soulful vitality that emerges when people come together. The hum of the classroom involves everyone, yet is beyond the control of even the teacher: something *happens*, without anyone making it happen. This is an understanding of spirituality that places it within the ordinary world, for the classroom spirit comes from these children and this teacher at this moment.

While Sharon links Alison's passion to calmness, Julie McCrossin links passion with patience when describing her life-changing teacher, Mrs Miller:

> Passion, patience and boundless personal relationship with each girl, they're the three qualities of a great teacher like Mrs Miller. The most passionate, erudite, curious hunger for learning: that was the spirit I got from Enid Miller and it's alive and well.

Mrs Miller's *passion* was her genuine love of reading, literature and performance: 'she wasn't bunging it on, she was absolutely authentic: she really loved Donne and Shakespeare'. Mrs Miller's *patience* was evident in the faith she had in the girls' ability

to learn through performance: she allowed them time to find their own ways into the roles and hence the plays. Her *boundless respect for each girl* manifested her compassion: 'she had the ability to make everyone feel special. She really cared; that's the human connection'. These three qualities came together in the curiosity that characterized Mrs Miller's classroom. Julie said:

> What I mean by really teaching is the ability to arouse, to stimulate to learn, so that the student is made curious and wants to take independent additional action. They're enthusiastic, electrified. Good teachers have a gift, a vocation, and the core of it for me is that they want you to learn as much as they want to learn themselves. In fact it goes deeper than that. Mrs Miller thought she could learn from students. She felt how Julie and the others responded to the trauma of Lady Macbeth and in this way she could experience the trauma of Lady Macbeth afresh.

The classroom of Mrs Miller, like that of Alison Pegus, combined passion with patience, movement with stillness, exuberance with respectful attention.

Passion, as its etymology implies, is an energy that involves passivity. It is something you receive, something that moves you; it is the compassion of patient devotion. By suspending the trajectory of the desirous self, passion returns students' attention to the task at hand. Patient and receptive, it provides the time students need if they are to mature.

Think of Mrs Miller's students performing Shakespeare in class. They are not rushing to interpret Shakespeare, and they are not distracted by the prospect of exams. They simply devote themselves to the particular lines of speech before them, playing with them until they ring true. When the lines resound with the vitality of a full body, who is providing the energy? Is it Shakespeare? Julie? Lady Macbeth? Western civilization? Mrs Miller? Who is active here and who is passive? It is the unanswerability of these questions that gives passion its cognitive power. When it is passionate, the work of Mrs Miller's students will be true to both Shakespeare and the students. This authenticity will be the proof that lessons have been well learned.

In her account of Mrs Miller, Julie several times linked enthusiasm and passion with curiosity. Open to receive what lessons have to offer, interested to see what they will learn about Lady Macbeth and what she will teach them about themselves, students face their day with faith and hope. This is not a curiosity that seeks satisfaction but one that enjoys being part of Shakespeare's universality. It is not faith in any *thing*, or hope for any identifiable outcome; it is acceptance that the only life available is

the one that unfolds from here and now. This class matters. It is not a lesson about life: it is life, it is the world.

The patience of the passionate classroom is, then, a form of presence. Students and teachers know that everything they need is already here; they know too that what they need will not be what they could have anticipated. As Buber says, awaited answers cannot be received (2002, p.3).

Give-and-take

When students praise their teachers for their passion, they are alluding, then, to the faith that teachers have brought to the classroom. Teachers know that each class will eventually find its unique energy.

Sharon Cheers told us that engaged learning cannot occur until she and the students know each other, as members of a class that has taken on a life of its own. Until then, her lessons are not lessons for *this* class. They do not address the needs of these particular students. So Sharon attends closely, looking for the change signalled by a smile, a warmth, a relaxation, a change in body language. There will be a moment of *getting it* when the class comes together and comes alive. Once this lively relationship exists, students are able to receive what is being given to them, and giving is no longer a drain on the teachers' energy:

> There comes a time when I say *I've got them now*. And when I feel that I've got them, I feel that I know what they're going to need. That's the thing about term one. You create a unit, you're organised, but you don't really know the kids, so you're constantly shifting things. You've got to get it to the stage where they can work together as a whole and accept the difference in each other. That's when you can see amazing opportunities.
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> I suppose once you've got them, you can relax. You can give and you get back and it becomes this sort of reciprocal relationship of knowing and understanding, and it's meaningful. It's an openness. If they're giving, they're also open to feedback, they're open to change. They get to a point where they say *Oh yeah, I've got it*. There's a sense of confidence. It's when you're explaining something and they smile or they look at you. It's those funny moments that keep you going. That's the giving. That's when you see something happening in the classroom that's really exciting. I suppose you just sort of ride this energy and that momentum carries you through.

The student's smile of *getting it* is simultaneously a receiving of knowledge and a getting of the classroom relationship. Moreover, when Sharon describes the smile as an open giving, she is drawing attention to the way giving and receiving are simultaneous within relationships. The student is unselfconsciously giving thanks for what they have received. In giving of themselves, they receive what they need; in accepting what they need, they give the teacher what she needs to carry on. There is a gift but you cannot say who is giving what. This logic of giving and receiving is the experience of grace: what each person needs is effortlessly provided if people are open with each other. Sharon's metaphor for grace might be taken from surfing: *you just sort of ride this energy and that momentum carries you through*. People are at once still and on the edge, being drawn on, in fascination.

Listening and questioning

When emphasising their teacher's inspiring passion for a subject, students are pointing to the teacher's vocation; passion indicates that the teacher's subject, work and life are indivisible. Since the teachers live and breathe their knowledge, there is no possibility of the external vantage point that would let them see the total scope of their subject. There is no final way to say what is known, for knowledge is continually being reformulated as life offers new connections.

Teachers are not exciting, then, because they are full of knowledge that can be dispensed to students. They are exciting because of the way they are themselves still eager to learn. Good teachers are those who need students so that they too can continue to be students.

Here, for example, is Nick Jose's description of his teacher, Mr Schubert:

> I learned to read literature from Mr Schubert. I'm incredibly lucky to have had such a good teacher. He was quite an imposing figure; one had a lot of respect for him, combined with a certain fear…. I think part of Mr Schubert's success was that, at a simple level, he was very confident in what he was doing. He was tough, and he was older, he was the senior teacher. He had a very good, very precise brain, and I respected someone who could speak with that sort of clarity….
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> Mr Schubert had a really deep love of literature. The texts he chose for us were fantastic texts he had a passion for, and, however strange his manner, he was able to convey that passion. He was very sensitive to literature and was always challenging us boys to be responsive as well. He was challenging us to tap into quite powerful forces in our lives, and that was a way of letting us be ourselves.

> He seemed blissfully unaware of the effect he was having on us. He would be there, he would rub his nose a lot and he'd read out these bits, like the quote from *Othello* – 'an old black ram … tupping your white ewe'. It was electrifying! Because he was blissfully unaware, we thought it was okay too. He treated us absolutely as if we were mature people intellectually. There was no talking down, and so that does lead to a kind of mutual respect.

While Nick emphasized the depth of knowledge that Mr Schubert brought to the classroom, in a letter to Nick, Mr Schubert emphasized the importance of his unknowing:

> No lesson in which I didn't learn as much as my class was of any value. To me teaching something was by far the best way of learning it. Now often I found that my knowledge of a work – an ode of Keats, a play of Shakespeare – which I had long been familiar with was only a glib one. And certainly a class would find you out. No amount of study, of course would unravel *Lycidas* or *The Ancient Mariner*, but all that was essential was the plain evidence that you had grappled with it. I also fancy a teacher is fortunate above most because he has the privilege of encountering so many minds vastly superior to his own. Together they can engage in that one essential pursuit of man – endlessly to seek out the truth. As Donne puts it *On a huge hill, Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will Reach her, about must, and about must goe.* Except for those blinding moments which fire you to continue the search, there is, of course, no hope of ever attaining your goal. And beware of that man who claims he has done so. But, as I see it, nothing exonerates one from this unrelenting task.

As knowledgeable about literature as Mr Schubert was, it was his childlike wonder and delight that allowed him to teach. He was an exceptional teacher because he was an exceptional learner: the deep form of knowing that teachers need is characterized by a simultaneous unknowing. To allow new connections to emerge from classroom dialogue, teachers must hold lightly those that they have previously made, allowing their knowledge to re-form around new starting points that arise in the class. Teachers must trust that the whole of their experience will be evident in their response to whatever particular points arise.

Teachers share their openness and love of learning, but, rather than sermonizing about these virtues, they perform them, *with* students. They model openness, but, crucially, they do not put on an external display of openness. Indeed, were they to

attempt such a display, they would distance their students, turning them into spectators. Students learn from inside the model, from their own participation in the openness.

When students see their teacher's wonder, they recognise that wonder is what they too are experiencing. When they see the teacher's excitement about learning, they recognise their own excitement. And in these moments of recognition, students *feel* what they see: they know their teacher's excitement from the way they feel, and they recognise that their feeling is excitement from the way the teacher looks. This is a self-knowledge that remains open: students are coming to know themselves relationally. They experience their potential, their fluent whole.

This is a new stage of maturity in the learning process. While everyone has experiences of creative fluency, we are initially too immersed to gain a reflective understanding of them. They are even difficult to remember because they are unwilled and unselfconscious states. But when these states are witnessed and affirmed, we both experience *and* witness them. The wow of wonder that comes to accompany them is a crucial sign of this awareness. It allows us to recognise, understand and trust these states; it allows us to see how relations carry us.

Winnicott insists that these experiences are the ways in which people learn how to live a whole and open life:

> [I]f someone is there, someone who can give you back what has happened, then the details dealt with in this way become part of you, and do not die…. That is, the sense of self comes on the basis of an unintegrated state which, however, by definition, is not observed and remembered by the individual, and which is lost unless observed and mirrored back by someone who is trusted. (1991, p.61)

Just as the students' enthusiasm gives the teacher confidence in the value of their lessons, the teacher's state of wonder gives students confidence in their capacities. Moreover, they see that their value isn't just in giving the correct answers or displaying correct behaviour. The more questions they ask, the more risks they take, the richer the life of the class becomes.

Good teaching, then, is a demonstration of how to hold questions open and take discussions further. This demonstration is the deeper lesson at work in any classroom dialogue. It is a lesson that doesn't draw attention to itself because it is a performance in which students are fully involved. In learning about the world with their students, teachers teach students how to learn. They show them how to enter into lively

relations, and how to be more than they could be by themselves. In this way students learn how to enunciate ideas that are theirs but which they couldn't have said or even remembered by themselves.

Vocation

Julie McCrossin spoke of 'the teacher's gift or vocation'. This gift is not a personal largesse, it is the ability to be in an I-Thou relation where giving and receiving are simultaneous. In other words, the teacher's gift is their ability to receive from the classroom what they need.

Julie drew attention to this question of teachers' needs. Following her account of the three qualities that made Mrs Miller a great teacher, Julie added a description of Mrs Miller's idiosyncrasies:

> And the final thing I will say is that she was just hilariously idiosyncratic. She was clearly a smoker, desperately thin. Looking back, her agitation must have been a desire to smoke. And she had very overt phobias. She was terrified of birds and if a bird ever flew past a classroom, Mrs Miller almost had a nervous breakdown. That only endeared her to us more. She was a very quirky individual, Mrs Miller.
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> It's a miracle in a way, her personal passion, her knowledge of her material, her love of learning and teaching were all so strong that even though she was very lined and old, battered by life, she could reach across this extraordinary gap to these teenagers.

The discrepancy between the agitated and quirky individual and the passionate and patient teacher tell us about the transformative power of classroom relations. Through their relation, students gave Mrs Miller qualities that were not available to her on her own. When the students experienced Mrs Miller in full flight, discussing Donne or Shakespeare, they did not look at her age or lined face: she met them across the extraordinary age gap because she was not limited by such definitions.

We imagine that Mrs Miller knew her vocation because she felt blessed by this transformative power. The calmness of the classroom allowed her to accept her occasional agitation; she probably had as bemused a relation with her quirks as the students did. They were simply part of who she was. Even these vulnerabilities had their place, *only endearing her more to her students.*

Vocation involves acceptance. It is what you accept and where you are accepted. The point is not that teaching is therapy or that good teachers are successful despite their vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities *allowed* Mrs Miller to teach; as part of the way she was, they were the way she entered the classroom. To be real with students, teachers have to accept both their strengths and weaknesses; they enter the class with humility because they know that they need the students' help.

Although the words 'calling' and 'vocation' sound quaint beside the desirous vocabulary of choice, decision and career, interviewees insisted on the vocation of good teachers. As an awareness of where one is needed *and* needs to be, calling takes teachers beyond the alienating choices of desire. Producing the wholeness of give-and-take, and providing the wonderful and serene energy of passion, calling places teachers and students exactly where they need to be to *get it.*

The teacher's call is not a once-in-a-lifetime message from on high: it is simply a compassionate openness to the signs present everyday, in every classroom. When Sharon Cheers is surprised by a smile or a look from a student, it is her calling that she hears.

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