

Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), pp. 163-76.

CHAPTER TWELVE: “Building Trust with Students”

Underlying all significant learning is the element of trust. Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue binding educational relationships together. Not trusting teachers has several consequences for students. They are unwilling to submit themselves to the perilous uncertainties of new learning. They avoid risk. They keep their most deeply felt concerns private. They view with cynical reserve the exhortations and instructions of teachers. The more profound and meaningful the learning is to students, the more they need to be able to trust their teachers.

The importance of trust is highlighted time and again in students’ critical incident responses and in the studies of the experience of learning mentioned in Chapter Three. In speaking of transformative learning events, students often make explicit mention of how teachers’ actions, and the trust these inspire or destroy, are crucial to learning. At the center of the cluster of characteristics that make teachers more trustworthy in students’ eyes are two components that might be described as teacher credibility and teacher authenticity. These are connected but, as we shall see, they are not necessarily complementary.

Teacher Credibility

Teacher credibility refers to teachers’ ability to present themselves as people with something to offer students. When teachers have this credibility, students see them as possessing a breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, and length of experience that far exceeds the students’ own. Freire (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 172) describes credibility as the “critical competence” that students have a right to expect of their teachers. Students continually stress their desire to be in the presence of someone whose knowledge, skill, and expertise mean that they can help students come to grips with some of the contradictions, complexities, and dilemmas they are experiencing. Although teacher education programs often stress process skills above content mastery, students still attach great importance to teachers’ having subject and skill expertise; without intellectual and experiential credibility, process skill is ultimately empty.

Teacher Authenticity

Authentic teachers (Moustakas, 1966) are, essentially, those that students feel they can trust. They are also those whom students see as real flesh-and-blood human beings with passions, frailties, and emotions. They are remembered as whole persons, not as people who hide behind a collection of learned role behaviors appropriate to college teaching. In more specific terms, students see four behaviors as evidence of authenticity: (1) teachers’ words and actions are congruent; (2) teachers admit to error, acknowledge fallibility, and

make mistakes in full public view of learners; (3) teachers allow aspects of their personhood outside their role as teachers to be revealed to students; and (4) teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students' expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students' voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students' suggestions.

Taking Steps to Build Trust

Trust is not given to teachers as a right, and teachers cannot assume that it exists a priori. It must be earned. In particular, the teachers' right to challenge students is not a given. Only if teachers have first displayed a public willingness to be learners themselves by adopting a critical stance towards their own actions and ideas can they legitimately ask for the same critical stance to be demonstrated by their students.

You must remember that not only can you not expect students to trust you from the outset, you may also have to face accumulations of mistrust nurtured by the actions of cynical and arrogant teachers in the past. When you face students for the first time, you also face their accumulated educational histories and their memories of all the teachers they have experienced in the past.

Building trust is neither quick nor easy. It can be very dispiriting to realize that your efforts to build trust may often bring little immediate result. But remember that, in Carl Rogers's words (1980, p. 273) "students have been 'conned' for so long that a teacher who is real with them is usually seen for a time as simply exhibiting a new brand of phoniness." With persistence, however, and with attention to some of the factors and processes described in this chapter, it is possible to build trust where none has existed before. If you do this, students will remember the time they spent with you as a time when they were valued and affirmed.

Don't Deny Your Credibility. One of the most erroneous and damaging beliefs held by some college teachers concerns the best way to show that they value students' experiences. There is a tendency among these teachers to try to dignify the validity of students' experiences by belittling their own. This is a serious mistake. Teachers may believe that if they say to students, "Look, my own experiences have no greater innate validity than yours—you'll teach me as much as I teach you," they are recognizing and affirming students' life experiences. In fact, the reverse can be true.

Teachers' protestations that they don't really know any more than students do and that they are simply there to help students realize that they already possess the knowledge and skills they need sound supportive and respectful. But such protestations from teachers who are demonstrably more skillful, more intellectually able, and possessed of a much greater range of experience than that of students will be perceived as false. Instead of students warming to what teachers believe to be admirably humane and respectful attitudes, students may conclude that if teachers' experiences have left them with no greater skill, knowledge, or insight than that possessed by students, then there is nothing useful students can learn from them. So in your desire to affirm the validity of your students' experiences and abilities, be careful not to undermine your own credibility in their eyes.

Be Explicit About Your Organizing Vision. In Chapter Two I argued that teachers cannot avoid having visions that guide their practice. This is quite normal. What is problematic for students, however, is when teachers deny having any visions, yet through their actions make it apparent that such visions exist and are highly influential in determining what happens in the classroom.

I have an educational agenda, and I always try to acknowledge this fact plainly to students. Instead of pretending that I have no power in the classroom, that anything goes as far as curricula, methods, or evaluative criteria are concerned, I try to make explicit at the outset what my expectations and organizing principles are. In interviews with applicants for degree programs, in consultations with students who are interested in finding out about my courses, and in all the course descriptions I circulate, I state the evaluative criteria that inform my teaching.

On the first meeting of any new course, I advise students to regard their attendance as a provisional sampling, a testing of the water. If they object to my agenda and concerns, then they can leave after this first meeting with no ill feeling. I will make sure that I say something like the following at this meeting:

If you decide to join this class, you must expect to be asked to be critically reflective about your own practice as educators. You must also anticipate being asked to analyze critically the congruences and discrepancies between your experiences and the pronouncements of theorists and researchers who are regarded as experts. These features are nonnegotiable, and you should know this right from the beginning. If you don't like them, or if you feel you're not ready to do these things, then you should think seriously about not coming to the second meeting of class. If you do show up next week, then I'll take this as indicating that you accept these fundamental purposes. If you don't show up that's fine—you'll have saved yourself a lot of needless anxiety. I know that critically reflective education is hard to understand and anticipate until you find yourself immersed in it, so let's take some time now to discuss some of the queries and uncertainties that I'm sure you have about what staying in this class involves.

Having said this I can then negotiate in good faith with students about possible changes in methods, areas of content, and evaluative indicators by which the development of critical reflection can be recognized. Not to make explicit right at the outset the fact that I have an organizing vision and not to inform students of the form that vision takes in the class would be fundamentally dishonest.

Make Sure Your Words and Actions Are Congruent. The congruence of words and actions is absolutely paramount. Few things destroy students' trust in teachers more quickly than teachers who say they will do one thing and then proceed to do something quite different or teachers who espouse one set of philosophical aims and guiding principles and then proceed to practice in ways that render these null and void. One of the most frequently described examples of dissonance between teachers' words and actions concerns those teachers who claim they are fully committed to democratic principles. Such teachers will declare that the classroom is a collaborative learning

laboratory in which students will have a full and equal role in determining what happens. Yet, subtly and manipulatively, teachers override students' concerns and expressed wishes to do what they, as teachers, feel is important.

Such spuriously democratic teachers will tell students at the outset of a class that the curriculum, methods, and evaluative criteria are in students' hands. As matters progress, however, it becomes apparent that the teachers' preferences and judgments are prevailing. This can happen explicitly and overtly, but is more likely to be done insidiously. Indeed, there are some teachers (I have sat in their classes) who vigorously deny that any subtle manipulation of events is occurring, even as they express surprise that the "collaborative" curricula to be studied and the methods to be used coincidentally happen to match those that they prefer.

Be Ready to Admit Your Errors. Learners seem to warm to teachers who acknowledge that they don't have all the answers and that, like their students, they sometimes feel out of control. So be prepared to admit to being plagued by occasional feelings of anxiety and unease about the inadequacies you perceive in yourself. Such admissions will help reduce the tension students feel about their own need to be seen as perfect by their peers and teachers.

Remember, however, that your admissions of error only have some kind of releasing effect on students when they are made after you have already established a degree of credibility. The timing of such admissions of error is all important. If you walk into a classroom and begin immediately to assert your inadequacy without having previously established that you have something to offer students, you will probably be perceived as overwhelmingly weak or inept. In fact, the typical reaction from most students will be annoyance at having found themselves in a class where they obviously aren't going to learn anything.

So, whereas public declarations of fallibility from teachers who have clearly earned credibility are prized by students, these same declarations from teachers who are unknown quantities may produce an effect exactly opposite to the one intended. Instead of releasing students from the self-imposed burden of needing to be exemplars at whatever activities they are exploring, it increases their burden of anxiety. In response to teachers' ill-timed avowals of inadequacy, students might quite legitimately ask, "Well, if you have so little to offer me, then why on earth am I here?"

Reveal Aspects of Yourself Unrelated to Teaching. Be ready to refer to enthusiasms, passions, and concerns outside your teaching role. When you reveal aspects of your personhood, it gives students a sense that they're dealing with a flesh-and-blood human being. Tarule (1988) calls this the autobiographical metaphor in teaching and points out how women, in particular, warm to teachers who are willing to bring evidence of their own extracurricular enthusiasms into the classroom.

For many years I steadfastly refused to refer to anything to do with my life outside the classroom. To me, personal disclosure smacked of amateur psychotherapy and indicated only that the teacher was using the learning group as a dumping ground for unresolved personal issues. There is no doubt that this can sometimes happen, but the authentic disclosure that students appreciate is very far from this. It is seen in teachers using incidents from their own daily lives to illustrate general principles, in their talking

about the passions that led them to develop an interest in their fields, and in referring to the enthusiasms that currently sustain and renew these interests.

Show That You Take Students Seriously. Listen carefully for any concerns, anxieties, or problems voiced by students. If none are forthcoming, arrange opportunities and provide encouragement for students to speak out about what's on their minds. When concern is expressed on an issue—no matter how misplaced or trivial it seems to you—don't give a quick and polished response and then move on to something else. Give students plenty of time to express their thoughts. Don't finish their sentences for them. Don't rephrase what they've just told you as a way of benevolently interpreting their anxieties for them. You may feel that you're saving them some embarrassment by doing this, but in reality you're sending them the humiliating message that you don't think they are capable of speaking intelligently for themselves.

Be wary of your actions unwittingly reinforcing students' belief that they are incapable of contributing to discussion at any serious level. Even if you're confused about what someone is saying or impatient to ask a series of sharp, quick questions for clarification, resist these temptations. Hold your self back, and the chances are that another class member will jump in and state the same concern in a way that is clearer to you. Here is Ira Shor's attempt to show students he takes them seriously:

I modulate my voice to conversational rhythms rather than didactic, lecturing tones. I listen intently to every student utterance and ask other students to listen when one of their peers speaks. I don't begin my reply after the student ends his or her first sentence, but ask the student to say more about the question. If I'm asked what I think, I say I'd be glad to say what I think but why don't a few more people speak first to what the student just said, whether you agree or not. If I don't have a reply to what a student said, or don't understand a series of student comments, and can't invent on the spot questions to reveal the issue, I go home and think about it and start a next class from what a student said before, to keep signalling to students the importance of their statements [and Freire, 1987, p. 117].

Be ready to explain, clearly and frequently, why you wish students to do the things you are asking. If students propose alternatives to your carefully thought-out plans, don't dismiss them out of hand. If you need time to think about a student's suggestion, then say this and promise to respond at the next class—and keep this promise. Be open to change. Show your readiness to negotiate and to adapt what you had planned to some other format. When students suggest themes, exercises, and issues they wish to explore, even if these are outside the scope of your original activities, consider very seriously how you can make some compromise to include some of these. If, in good faith, your own convictions or external constraints make these inclusions impossible, be prepared to explain and justify your decisions. Don't fall back on your presumption of authority as a way of winning the day, and don't imply that students lack the sophistication needed to understand your reasoning by refusing to discuss it with them.

Don't Play Favorites. In every class there are students whom you like more than others, people whose work you look forward to receiving, and people whom you would welcome as personal friends. Conversely, there are those whom you dislike personally,

whom you think boorish and insensitive, and whom you believe are sliding through a course with a minimum of effort and a maximum of cynical contempt. You wouldn't be human if you didn't warm to some students as people and freeze in the presence of others. But if you are ever to be trusted by students, it is absolutely essential that you don't allow yourself the luxury of exercising these personal dislikes, that you avoid playing favorites.

Playing favorites—showing that you regard some people's work more favorably because of their appealing personalities and that you are prejudiced against others' efforts for their personal failings—destroys your credibility in students' eyes very quickly. So watch out that in discussions you don't slip into the habit of giving automatic preference to the contributions of those you like, while only acknowledging as a last resort the contributions of those you dislike. Try not to let your nonverbal gestures communicate how you feel about the personalities of contributors to discussions. Be alert to students' picking up your nonverbal messages about which students you like or dislike personally. When you see students making scapegoats of people whom you personally dislike, ask yourself how much your attitude is coming through to the group. When you see scapegoating happening, send a strong symbolic message by explicitly creating a space in the discussion where the person who was made the scapegoat has the chance to contribute—fully and freely—without intimidation. You are bound to have likes and dislikes regarding the different students in your classes. The important thing is to avoid letting these influence your public actions as a teacher.

Realize the Power of Your Own Role Modeling. Teachers sometimes shy away from acknowledging the significance of their own actions to students. They believe that regarding their own actions as particularly significant within a learning group indicates an unpleasant egoism. They like to think that they are at one with students and that their own actions have no more significance than those of any other member of the learning group. This is patently not the case. As Jackson (1986) acknowledges, the role modeling undertaken by teachers is the most important element in transformative teaching. What we do as teachers is invested with enormous symbolic significance by students. So recognize the inevitable symbolic significance of your actions and make a virtue of necessity by ensuring as far as you can that these actions are perceived as authentic by students.

Let me give an example from my own practice of how seriously I take role modeling as a contributing component to trust building. My primary function as a teacher is to encourage critical thinking—something I suspect is an organizing principle for teachers across many academic disciplines and subject boundaries. More than any other factor, it is a teacher's willingness to display the habits of critical questioning towards his or her own ideas and actions that encourages these same habits in students.

From my own practice, I know that the position of institutional authority I possess as a professor at Teachers College or as the "expert" consultant invited to give a keynote speech or conduct a workshop means that most people will be reluctant to criticize publicly any of my pronouncements. The risk of doing this is perceived as just too great. When they recall how such criticism has been received by leaders in the past, they may conclude that silence is the best policy or that, if they do speak, it should be to affirm the validity and accuracy of the leaders' insights.

Knowing this, I usually critically scrutinize my own ideas in front of my students or conference audiences. I will talk about mistakes I have made, about errors in my work, or about times when I wrote about something before fully understanding the phenomenon. I will discuss the areas of my work most in need of refinement. I will identify the issues I wish I had paid attention to or the most problematic areas for future inquiry. I talk about my confusions as much as my certainties. It is easier for me to do this without damaging my credibility than for someone just beginning in the field. Because of my writings and speeches and the credibility that accrues to published authors (regardless of whether what they published actually made any sense), I can move very quickly to this critical role modeling. Were I back in 1970 teaching my first classes, I would be much more cautious about this approach.

One thing I am very careful to do is to encourage the first hesitant critical comments of students, even if I think their criticisms are wholly misconceived. Despite my annoyance at being personally criticized, I try to make sure that the giver of this criticism is not silenced by other members of the group anxious to observe what they see as the pedagogical proprieties of the college classroom. A very powerful symbolic action for me is to distribute to students copies of reviews critical of my books and to point to the valid points in such reviews. This is a difficult thing for me since I react to such reviews personally and with a sense of injured martyrdom. But if it were easy for me to distribute critical reviews, then the symbolic power of doing this would be diminished. Because it's obvious that I'm hurt by these reviews, students are that much more convinced that I mean what I say about being open to criticism.

Shor describes, in similar terms, how he acts carefully to model the critical thinking he tries to encourage in students:

What I try . . . is to demonstrate that there is no punishment for disagreeing with me, and also there is no reward for simply agreeing with me. I do this in several ways. In class, I react blankly to any student who mimics my ideas in his or her own voice. I do not model approval of mimicry. Then, I raise questions about my very own position, phrased by the student, to challenge their manipulation of me for a grade. If students write papers mimicking my ideas, I do the same thing, but in written response on their essays, asking leading questions about the ideology they "psyched out." I don't give automatic As to the mimic-papers and my written questions urge the student to reason out the issues in depth, next time. From the reverse point of view, if a student writes a paper or makes a statement antagonistic to my views, I don't pounce on him or her in a one-to-one debate. Instead, I reproduce the paper for class reading and discussion, or re-present the statement as a problem-theme for our inquiry [and Freire, 1987, p. 184].

Teachers who declare that they are running critical or liberatory classrooms in which everything is open to critical scrutiny cannot expect students to breathe an immediate sigh of relief and release at inhaling this heady air of intellectual freedom. The more likely reaction is for students to wonder exactly which particular game the teacher is playing and when his or her agenda will start to emerge. So if you're trying to encourage critical thinking, you must expect a

period in which students will scrutinize very carefully to what degree your protestations are congruent with your actions.

Balancing Credibility and Authenticity

Credibility and authenticity are elusive concepts, made the more so by the fact that they cannot be easily standardized. It is impossible to develop training packages to tell people how to be credible or authentic, since contextual features affect so strongly how students and teachers define credible and authentic behaviors. The most one can do is offer some of the general guidelines discussed in this chapter, give examples of how teachers in different settings try to build trust, and urge teachers to pay attention to the necessity for doing this. However, although these concepts evade precise definition, students sense when they are and are not present. In fact, it is usually much easier to say when these elements are absent, since students are mistrustful and uneasy, and their awareness of these feelings is sharp and disturbing. When students trust teachers, they cross new intellectual terrain with a tread that is firm and confident. When they mistrust teachers, each step is filled with trepidation and taken with the ever-present fear that it will be the one to send them sinking into quicksand or hurtling into a ravine.

The problem with pursuing authenticity and credibility (aside from the fact that neither of these concepts can be standardized in behavioral terms) is that the actions associated with these ideas often seem contradictory. In pursuing one you risk threatening the other. On the one hand, in striving to establish your credibility with students, you risk seeming to show off your knowledge and experience in a manner that appears authoritarian, arrogant, and inauthentic. On the other hand, however, in striving to be authentic, you risk weakening your credibility if you overdo your readiness to admit to error; students can be left with a perception that your most distinguishing characteristic is your ineptness. You also strain your credibility when you make students squirm in embarrassment because you are too personally revealing about your life outside the classroom. No student likes a teacher to use a class as a therapy group for the exorcising of his or her personal demons. So overemphasizing or mistiming can destroy the very trust you are working so hard to create.

This problem has no easy solutions, and most of the time you will probably feel you are erring too much on one side or the other. The only comfort I can give is this. If you don't make the effort to build credibility or act authentically, then you will do more harm than good. Better to try and achieve some sort of balance, knowing this will always remain elusive, than to neglect this trust building entirely. Teaching is never easy, and of all the complex balances we try to attain, being credible and authentic in the right proportions is one of the most difficult. But if you neglect entirely the need to build credibility in students' eyes, then they will have little confidence in the value of what you ask them to do. And if you behave inauthentically, they will regard your asking them to do it as a self-serving confidence trick.