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Why Is School Like a Prison?

Abstract

"Imagine the change in motivation in a classroom that was formerly teacher-directed to one where students have a voice in the learning process!"

Posting about enhancing the student experience from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/why-is-school-like-a-prison/>

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Comments

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Why Is School Like a Prison?

 [all in allthings.org/why-is-school-like-a-prison/](http://allthings.org/why-is-school-like-a-prison/)

August 2,
2016

Dave Mulder

When I taught middle school, I once had a very thoughtful conversation with a group of 7th graders during a study hall. They did not want to get started on their homework; they were disgruntled by the perceived busywork, and they weren't afraid to share their thinking with me. One young man started the discussion with something along the lines of, "Why is school like prison? We don't have any freedom here. The teachers just order us around, and tell us what to do, and if we do anything they don't like, we get punished for it." The others agreed with him, and gave other examples as well: no input in the kind of work that was assigned, a lack of choice for with whom they would on projects, an expectation that they would be silent in the halls, being told when they could use the restroom or sharpen their pencil or get a laptop from the cart. One young lady even suggested that the food in the cafeteria was like prison food—the whole group laughed at that.

All of this was fascinating for me, so I asked them if they felt that way in my class too, and the response surprised me: "Well, kinda, Mr. Mulder... 'cause it's school. But don't worry; you're a *fun* teacher."

I was struck by that comment, because early in my teaching career, I really wrestled with this: I *did* want to be thought of as "the fun teacher." I *did* want students to like me; honestly, I probably worried about this more than whether they were learning much in my classes¹. And I thought that—by the time this conversation was unfolding, anyway—I was largely past that point in my career. But when asked if they perceived my class to be "prison-like," they still saw some aspects of it, but they were okay with it. I like to think this was because I was being deliberate at developing relationships with my students—notice that all of this all came out in a conversation—and I was striving to make my class "for them" as much as possible, giving them a voice, and the opportunity to make reasonable choices about what and how they would learn.

Previously, I confess, I had tried to keep tight reins in terms of my classroom atmosphere. But when I came across this quote from school reform advocate, Alfie Kohn, I realized that my teaching practice needed a change: "One is repeatedly struck by the absurd spectacle of adults insisting that children need to become self-disciplined or lamenting that 'kids just don't take responsibility for their own behavior'—while spending their days ordering children around. The truth is that, if we want children to *take* responsibility for their own behavior, we must first *give* them responsibility, and plenty of it. The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions²."

This has me wondering how class must be for students when they *don't* have a voice, when education is seen as something done to students, rather than something done *with* students. Maybe it's no wonder that students would think school feels like prison?

What do you think: if your students were not required to attend your class, would they still show up? Yes, this is a hypothetical, but I hope that this question has merit for you, and not just because you might teach a subject that is considered an elective. What draws students to your class? What is happening in your classroom that is so interesting, so compelling, so...fun?...that students don't want to miss out?

I am not suggesting that every class period has to be fun and games. "Edutainment" seems destined to fail on both ends; it probably won't be very educational, and most students probably won't find it very entertaining. But I do wonder what educators are doing to *make their classroom a place students want to be*?

I do not claim to have this all figured out, certainly. But I can offer a few words of encouragement for educators willing to take steps to make their classroom a space that draws students in to learning.

In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink, explores human motivation³. Based on his extensive research, Pink suggests that there are three things we should consider to make work more intrinsically motivating:

- 1) Autonomy – providing space for self-direction in our work,
- 2) Mastery – working towards getting better and better at something that matters, and
- 3) Purpose – expecting to do work in the service of something larger than ourselves.

Think about your own learning, whether for work or play: do you learn best when you are learning on your own terms, working towards getting better because you care about it, and with a sense of purpose? Or do you learn better when the what, when, with whom, how, and why are dictated to you? Imagine the change in motivation in a classroom that was formerly teacher-directed to one where students have a voice in the learning process!

Clearly, it's a stretch to expect students to always be self-motivated in their learning, but I am convinced that adding a little playfulness can help to draw them in. I want the students in my classes to have joyful surprises regularly. Let me be clear: students need to know what to expect, generally⁴. Within that structure, however, don't be afraid to try things, to experiment, to *play with students*. Share a story or a song. Bring in a silly prop to make your lesson memorable. Take on an accent for part of your lecture, or try to teach a lesson in pantomime. Silly? Perhaps. But, in my experience, such playfulness is not wasted⁵.

I should share that this did not come naturally to me. I have been learning, over the eighteen years I've served as a professional educator, to be myself in the classroom. About a decade ago, I was handed a copy of Parker Palmer's inspiring book, *The Courage to Teach*⁶. This book changed the way I think of myself as a teacher. Palmer uses the analogy of an actor playing a role onstage, and then being a very different person backstage. His encouragement to educators: don't act like a teacher, *be the teacher*. Let the character you are backstage—your *real* character!—be the person you are “onstage” while teaching. And for me, owning my authentically geeky self, with my quirky sense of humor, and my enthusiasm and passion for my subjects blew the doors off of simply acting like a teacher.

I challenge you this, teacher: no one ever said school has to be prison. I believe that play and learning are complementary, two sides of the same coin even. What are you going to do to entice your students to learning?