Rethinking Education from First Principles

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Several years ago, I began teaching writing pedagogy in Capital University’s “junior block” elementary education program, a program that teaches pedagogy classes across the curriculum and then places students in a school for five weeks. I wanted students to consider what they were doing when they carried out the activities we call “teaching” in a classroom. One of the fundamental but unfortunately unspoken assumptions about teaching is that when a person teaches, another person learns.

My inspiration was physicist Richard Feynman who disliked taking other people’s word for anything. In most of his pursuits, including physics, mathematics, and computer design, he liked to figure things out from “first principles,” that is, working from the basic foundations of a field and deriving the higher elements himself in the hierarchy of theory. I wanted students to think about education from first principles because unless we have some idea of what we are doing as teachers, we are wasting a lot of people’s time.

The resulting project was “What Difference Does Instruction Make?” I asked students to collect data on their students, record the nature of instruction given, and then collect data following the instruction. They were to analyze the differences between the pre- and post-instruction data. The project was made flexible to accommodate the variety of field placements they could experience, so they could do their project on a single student, on a small group, or on the whole class. The instruction in the project could be on any topic and did not have to be taught by the student him or herself; the instruction could take place across minutes, hours, days, or weeks. The data collected could be systematic quantitative or qualitative (or, ideally, both).

I told students that the most critical part of the project was the section in which they would discuss the implications of what they found. I gave them a list of possible questions they could consider in writing their implications. I reassured them that projects could be “successful” whether or not the instruction worked. What I cared about was their understanding of what happened in the classroom and their ability to think critically about it, without assuming something which may not be true, that students learn when we teach.

I tell this story because I believe we really need to think about what the process of teaching entails and further consider the implications of that process for education in the “real world.” Finally, we need to be educating potential teachers with a realistic understanding of teaching as well as effective strategies that are based on the actual learning process.
Tenets

There are several basic tenets of education which range from the personal to the institutional and these are all significant to the learning process.

First off, every person is different. Every teacher is different and every student is different. We have a tendency to want to apply the same teaching practices which worked in one setting to another setting, with different students and different teachers. Research across the past forty or fifty years is full of enthusiastic reports about this or that method of teaching, some of which are diametrically opposed in terms of philosophy, working dramatically well. Why do so many different methods work so well according to research and yet no one has found a panacea to the perennial problems in education?

When people do research on a method during its development, that method is necessarily used by people who have been thoroughly trained in its use and who are probably enthusiastic about that form of teaching. These teachers choose to be part of the research project—most researchers do not want to work with unwilling partners; in fact, it is unethical to do so. When the method is later disseminated in schools in an area, it is often approached with a top-down perspective, that teachers are mandated to use this method. In some public schools, teachers have been monitored by people walking in the halls to ensure they are using the method required by the school district at the pace required by that district.

What I have to say below will illuminate why this is, but the short point is that teachers are human beings. Not every method fits every teacher and most teachers don’t like management approaches that appear not to take into account their reality. The top-down approach, unaccompanied by care for the perspectives of people in the “trenches,” does not work. Many decent reforms have been left at the classroom door because of teacher resistance to the ignorant employment of institutional forms of authority.

Students also differ from person to person. We currently acknowledge this under the aegis of ethnicity and (dis)ability, but in fact every person in the world has a different set of schemas, actual ways of thinking and understanding the world, about any given area of knowledge or worldly experience. This means people think differently. What makes sense to one person is complete nonsense to another. Yet because we are stuck within our own minds, we have difficulty imagining a mind that thinks fundamentally differently from our own.

If it is the case that teachers differ and that students differ, then it is likely that real education happens in situations where there is flexibility and wisdom to accommodate a given teacher and a given student. We have a lot of knowledge; in fact, we may be suffering from having an excess of knowledge. What we lack is wisdom, which is the ability to apply that knowledge effectively.

Our wisdom has been drastically hindered by the predominate paradigm in educational philosophy and research. In its attempt to become a “real” science, the “social sciences” adopted behaviorism because it most readily could be adapted to scientific method. This has led to an amazing amount of foolishness because of a number of ideas: that teachers could all manipulate the environment in such a way that all students would learn; that the most important aspects of a person (whether teacher or student) are visible; that given the correct training, any teacher could adapt any method to any classroom successfully; that external rewards and punishments could adequately shape a student into a constructive and thoughtful citizen; that the more scripted a method was, the more successful it would
be because the script would be an adequate control of the teaching environment; that people’s minds, thoughts, and learning could be translated successfully into a series of numbers—test scores, IQ, etc.

A second tenet is that learning is based on the relationship a teacher has with any given, individual student. In a class of 25 students, there are 25 teacher-student relationships, and they are all different.

We know from the literature on “at-risk” students that they have difficulty learning when they feel that the teacher does not care about them. Students who are not “at-risk” can “do” school successfully enough that they can look like they are learning. They do not disrupt class, they do the worksheets and homework, they pass the tests, they move from grade to grade with their peers, they graduate. Then I get some of them in my college classes, where they have trouble taking intellectual risk, have a primary interest in doing as little as possible in order to get the credentials necessary to get a job, remember that they learned something for a test but cannot recall the actual content of what they learned, fear doing something “wrong” that will make the teacher angry, and the biggest crime of all, they have little or no curiosity about the world they live in. I see evidence in so many ways, but the most shocking to me is when students misunderstand an assignment I have given and when we discuss their understanding, I find that they would not be surprised if a teacher gave work to them that was completely senseless in terms of content or the process by which the work was to be done. They do not seem to have schemas for critically looking at an assignment and finding logical connections between it and the class they are taking.

We identify “at-risk” students by external factors: socio-economic status, ethnicity, and behavior. We fail to identify “at-risk” students who do not have the normal “at-risk” external attributes but who have, nevertheless, checked out, intellectually speaking, and who are filling time with meaningless tasks in order to get diplomas necessary for getting a job and beginning real life. Thirteen years of primary and secondary education followed by four years of college: potentially seventeen years of mindlessness. But we have “documented” our success with our numbers and multiple choice tests, so they must have learned something. Indeed, they have. They have learned to size up teachers as to how hard they will have to work in the class, they have learned to find easy ways out, they have learned to avoid work, they have learned to pretend they understand or pretend they have read the text. If there is doubt about this, start reading blogs on the web from high school and college students.

“At-risk” students have done us an enormous favor in refusing to acquiesce to nonsense. They have shown us that learning does not happen where there is no relationship or the relationship is negative. One of the biggest genres in the literature on teaching and education is the teacher autobiography, often made into an inspiring movie, which goes something like this: “I was in a classroom of at-risk [fill in the blank: elementary, junior high, high school] students in [fill in the blank: inner city LA, Harlem, rural Georgia]. No one cared about them, but I did. I did [fill in the blank: language arts, math, music, etc.] with them and they succeeded not only with this but also [fill in the blank: getting out of a gang, giving up drugs, going to college, believing in their dreams].” “At-risk” students have been outspoken in their choices about not learning and learning and we have heard them. We just have not generalized their message to all students as we should have.

I acknowledge that there are many students who can survive the worst schooling because they have a rich intellectual life outside of school and there are many wonderful teachers who are truly educators. But the problem with poor schooling and alienated students remains significant for obviously and not-so-obviously “at-risk” students and it continues to exist in part because our concept of education does
so-obviously "at-risk" students and it continues to exist in part because our concept of education does not work.

The third tenet is that learning entails change. Piaget chose the right word, disequilibrium, for the moment when we understand that our schemas do not work in a given situation. This word not only implies a lack intellectual knowledge but also negative feelings. It is uncomfortable to contemplate the possibility of change, much less the need for it. If you add psychological risk to the unpleasant feelings of disequilibrium, most people will, understandably, do their best to avoid the situation rather than to engage with it. This is why the relationship between the teacher and the student is so critical: without the relationship, change is too risky to undertake.

While there is much more that can and will be said on this topic, the bottom line is that teachers may have “authority” in the classroom, but students have real authority over their own learning. They choose the quality of their intellectual engagement with classroom events, from none whatsoever to deep concentration on the activities at hand. They also choose whether to be authentic about their engagement, to create an appearance of being engaged, or to defy completely the intellectual and psychological setup of the classroom. No amount of bullying, stickers, “motivation,” being sent to the principal’s office, pretending to “give” the students control, or any other attempt at manipulation will change the fact of the student’s authority.

Implications

The implications of these tenets range across the idea of a school as a teaching institution and the district as a collection of teaching institutions (or any other possible conglomeration of schools) and also include the interactions within a given classroom and between any two people in that classroom, but most especially the teacher and any particular student. These tenets also have implications for how we help people to become teachers—what we tell them about the nature of learning, the strategies we suggest they use for “classroom management,” and how we help them manage the authority they do have as learners, themselves.

Institutional Authority

For many years, I was strongly influenced by a woman who had had very little official authority in her life due to race, socio-economic class, gender, and age. Juanita Price had been in a violent marriage in the days before battered women’s shelters and she figured out how to find and use a source of authority that no one could take from her in order to deal successfully with her batterer and keep him from killing her or stalking her. Over the years, she and I used her ideas as we worked together in two battered women’s shelters and a university. Since coming to understand her paradigm of authority, I see it everywhere.

For example, I was once invited to do some work in a school where the entire culture of the school revolved around, not the principal or even a strong teacher, but a teacher’s aide. The school was inner city and yet highly successful. This aide had the role of being the person who supervised children sent to a “time out” program, but his way of dealing with kids freed up his time considerably; teachers did not need to send students to the time out program because their behavior improved. He spent a lot of his time in the school encouraging students academically in various ways, supporting the teachers, and calling in the occasional outside resource to do things for “his” school.
How do we explain the fact of this aide’s influence on his school? We tend to focus on external entities because those are visible (hearkening back to behaviorism) so we ignore how institutional authority is undercut in every institution by a different form of authority, which Juanita Price and I call “personal authority.” The aide had personal authority, which trumped the institutional authority of anyone else in that building. The principal was a wise woman who knew a good thing when she saw it and did not resist the personal authority of this aide.

Personal authority is the authority you have over yourself. It consists not just of the choices you get to make about yourself (to learn or not to learn…) but also your ability to control yourself in the interest of making better and better choices that benefit not only yourself but potentially your community. A person with full personal authority is a person who can make mature, ethical decisions—a person with wisdom. If you ever see a conflict between a person with personal authority and a person with institutional authority but no personal authority (no wisdom or maturity), don’t bet on the institution.

Institutional authority is what we assign every teacher when we give him or her a classroom, but the trappings of this authority are thin. We train teachers to shore up a weak form of authority with reward systems or systems of consequences or rules that the kids allegedly created or various other forms of psychological manipulation, but in fact, it’s all mumbo jumbo. If we pretend anything else, we might fool ourselves, but we are not fooling the kids. They may not be able to articulate it, but their behavior abundantly demonstrates that they know when a teacher is bluffing.

A teacher with personal authority, in contrast, now that is a formidable person. A teacher with personal authority is choosing to be a learner along with the students. In fact, that teacher models learning because the teacher recognizes the foundation on which his or her authority rests: the example you set is your authority to speak. No example, no authority. If you want respect in your classroom, treat people respectfully. If you want honesty in your classroom, deal with people honestly. If you want hard work in your classroom, then work hard. If you want learning, then learn. If you want excitement about learning, then find the parts of learning that excite you and share those.

If the institutional authority of a teacher carries no significance in the classroom, the same is true for anyone over the teacher’s head in the context of the school—the principal, the curriculum coordinator, the professor, the creator of the teaching method that has been mandated. Everything a student can do in relation to learning, a teacher can do in relation to following the mandates of the school, district, or state.

I was aware in a district of a mandated, highly scripted teaching method for reading instruction. Teachers’ responses to it varied. Some did their best with it because they either agreed with it or they knew the students needed to learn how to read and this was the materials they had for teaching. Some did the method but then added their own instruction as they saw fit. Some deliberately did the teaching method poorly because they resented the intrusion on their classroom as well as the monitors in the halls making sure they were on schedule. It is not surprising that results of that method varied.

Anyone who reads music or poetry knows that what is on the page is the starting point and the same is true with any teaching method, most particularly one in which all the words the teacher is supposed to say are written down to be read out loud. This is evidence of the limitations of institutional authority and the futility of top-down decision-making. If you want to make a difference in an institution as an authority figure, whether teacher or principal, you must use personal authority and you must engage the personal
authority of everyone with whom you are working. You still may not be able to make the changes you want because one aspect of personal authority is the right to say no. But you have a greater chance of succeeding than just issuing edicts from on high.

In sum, institutional authority is a sham. It’s a façade we use as we attempt to organize institutions in order for them to get their work done. But the true accomplishments of any institution happen because of the personal authority of the people involved. When the institution fails to accomplish its aims, it is because of a lack of personal authority somewhere in the institution.

The Centrality of Dyads

No matter what an institution’s structure is, the relationships between any two people in that institution, no matter where they are on the hierarchy, determine how the institution will work. For example, in a school there may be custodians, students, teachers, a secretary, and a principal. Functionally speaking, the institution itself is composed of a web of dyadic relationships between all who interact with one another, regardless of the positions of authority anyone holds.

A custodian who constructs good relationships with the other people in the school contributes significantly to a positive atmosphere in the institution. A single teacher who lacks personal authority—who is immature in dealing with other people—can cast a pall on the part of the network of relationships where he or she is the center. No principal cannot change that negative part of the school relationships using institutional authority alone. Ordering a person to change this or that about how she handles relationships is not going to work because the essential problem has not been addressed—the immaturity.

If a school has a number of “nodes” within its web that reflect immaturity, nevertheless, a single person who has personal authority can not only create a series of positive interactions around his node, but also can spread that positivity through helping other people to develop personal authority. This individual could be a single teacher, a single student, a school secretary—anyone within the collection of people that form a school.

The way personal authority spreads is through dyads. A teacher has a dyadic relationship with each student in the classroom. The teacher with personal authority not only demonstrates that to the conglomerate of students in the classroom setting but also to each individual student during dyadic interactions. As a matter of fact, it is a common problem in a classroom for a teacher to “demonstrate” respect, a basis of personal authority, to the whole class, and yet fail to demonstrate that respect in individual interactions. That is a teacher who is talking the talk but not walking the walk—a person who lacks personal authority. Personal authority can be faked in front of whole groups of people, but the rubber meets the road in individual interactions, and most particularly when there are conflicts between two people.

If a teacher has personal authority, demonstrates this personal authority in interactions with individual students, the teacher can also teach the students about personal authority. As a result, those students are likely to have personal authority in their relationships with other people—other students, other teachers, other school personnel, and their own family members. Negativity can spread in an institution, but positivity can spread, also, and it doesn’t matter who begins.
Over the centuries, people have come up with all kinds of different systems, believing that the right system could engender positive results. A system is more or less an environment and it has some significance. But the significance of a system or institution is less than the significance of the personal authority of the people who use the system. For example, some schools are set up along traditional lines of education, where students are taught often through direct instruction and they are assessed with tests and the like. Other schools are set up to be in line with John Dewey’s ideas about how learning needs to be organic to the student.

In either type of school, when most people possess personal authority, learning happens and the school works as an educational institution. Likewise, in either type of school, when personal authority is lacking, the school fails, philosophy notwithstanding. Philosophy is trumped by the quality of interactions between any two people in the school. A direct instruction, traditional teacher who demonstrates personal authority in her relationship with each student and who helps students to use personal authority in their relationships with each other will have a positive learning environment despite the mountain of worksheets the students are doing. In fact, along with content, students will be learning people skills and independent work habits that they will be able to use as adults in their careers.

A burned out constructivist teacher might have a bunch of neat activities, but if he is unable to construct positive relationships with each student, the neat activities will not create a good learning environment by themselves. A classroom environment with the latest technological equipment, lots of books, and every math manipulative imaginable will still not offer a real education if dyadic relationships in that classroom are overwhelmingly characterized by a lack of personal authority.

In an institution—a group of people who have been designated to carry out a certain set of goals—we may not really like every single person. There are people we would prefer to not spend time with. Yet, every student in a school must have a positive, personal authority-centered relationship with at least one person and the more positive dyadic relationships a student has, the more successful a student will be. Further, regardless of how we feel about a person, we can have a positive relationship with him or her because personal authority means that one’s feelings do not control how one interacts with other people.

Finally, different people have different experiences of an institution based on their dyadic relationships. A good teacher with general personal authority can make mistakes in dyadic relationships, resulting in the fact that some students will have a positive experience in a given activity and others will have a neutral or even negative experience because of dyadic relationship characteristics.

Personal Authority in Relationships

How does personal authority work in relationships? Personal authority is based on a person’s ability to exercise his or her own rights in a way that acknowledges the rights of other people. Additionally, personal authority makes it possible for a person to choose to work towards the good of another person or group of people even if it means personal sacrifice. A lack of personal authority is characterized by self-centeredness, egocentrism. Personal authority is characterized by the ability to be Other-centered and the ability to not allow personal desires or emotion to rule one’s actions and choices.

A person with personal authority in a relationship with a person who lacks it, no matter which positions
in the institution the people hold, has many choices about how to exercise that authority. Most often, people who lack personal authority are seeking to control other people for their own benefit—this is part of selfishness. Sometimes that selfishness is unconscious due to the age of the person or their lack of personal insight. Sometimes attempts to control other people for one’s own benefit are deliberate. To a certain extent, that doesn’t matter, but it is helpful to understand that people might not know what they are doing or how their behavior has an impact on others.

Strategy: Refuse to engage your own negative emotions

The old saying is that it takes two to tango. It takes two people to create an argument and as long as one person chooses not to argue, there is no dance. People who lack personal authority want to draw you into an argument because your resulting anger places you in the same spot they are in—lacking personal authority. When both people lack personal authority, the biggest bully wins.

Choosing not to allow your emotions to be engaged means acknowledging them internally and making an active choice to avoid mirroring the emotions being displayed in front of you. For example, when a person is angry, they expect you to get angry and then the dance begins. Instead, you can choose not to act in an angry way despite the display being put on in front of you. This does not mean ignoring the person. Instead, the next step would be to focus on problem-solving. What problem is that person having? What are the options for solving the problem? Who might be able to help?

Strategy: Don’t be a volunteer

Self-centered people bank on the surrender of other people. For example, a self-centered person might display a lot of anger and is counting on the fact that the anger will keep other people away, even those who have a reason to be around. People volunteer to stay away from angry people and as a result, necessary tasks do not get done. Staying away is actually a selfish strategy. Instead of focusing on what needs to get done for the benefit of others, people who stay away are trying to save themselves the trouble of having to deal with an unpleasant person.

Another aspect of refusing to volunteer is to choose not to notice the angry behavior of the unpleasant person. Instead, focus on the task at hand and be professionally friendly—not personal, but also not intimidated. Listen for the content and respond to that. For example, if the person is blasting at you for some undone task, then reflect back to the person their concern about the task and focus your own attention on how that problem can be solved. There is no need to be defensive, because that is another self-protective device and it is self-centered. Defensiveness actually invites an angry person to attack.

Strategy: Be an example

It was Juanita Price who often said, “The example you set is your authority to speak. No example, no authority.” Interestingly enough, if you face an angry person calmly and without responding to the inappropriate expression of their emotions, often that person will begin to imitate you. You may notice the person calming down and becoming engaged with the task at hand.

When you are an example, you are doing three things. First, you are following the Golden Rule, treating people as you want to be treated. You cannot be worthy of respect unless you are respectful, even to people who are not very respectable. You do not have to trust every person—trust is something that has
to be earned. But if you want respect, then you need to be respectful. There are no circumstances where you can be disrespectful and still reflect personal authority.

Secondly, when you are respectful in the face of disrespect, you are holding up a mirror to the other person. When they hear your calm voice in comparison to their own loud and unpleasant voices, they can start to hear a little of what they sound like. If you yell back, their yelling will sound normal to them. If you speak in a calm voice, their yelling will sound like yelling. They will be more able to recognize that their behavior is out of line because at some level they will be comparing their own behavior to yours.

Thirdly, a person may lack personal authority and you may know that, but your display of personal authority causes them to put on a pretense—they pretend to be mature. A pretense is a lot better than no personal authority at all—we all have to “fake it 'til we make it.” So you can accept the approximation of personal authority and in the long run that approximation will lead to the actual development of the quality.

Strategy: Have mercy

When a person shows the least signs of developing personal authority, have mercy on them for their past behavior. Celebrate the growing—don’t focus on the past or hold a grudge. Holding a grudge for past problems is a form of selfishness.

Strategy: Apologize publically

People with personal authority are human and make mistakes. When you find that you have made a mistake, the first step is to tell on yourself—tell anyone who will be affected by your mistake the nature of the mistake and the fact that you made it. Be very specific—tell them exactly what you failed to do. Then apologize for the mistake. Apologize as much as is necessary to alleviate the hurt of the other person when that is a factor. That means repeating “I’m sorry” until that person has expressed all the hurt inside. This is how hurt gets cured. People who lack personal authority hate to apologize and believe that others will hold them in lower esteem, which is a form of selfishness. In actuality, the opposite is true. If you withhold information about a mistake you made and it gets discovered, then you will be held in lower esteem. Also, if you tell on yourself and apologize, you actually may be held in higher esteem. You are also setting an example of how to handle a mistake when you have personal authority.

Strategy: Know that words don’t count

People who lack personal authority are self-focused and their words reflect that self-focus. They say things to you and about you, but those things are really not about you—they cannot see that far to be able to say things about you. In order to say something true about another person, you have to understand that person and people who lack personal authority do not understand other people.

So, when you are around people who lack personal authority, you have to know that their words don’t count. That is to say, if they say something about you that is not true, no big deal. You know it’s not true and that’s all that needs to be said. There is no use getting defensive or getting into an argument because that is when you shed your mantle of personal authority and become a little kid.

If a person who lacks personal authority says something negative about you that is true, take away the
power of the words by agreeing with him or her. Apologize for the negative characteristic or action and tell the person what you will do to change it. Then follow through and do that.

Personal Authority and Education

There are people who have personal authority and people who lack it. Those of us who are in the educational world have the responsibility of helping any person who lacks personal authority to develop it, no matter how old that person is. If we are in a position as a teacher and a 57 year old principal lacks personal authority, it is our job to help that person attain it. In this case, by demonstrating personal authority in our every action and by caring enough about that person to want to figure out how to help that person. Likewise, if the other person is eight years old, we still have that responsibility.

Learning is a risk-taking adventure and people only learn when they know that they are psychologically safe, so we teach personal authority by demonstrating it ourselves and also by actively teaching in a way that involves respect for the learner. It is not respectful, or particularly smart, or a reflection of personal authority for that matter, to go to a principal and say, “You lack personal authority; you are immature.” What can be smart is to recognize a problem the principal is having and offer your services in a respectful, non-patronizing way. Over time, trust develops and learning can take place in the teachable moments that inevitably arise.

As teachers of people younger than ourselves, we also have to give youngsters a chance to stretch their wings into adult roles. Pre-school children can learn to do this—they can learn to take care of their school room and the things in it. They can learn to take turns with each other. They can learn to use their words instead of their fists. They can learn to share. All of these things are respect-based activities and they need to be actively taught at all age levels, not just nursery school.

Our job, then, is to take a principle: personal authority, which is based on another principle, respect. We are to enact these principles in our own lives and when we fail to enact it, we are to own up to that failure and to apologize for it. We are to actively teach these principles as the occasions arise, always keeping in mind the fact that people can choose not to learn. Instead of using a controlling way of trying to teach personal authority, ("you really should do....."), we wait until we are asked for help which acknowledges the learner’s choices about learning. Or we wait until a situation arises in which something the person doesn’t understand can become clear and we help them to understand the situation.

The same is true for everything else we teach. Standards and benchmarks are good tools to help us consider content and make sure we are offering the broadest and deepest range of educational opportunities we can. But teachers with personal authority are the professionals with wisdom who take the principles of the standards and apply them to the specifics of the human beings in their rooms, developing a positive and caring relationship with each student along the way.

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