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When Students Are Afraid of Learning

Jennifer W. Shewmaker, PhD • October 14, 2019

It's night; a boy bikes alone on a dark, empty forest road, the only sounds those of his bike wheels whirring, the cicadas singing, and the gentle breeze. He passes a large metal fence with a warning sign that reads, "RESTRICTED AREA. NO TRESPASSING. U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY." Suddenly, the boy notices strange electricity in the air; the headlamp on his bike flickers off and on. When he looks up, a tall figure looms in the middle of the road. Shocked, the boy loses control of the bike, veering off the road and down a hill and faceplanting in the dirt. From behind him, he hears strange, guttural sounds. Something is coming. He runs.

Students often feel much like Will does in this moment from the pilot of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016). They're going about their business of learning, they approach something new, and bam, they become terrified. They wait there for a moment, and if their teachers don't support them, they may run—away from new knowledge, away from the challenge of learning. As teachers we need to ask ourselves, "What is the figure that looms in the road of our students' learning? And why are they afraid of it?"

Our students encounter new information and questions in the context of the self. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks writes, “School was the place of ecstasy—pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone” (p. 3). Parker Palmer echoes this view in *The Courage to Teach* (1998/2007) when he submits that one of the greatest fears both teachers and students in the classroom face is that of encountering ideas and perspectives that challenge strongly held beliefs and perspectives. As we plan learning experiences, then, we should ask ourselves questions such as the following: How might this content lead to fear? What kinds of fear might surface? What is the most effective way to respond to such fear in order to move forward with learning? Considering these questions in the context of the student’s identity can help create experiences that lead to effective learning.

Kathy Lund Dean and James P. Jolly (2012) maintain that students run from learning because it threatens their identity. Each student has developed an understanding of themselves relative to the people they’ve been around and the experiences they’ve had. But new learning can challenge that identity. Maybe as they learn about a concept—say, culture or gender or religion—the student begins to see things differently. Maybe they begin to wonder whether the beliefs they’ve always held are really true. If they’re going to accept that possibility, they’ll probably realize that they’re going to have to reevaluate many other things they’ve believed in the past.

Further, Dean and Jolly note that when students are learning, they experience cognitive dissonance by “uncomfortably holding conflicting ideas at the same time” (p. 234). To deal with this dissonance and discomfort, the student has to decide among three options. They can choose to change their beliefs, find a justification for their current beliefs, or reject the new idea (p. 234). As students struggle with this discomfort, they can become defensive or resistant; if so, they might stop paying attention in class, decline to participate, or at an extreme, challenge the professor’s authority (p. 236).

As teachers, how do we set up our classrooms and organizations in such a way that we help our students overcome fear, commit to change, experiment with new conditions of knowledge, and move into the growth to which learning calls them? How do we help our students move forward rather than run away? Dean and Jolly recommend a few approaches to help students deal more effectively with these threats to identity (p. 238). Below are my interpretations of these, along with some examples of how to put them into practice.

Make it safe not to know the answer

I have learned to tell students at the beginning of a course that we are going to wrestle with a lot of new ideas. As Dean and Jolly recommend, I explicitly state that part of learning is about changing, both intellectually and emotionally. I allow students to share their thoughts, and together we brainstorm ways to think about different concepts, evaluating and assessing each from different perspectives. This provides students with the opportunity to see the ambiguity of learning as a natural part of our experience, rather than something to feel threatened by.

Provide clear context for activities

From the start I let students know that they will grow in knowledge, skills, and understanding. I intentionally discuss current social issues, encouraging students to engage with matters that affect people’s lives outside of class. For example, my psychology students complete activities that ask them to consider how [Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model](#) might explain sexual assaults that occur at high school parties and fraternity houses.

Additionally, I preface new activities by telling students that we are going to try something new, and if it doesn’t work exactly as planned, that will be a part of our learning process as well. I have noticed that as I allow

for failure on my own part in class, students become more comfortable with trying new things and failing as well.

Enable a variety of people to give feedback

Allowing students to evaluate and offer feedback on each other's ideas can alleviate some of the perceived threat of trying out new concepts. I do this by creating small group activities in which students work together to create a product such as a mind map or graphic to explain an idea or apply a theory. As the group develops a concept map or decides how a theory might explain a current social issue, the students are asked to evaluate one another's ideas and provide feedback on each person's reasoning.

Give students direct control over learning

Having input into class activities or assessments gives students a greater sense of control when it comes to their learning and can decrease resistance. In one of my classes, instead of reviewing a fully developed course schedule, our first meeting is devoted to discovering what the students are most interested in learning about. We brainstorm a list of topics that they care most about and do both small and large group activities designed to solicit their interests. I'm then able to tailor some of the topics to we address those interests.

When educators are aware of how the learning process can challenge identity and the fear that can arise from that challenge, we are better able to design learning experiences that help our students move forward rather than run from the learning that will help them grow. Accepting that learning involves embracing, rather than running from, new ideas sets our students on an effective course for a life of discovery and wholeness.

References

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