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## Being Human in the Classroom

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**The combination of a good mind and heart is key for developing emotionally healthy kids—and teachers.**

I may have known a few things about what it means to teach well when I first entered the classroom as a teacher. Most of those inklings were gifts from a few teachers who shaped my young life in profound and positive ways. Over time, my students clarified and extended those early stirrings. Time itself, a bit of maturity, and an inclination to be reflective further refined my sense that teaching allows us to be much more than dispensers of knowledge.

Teaching is the rare profession that allows its practitioners to model a world that dignifies—lifts up—all its members. It became important to me, then, to create a classroom where my students and I learn together to be more fully human. As is the case with all humans, I fall woefully short of that aspiration more times than not, but pursuit of that intention has made me a stronger person and a better teacher.

For years, my sense of what I meant by being more fully human was amorphous. Geoff, a student I taught for three years in middle school, helped me organize my reflections when he wrote on an application for a summer program that he had been given the gift of a good mind and felt a responsibility to develop a good heart to go with it. That, I think, is the real calling of a teacher—to model and encourage students to develop good minds and good hearts. Certainly helping young people develop good hearts and good minds is key to developing emotionally healthy kids. And developing emotionally healthy kids should be high on the list of essential teaching goals.

There's no "right" definition of what it means to develop a good mind or a good heart. Clearly, they are interdependent, as Geoff understood. To become more fully human is to value and be good stewards of both. A teacher plays a dual role in cultivating them: both modeling them and teaching them.

### Developing a Good Mind

We tend to think about teachers as developers of minds—or at least I think we ought to. We are better guides for young people when our work helps them *build* their minds rather than *stuff* them. Achieving that end is different from covering content, ticking off a list of standards, or preparing for tests.

Toward that end, I'd like to get better and better at commending and living out at least four propositions. This list of propositions is in no way exhaustive. Add your own propositions to the list, or recraft the ones offered here.

#### **Proposition 1. Learning should nearly always be satisfying—and often exhilarating.**

Learning is a defining feature of human beings. It's how we grow into what we can be. We have the capacity to develop our brains and, in so doing, to better our lives. To model this proposition, I need to understand that although learning is not by any means confined to school, it's what school is for.

There's nothing more electric than having an insight, so I'd better be invested in creating learning that provides consistent "electric moments" and the satisfaction that follows a good mental stretch. I need to share with students my own joy in

learning—both my learning and theirs. Conversely, I need to avoid reducing learning to that which is rote, flat, purposeless, or perfunctory.

### **Proposition 2. Making meaning of the world around us is central to learning.**

The human brain is a meaning-making mechanism, seeking patterns to inform and protect us. I need to encourage my students to figure things out, ask good questions, and find reliable information from which to construct answers. I need to push them to speak, write, and act on the basis of trustworthy information, evidence, and reason.

To model the proposition, I need to be a reasoning human being and to share my reasoning with my students. They need to see me seek deeper understanding of what I teach and why it matters. I need to invite students to explore their understanding with me and with one another. And I need to resist confronting them with so much information that there's no time to make sense of it.

### **Proposition 3. Working hard and working wisely are the secrets to mastery.**

It's a scandalous fiction that only a relatively few people can be successful. Dogged and informed persistence is the ticket to success in most domains of human endeavor. Human history is laden with accounts of people who were told they'd never succeed at something and who made their naysayers look foolish by persisting to achieve their goals.

I need to be an exemplar of devoted effort, unafraid to say to my students, "What we did today didn't work. I'll be back with a better plan tomorrow." This helps students see what genuine effort looks like and helps them adopt the habits of mind and work that are most often precursors of success. I must also stand against the insidious inclination to see young people as smart or not smart, understanding that my students hear every message I send—whether overt or implied—about their capacity to learn and succeed.

### **Proposition 4. All humans have the ability to be creative.**

To be creative is to find a better way, to improve one's corner of the world. We become more fully actualized as we become more creative. We also expand our opportunities to become more productive.

I need to model the attributes of creativity—flexibility, originality, a problem-solving orientation, intellectual risk-taking, tolerance for ambiguity, a belief that mistakes are catalysts for growth, a willingness to play with ideas, and the ability to take pleasure in my own work. I need to call on my students to be divergent thinkers at least as often as I call on them to be convergent thinkers.

## **Developing a Good Heart**

My student Geoff understood that a keen mind without a generous heart can easily become a guided missile gone awry. Goodness of spirit magnifies the positive power of a good mind. Teachers often spend more time with our students than do any other adults in their lives, giving us remarkable opportunity to help young people see, reflect on, and enact attitudes and behaviors that lead to good hearts. The following four propositions can point us in that direction.

### **Proposition 1. Kindness is the air and water that humans need to thrive.**

Being unkind hurts, stunts, and ultimately destroys pieces of the person to whom we were unkind. I need to ask my students to look for the best in their peers, to listen in order to understand others' perspectives and see their humanity, and to see themselves in others and others in themselves. This means asking them to be kind—especially to those who need it most. They need to say they're sorry when they hurt someone's feelings, even if they feel their viewpoint was right. Kindness does not require agreement with another person. Rather, it reflects our understanding of the value of another's life.

Of course, as a teacher I must also consistently speak, act, and react from a position of kindness. Our kindness and unkindness is present or absent in our faces, lesson designs, grading practices, responses to wrong answers and bad behavior, and all other aspects of classroom life. We need to strive to live with kindness at our core.

### **Proposition 2. We need to decide what we stand for and who we want to be.**

Developing a good heart requires clarity of purpose and the discipline of practice. We need to name the attributes that elevate us and build together a mental rubric to guide our growth in those areas. As a classroom of learners, let's decide who we want to be. What do we want to stand for? What will elevate us as a community or a team? How can we grow in ways that make each of us stronger?

Although my compass as a teacher does not dictate the compass students elect to follow, my ability to teach from my compass is essential. *Who* I am as a person and as a teacher and *how* I am to my students predicts much about the likelihood that we can, together, celebrate who we are, what we do, and how we have come to that point of fulfillment and gratification.

### **Proposition 3. We must strive to be good members of the human family.**

The classroom is a microcosm of the human family. To make the classroom work for everyone in it, we all need to pitch in by taking responsibility for ourselves, dignifying one another, seeking to understand more than we seek to judge,

competing with ourselves rather than with others, celebrating one another's victories, and, when possible, buffering one another's hurts. We should also treat materials with respect, clean up after ourselves, do our best work, and help one another grow. And when there's conflict, we need to seek reasonable compromises and work for peace.

As a teacher, I need to work with my students to be architects and nurturers of community in our classroom. How we live our days enhances the life of each member of our group and of the group as a whole, so we celebrate individual and group successes and learn how to work redemptively in the face of our differences and shortcomings. To that end, I need to muster patience and temperance in challenging moments—and ask for students' forgiveness and help when I cannot. I must attempt always to use my influence constructively and instructively.

#### **Proposition 4. We make our own memories.**

Our memories become more positive as we look for good things around us. We need to find time to do things we love doing. We might sing or giggle or be a little goofy sometimes. We are happier when we learn to appreciate small kindnesses. To see the bright side is not to be blind to difficulty, but rather to refuse to be hobbled by it.

When I teach, I try to share stories about happy and funny things that happen in my life and lead my students in laughter and silliness. I tell them about times I work with projects or causes that "swallow me" and help me find greater purpose, and I share examples of how I find good moments in the midst of difficult ones. To help my students make good memories, individually and as a group, I act as chief celebrant of the memories we all will share.

### **Strong Lives and Strong Resumés**

It's regrettably easy for teaching to become a job we do to pay the rent and make it to retirement. It's similarly easy for "going to school" to become something a kid does for 13 (or more) years to make it to adulthood. It's possible, however, for a teacher to live in a way that makes both the teacher and his or her young charges more fully human.

This orientation does not diminish the role that academic learning plays in human development. Rather, it suggests that academic pursuits are rich contexts for developing good minds and hearts. Teachers who make and hold fast to that choice help their students construct strong lives as well as strong resumés.

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