

# **Providing a Classroom Culture for Thinking and Learning Or From Good to Great without Getting Noses out of Joint!**

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## **Abstract**

By adapting the management theory of Jim Collins in *Good to Great* and Philip Lundin in *Fish* a classroom culture can be provided that gives freedom for both teachers and students to be on the leading edge of teaching and learning.

The school is the sea. The students are the fish. If the sea is not kept at the right temperature the fish will die!

The right temperature is a school and classroom culture that gives both teachers and students the freedom to learn. Such a culture must not only be a nurturing one but also an adaptive culture able to adapt rather than adopt principles of greatness and excellence both from outside and inside the educational environment. All this is within the context of a disciplined approach to persisting and keeping on keeping on with the desired principles of greatness.

First is focus. To use a business concept, the core business of a school is to create an environment, which is able to grow learning. To do this it must not only be student focussed but also one that generates efficacious energy. Thus dreams - dreams that push the boundary - are needed to provide a catalyst which arouses the passion that gives the energy and enthusiasm. So our dream, which became our focus, was to be a *leading edge school*.

This dream could apply to every subject, every activity from the academic, to the cultural, to the social and more. Further to be on the leading edge suggests to be continually improving, to be taking responsible risks by trying new ways to accomplish things, to be seeking excellence, and overall invoking an overall positive suggestibility. In this way our focus empowered the teachers, the students, and perhaps surprisingly the larger school community especially the parents. Difficulties were a challenge to be remedied. A can do efficacious practicality, engendered positive expectations.

Dreams, to be realized, require what Jim Collins calls a resource engine: the practical actions and concepts that make things happen: the practical actions and concepts that in this case did make us a leading edge school. The fish philosophy gave this four cylinder engine for us to adapt and use: attitude, play, make their day, and be present. To this basic model customised extras were added: Learning Styles, Multiple Intelligences, Habits of Mind, and Emotional intelligence.

School wide a corporate discipline ensured that these aspects were constantly in the collective conscience of the school community.

A warning! Despite unpacking the resource engine in this way, it is always modular, being the sum of the parts and the synergy that brings.

## **Attitude**

Change, or an attitude to be better than before, starts with the individual teacher. They must develop a personal attitude that, "Change begins with me." If the school is to be the nurturing environment needed for the students, the fish, to flourish, the teacher's role must be a mentoring

one. To do with students not to them is not just necessary it is crucial. This is an essential aspect of being student focused.

Crucial to this mentoring approach is the need to bring whatever is happening to the consciousness level. Dialogue between student and teacher and ongoing formative assessment that points the way are two ways of achieving this.

Words are metaphors, given subtly complicated emotional meaning which is constantly being framed by our experiences. “Get on with your work,” evokes a frame of something that is assigned, that is a duty, that is associated with loss of freedom, that is associated with difficult, that is associated with loss of pleasure, and other joyless terms. These are all negatives, compounding one on the other. On the other hand, “Here is your thinking and learning,” or “Here is your home thinking and learning,” has an opposite emotional meaning: succeeding, making a difference, doing better, and even fun. All these are positives: all potentially joyous.

When Pat Morrissey from a school in Westchester County, New York, made this change, she observed – “the children are responding to my change of the word ‘work’ during class time. I am now using the phrase ‘you have learning to do’ instead, and I can see their reactions. It’s interesting to think of the shift in their attitude, but not surprising. ‘You have work to do’ sounds so heavy and dismal; ‘you have learning to do’ sounds interesting, engaging and fun.” This is a tiny change in language but a huge mind shift in attitude.

If we want students to have the right attitude it is necessary to teach what skills they require so that they really do know and understand – the finer tuning of the resource engine. Attitude is a personal thing. No one else can choose an attitude for another person, so it was essential that they were not restricted by inadequate skills or lack knowing.

We can only know what we know. As I go out the door to the gym wearing my backpack, my niece’s four year old daughter stares at me “Are you going to school?” she asks in a surprised tone. She knows her older brother goes off to school each morning with his books and lunch in his back pack, so she relates what she knows about back packs to me. All she knows about a backpack is that they are worn when you go to school, so she “knows” that because I’m wearing a backpack I’m off to school!

This is where emotional intelligence came in with its two basic aspects – self management and managing others. These matched our desire to promote a can do efficacious attitude. Starting where the students were at, using authentic meaningful experiences, and consolidating at each sequential step before moving on, meant that it was a year long process.

A Likert line was used to begin this process. On a scale of one to 10 students had to line up with one being mad, five being sad, and ten being glad. As the days and weeks went by the vocabulary was increased and modified, using the teachable moment wherever possible.

Once the Likert line sequence had provided a more relaxed attitude to publicly admitting emotions, and the vocabulary had begun to be developed, role play was introduced. This used simple authentic or near authentic examples that students could relate to, and that would be fun. Thus emotional energy was created here too. One of these role plays was in pairs where one student had spilled juice on another’s home learning project. One participant blurted out, “You’ve juiced my assignment,” accompanied by much mirth.

Later more complex situations were introduced. Things like your best friend has been chosen for a sports team, or a trip, or a cultural event and you have been left out. This could also be complicated by adding in a bystander, or a third or fourth friend.

Metaphor was the next addition to the mix. This was to develop more elaborated language, but still keeping to the simple and at least the near authentic. A secondary purpose was to allow more abstract ideas to be conceptualized. When a McDonald’s hamburger was given as the

comparison, one student came up with, “I feel like a cold fry that has been dropped on the floor.” Another in a more positive mood when a roast potato was the comparison stated, “I feel like a hot roast potato, crisp, salty and mouthwatering.”

An interesting sidelight here was that in sharing these likes and dislikes a common ground was developed. This not only meant an insight into the opinions and feelings of others but also gave a measure for their own situation. Often when these sessions were run after others had shared; students revised upward their own situation.

The above is a practical example of how the synergy of interdependent thinking morphs into the higher level thinking skills of Lorin Anderson’s New Bloom as the students analyse, evaluate and create.

Finally came as a practice field the use of secret squirrel.

Metacognition at the end of the year from both parents and students was unanimously enthusiastic. One boy who had been a troubled at risk student stated, “I have more positive feelings about self, school, and family. I never thought I was any good at school work but now I have changed my mind.”

A parent stated, “She is much better at turning her frustrations away from the negative to the positive.”

What had resulted was a growth mindset with a can do practical efficaciousness. Carol Dweck’s concept of mindset to describe how students think about their intelligence is well displayed here.

Those with a fixed mindset believe that they have unchangeable internal characteristic. To them effort simply does not count. This means they shy away from academic, or indeed any challenge to the extent of not even attempting simple challenging tasks that require problem solving effort. Worse they may develop disruptive behaviour patterns to mask their perceived inadequacies.

Those with a growth mindset see intelligence as malleable and therefore effort and persistence are seen as positives to confront challenges and solve problems. They focus on the strategies that they can use rather than worrying about how competent they are. Moreover the mindset can be changed through perceptive teaching, just as the at risk student mentioned above had his mindset changed through the emotional intelligence knowledge he gained.

## **Play**

The brain is biologically programmed to attend first to information that has strong emotional content. When used thoughtfully the emotion inherent in play, to quote Bob Sylwester, drives attention and attention drives learning.

Georgette’s chocolate cake maths is an example of this. She wanted to break down built up emotional barriers to maths, specifically fractions, and decided to use chocolate as the catalyst. It was a visual, tactile, and tastebud way (senses) of teaching fractional numbers through play started with a cake (bar) of chocolate. When she opened it up, the kids were glued.

The serious business was that she was discussing fractional numbers and began with the naming of parts in the space on a number line between zero and one. The visual hook was ONE bar of chocolate, yet it was divided up equally into 80 pieces. The bar was then broken in half and – she looked for the vocabulary relating to fractional numbers: 50%,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and 0.5 of one whole. She then looked at other common fractions relating it back to numbers being less than one.

For the next lesson she brought a chocolate cake to school and revised last week's lesson with extra added. Students had remembered the previous lesson and yet were still very enthusiastic to go over it again, this time using a different food.

Chocolate cake maths was intended to last for a few periods as part of the fractions unit, but when she stopped, the students carried on and sometimes she would arrive to class with several chocolate cakes on her table. So the students then had to help plan the lesson and she moved into problem solving, measurement, statistics etc. It is amazing how these now grown kids still remember those lessons.

Pauline's play with ice cream was specifically designed for developing and remembering the appropriate math language for 3 dimensional shapes; cone, conical, sphere, spherical, rectangular flat. She decided a novel lesson may help as the brain programmed to pay attention to novelty. The students 7 and 8 year olds had to choose the most suitable tool to create a sphere of ice cream and place it on a cone using an ice cream scoop or a tablespoon to move the ice cream onto the two varieties of wafers - cones and flat. If they got it correct and named the shapes they got to eat their creation.

The golden rule is that play is to support the teaching and learning required to achieve the educational objectives.

Very often students need to have what they are doing raised to the consciousness level. From time to time Barry would see an example of a Habit of Mind occurring in his classroom. He would then hum, like Pooh Bear, Hommmmmmm .... At that signal the whole class would join in. When the hum concluded the class was invited to state what the Habit of Mind that the teacher had seen being practiced was. The Hum had created a teachable moment. Students also inaugurated the hum when appropriate.

As the year went on variations were used to keep the idea fresh. Sometimes the Hommmmmmm would be made longer or shorter, the class were not allowed to Hommmmmmm until the teacher cut the conducting and must again Hommmmmmm for as long as the teacher held the 'note' or Hommmmmmm. Even the conducting could be varied by conducting with just fingers rather than arms.

At one level all this is just a bit of fun – play. However, at another level, by involving the emotions it makes the point powerfully.

Role play is also play – We used this a lot when I was in the New Zealand regular army, often making points through humour. When soldiers came up on charge in a commanding officer's orderly room the conventional court procedures applied. The soldier was to be considered innocent until proven guilty. Thus a role play in which the officer stated to his sergeant to “March the guilty bastard in!” invariably brought laughter but the juxtaposition with what should happen also made sure the point was well made.

Perhaps this a good point to reinforce that although we are unpacking the four major attributes of the resource engine individually one by one, the resource engine is modular with the parts overlapping and acting in concert as often as not. Thus role play can be considered as play, or as attitude, or perhaps both at the same time!

## **Making their day**

Making their day is all about creating energy and good will.

Rapport between teacher and student generates emotional energy which is then applied to the teaching and learning. After 3 boys my wife and I produced a daughter. At the time I was teaching a class of very lively 14 year old girls. After the daughter's birth I walked into the

classroom to find that almost every girl had written congratulations and initialed it on the chalkboard. In a square in the middle some bright spark had written, is this the start of three girls. Quietly I picked up a piece of yellow chalk and wrote in large letters NO. Before I could turn back to the class a loud voice said, “Of course not he’s far too old,” and much laughter followed. Eventually I got my own back when it came to report writing time when I put on her report, “She lacks mature judgement i.e. she thinks I’m a geriatric.’

A sense of humour can be an important ingredient of making their day.”

So too is the use of song. It can be an original rap or it can simply be new words to an old tune. Thus the Habits of Mind can be introduced and remembered by composing a simple song to the tune of She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain. Here are the first two verses as composed with the assistance of my two granddaughters aged fourteen and sixteen. Half way through the writing they sent me an email, “This is fun!” It is the doing it differently – the unique nature of the task – that makes the day fun for them

There are sixteen useful habits in our kit,  
There are sixteen useful habits in our kit,  
There are sixteen useful habits, there are sixteen useful habits, there are sixteen  
useful habits in our kit.

There is empathy in listening in our kit,  
There is empathy in listening in our kit,  
There is empathy in listening, there is empathy in listening,  
There is empathy in listening in our kit.

The modular nature: the modular effect of this resource engine is well shown by how well the rituals and routines of the school fit making their day. It is all too easy to have a gap between what is espoused and what is practiced. A simple every day ritual such as lining up for class shows this

I was recently doing some work in a school where the students line up outside the door. They know the ritual so they wait silently, hoping they are not going to be reprimanded for the line not being straight enough, or because someone has chosen to tempt fate and whisper a comment. They wait patiently, perhaps resignedly. The teacher gives the signal and they rush to enter the classroom. Chatter breaks out getting louder and louder as they sweep through the door, slightly jostling each other in the process. The teacher claps her hands. The students clap back and silence reigns. The teacher has ownership and the lesson begins. There is a tension present born of fear doing something wrong. To the untrained eye it looks like good discipline. In reality it is doing to. The teacher is using a transactional leadership style where conforming is the norm. The lessons begin in an atmosphere that may at best be neutral, at worst negative, and unlikely to be positive. The teacher is in control. The students lack both control and power. Yet the school claims to be catering for the individual!

At my school there is no lining up in the corridor. Students chatter quietly as they filter into the classroom. They know the required ritual and are comfortable with it. Some may linger at a desk to finish a conversation before they sit at their own desk, purposefully and positively take out a book and start reading. Within a few minutes of entering the room all is quiet, purposeful. It is condition go! There is a sense of relaxed alertness. The teacher is using a transformational leadership style. After a period of quiet the teacher calls for attention and the lesson begins within

an atmosphere of positiveness. The students have internal control. They are responsible. They have ownership.

Another way of making their day or not making their day is in the questioning ritual that is in vogue in the school and the classroom. Quite simply students are neutralised or empowered by the ritual used for questioning.

Students not being called on to answer questions all too often develop a low level of confidence believing that you the teacher do not believe they are capable of answering, or at least that others will have a better answer. They may even believe that the problem is that you the teacher do not like them. All this negative expectancy too easily becomes an alibi for inattention and beyond that ill discipline. Who gets asked to answer the questions becomes the arbiter of success or failure. Therefore to make their day some form of random selection of who gets to answer the questions is required.

Wait time is the other important ritual when asking questions. Unless some specific attention is given to it, most teachers require immediate answers, and beyond a one second wait if an answer has not already been forthcoming either answer the question themselves or pose another question. Mary Budd Rowe's research shows that by waiting just 3 seconds before requiring a response a positive mindset is developed with the students then able to be fully engaged.

Thus fifteen months after introducing both the wait time and random selection of students into a school as the school wide ritual for questions and answers a teacher volunteers that the quieter boys are now stirred to answer with a quality response. Another teacher states, "I now have a class of keen 'answerers', they tell me by their eyes."

Another teacher raised to the overall consciousness level what is involved when she explained to her class that once she had asked the question she would count down from 25 under her breath as wait time. One day when she asked for a speedy reply one student said "Boy you must have skip counted down that time Mrs Donaldson." Rapport between student and teacher develops when the students know what is going on and why.

By involving everyone, not just the favoured few, in the questioning and answering, the teacher is making their day and learning flows.

## **Being there**

Being there is all about taking an individual interest in each student. Recently I conducted a qualitative survey asking a group of 5 year olds to 17 year olds to state simple the one thing that they thought made a good teacher. Heading the list was that the good teacher was interested in them as individuals, or a variation on that that the good teacher was interested in students as people. Two other important aspects also appeared – that the teacher engaged them, and that there was interaction or doing with not doing too.

I also asked what characteristics of a bad teacher were and not surprisingly the opposites to the above appeared. One heartfelt comment being, "After two weeks of a lesson a day he still didn't know my name – maybe trivial but to me infuriating and almost insulting"

The doing with needed to be a working relationship where there is mutual respect and self discipline. One scathing comment about a disliked teacher was how she wanted to be "everyone's friend, and never sanctioned anyone." That attitude led to disaster.

Flowing easily from the above is formative assessment with the teacher cruising the room giving focused feedback. Where this doesn't happen disaster follows.

Cate had to produce a poster for the visual language assessment for her course. Despite the teacher spending time and effort painstakingly placing exemplary examples from previously

successful students about the classroom walls as models, Cate did not produce a poster. Her reason was that she did not know what to do.

Naturally the teacher was incensed. She was proud of the exemplars she had painstakingly collected and displayed in an attractive manner on the wall. She felt she had done her bit and more. Cate was not just poor mouthed within the faculty lounge but in class by both word and body language. To further inflame the situation, Cate produced an almost perfect poster for her ICT teacher only a few weeks later. If it had been presented in the English class it would have gained at least a merit. It was very good indeed.

Integral to this is the realization that learning is individual - that students learn in many different ways, and teaching and learning is most efficient when these differences are taken into account. The Dunn and Dunn learning styles model is complex, having 21 different categories. However, there is a smaller subset of the whole, where learners are divided into global big picture learners who just want the general idea, and analytic learners who need heaps of structure and detail. It is this sub-set that explained Cate, and it provided a simple enough solution to her problem of not knowing what to do. Rather than being disinterested in learning, and disinterested in completing the poster Cate was anxious to get it right and so to know exactly what she had to do was a prerequisite for her to get started.

Quite simply Cate was a learner who needed a lot of structure. Although the teacher had gone to considerable trouble to put her exemplars up on the wall, this was big picture stuff, and what Cate needed was the detail built up step by step in sequence to the extent of having a visual to guide her. We explored this and she chattered away comfortably and openly. She now had the detail she needed to be relaxed and confident.

Such graphics also provide for a visual learning style.

The next question followed from that. "You're having no problem talking to me and you don't even know me, surely you could have asked the teacher."

Immediately the weather changed. Suddenly there was tenseness in her body and a scowl on her face. "I don't like the teacher!" While I was not surprised by this the vehemence with which it was said indicated a deep emotional response.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because every time I ask her a question, she answers to the whole class!" So that was it. The teacher was answering in an authoritarian way. This so alienated the quiet but very articulate introvert that I was so easily chatting with, that she chose to remain silent and fail rather than be humiliated by her teacher.

That was not so in her ICT class. When I asked how she had developed such a good poster she said that her teacher had helped her. How I wanted to know.

Again the weather changed, her whole body lost any tenseness that it had retained and her whole face lit up. "She's lovely," Cate said. "When I ask her a question she comes and sits beside me just like you are and we chat about all the little bits and where they fit in. She's lovely!"

So there was the answer. Not only was the ICT teacher a collegial adult but she also quietly through conversation provided the detailed structure that Cate needed to complete her poster. The emotional blocks had been removed by teaching to Cate's learning style. She was being there for Cate.

This true story shows up how important the emotional climate or culture in the class is. For this student one climate produces an emotional response that empowers the student's natural learning system, the other literally shut it down.

To complicate matters not all students are like Cate. According to Learning Style theory and practice there are the analytics like Cate who need step by step detail to succeed, and also like Cate, those whose sociological preference is for a collegial relationship. However, there are also their opposites. Some, the globals, simply want the big picture like the completed posters the teacher had on the wall as a general guide. This then lets them get on with doing it their way.

This is where teacher imagination is needed to cater for many styles without becoming stressed out.

“My way or the highway” is very often the philosophy of schools and teachers and so an adverse culture flourishes. This means that the school, the classroom, the total learning environment is teacher friendly rather than student/user friendly. In their book Jonathan Mooney and David Cole (2000) Dyslexic and ADHD students respectively, who went on to achieve honours degrees, ram this home, when they state, “It did not matter that we showed strong alternative learning styles .... these strengths were ignored .... Attempts at intervention allowed people to blame us..... It took us 15 years .... to stop blaming ourselves .....and to come to realize how profound an effect the environment had had on our ability to succeed.”

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