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## Inspired Responses

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**By developing a deep reserve of techniques, good teachers learn how to read each situation.**

In 7th grade, my classmates and I had the same six teachers every day. In five of those classes, we regularly acted up or tuned out; in the 6th class, we were attentive and productive. What made the difference? For one hour we had an inspired teacher.

### What Is Inspired Teaching?

In describing great teaching, I prefer the term *inspired* to *effective*. Inspired teaching has three components. First, the teacher has a broad, deep understanding of the subject being taught, developed through coursework, life experience, and continuous refinement. Inspired teachers comprehend subtleties, contradictions, and all the fine points necessary to fully respond to almost any question about their subject that arises. Second, the teacher has a wide repertoire of teaching techniques—also fine-tuned over time—and is comfortable and competent with each one. Thus, it's simple for him or her to select one useful approach from many and fit it seamlessly into a lesson. Third, an inspired teacher can also "read" students, situations, settings, and reactions and can select apt responses so that learning goes smoothly. When teaching, the unexpected is the norm. No matter how much you prepare, there is always some reaction from a student you never could have predicted—a question, comment, analogy, or personal quirk. The apparently intuitive responses of expert teachers reflect the distillation of months or years of learning until the essential understanding is in their bones.

So how do teaching skills develop over time? I believe teachers progress through four stages: *unaware*, *aware*, *capable*, and *inspired*. No matter what field a person enters—teaching, civil engineering, or filmmaking—all beginners start out relatively *unaware* of important information. This is not a condemnation; it's a fact. As new practitioners learn new facts, understanding increases. Practitioners progress to the *aware* level once they master concepts, theories, and the names of techniques. Still, while novice teachers are aware of much information important to teaching, they aren't yet able to use everything they've heard about.

With experience, novices put important ideas and techniques into action. But no one masters a new skill in a single usage. First attempts are awkward and uncomfortable. Remember your first attempt to skate or to type on a keyboard? Wise learners don't reject an approach after one bumbled attempt. If they keep trying, new teachers will see their own performance improve until they reach the *capable* level. Although they may still need to concentrate intently to carry out a teaching strategy, capable teachers are increasingly comfortable with a growing repertoire of skills.

Teachers who continually reflect on their practice can eventually reach the *inspired* level. This means they hold vast

stores of possible teaching strategies and responses in mind and can sense which ones are most effective at a given moment for given students. They chunk information, meaning that they make associations novices don't and connect disparate facts so quickly that they appear to have strong intuition.

## Beyond "Know, Tell, Control"

People are quite clear that they want good teachers, yet they often have a simplistic idea of what good teachers do. The public expects teachers to know their subject, explain it to kids, and maintain order—in shorthand terms, to know, tell, and control. But to understand how inspired teachers operate, we must remember that teaching is a multidimensional activity. Teachers observe students, talk with them, explain material, and facilitate activities, often simultaneously, adapting as they go. Although knowing, telling, and controlling are essential teaching behaviors, they aren't the whole story.

Here's why. The core teaching behaviors of knowing, telling, and controlling have something important in common; all three are mostly *sending* behaviors. Although knowing a subject well may not seem like a sending behavior, in the classroom teachers use their previously acquired knowledge more like a "pool" or a tool; they sift through and then select prior knowledge to use to send messages to students. When we are telling, we are clearly sending out information. And as we manage a classroom, we spend ample time announcing rules and consequences. Even when teachers demand explanations for problematic behaviors, we usually hope for a short, apologetic summary.

Teachers often forget the other half of the act of communication—receiving. We continually send messages that we hope students will receive clearly, but we can't know if our students receive and comprehend these messages unless we look for reactions and ask for feedback. We need students' messages as much as they need ours. And every student behavior sends a message. In addition to formal feedback, students send dozens or hundreds of what might be called accidental messages: facial expressions, body language, attitudes, and answers that reveal gaps in knowledge.

Those who observe classrooms often overlook the importance of how teachers interpret what students reveal to them. This is not surprising; overt actions like talking or disciplining kids are observable, but what a teacher hears or thinks is invisible. However, what a teacher perceives in terms of students' reactions is a powerful predictor of how well that teacher is able to teach—perhaps the most powerful. In fact, four of the 13 most important skill areas in teaching identified in a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards study<sup>1</sup> center around gathering information from students and settings: (1) interpreting events in progress, (2) being sensitive to context, (3) testing hypotheses, and (4) improvising. Let's consider each of these four skills in the hands of an inspired teacher.

## Interpreting Events in Progress

Whether there are 13 students present or 36, there's a lot going on, moment by moment, in every classroom. Each person there, including the teacher, is doing, thinking, and feeling things that may or may not advance learning.

When unaware teachers observe a classroom landscape, they are likely to miss lots of useful data. They may experience tunnel vision, focusing on only one speaker or listener at a time; alternatively, they may feel overwhelmed by the swirl of classroom activities and powerless to intervene. Watching a class in action might seem like watching a video—a recorded program impervious to intervention.

Unaware teachers have little skill at separating out the details in the environment that are relevant for learning. They also see each event as discrete, rather than as part of a pattern that can be addressed meaningfully. They are poorly skilled at responding to the details and cues they do note, so they continue their lessons without modifications.

Happily, teachers can advance beyond the unaware level. As they advance, capable teachers can attend to and understand simultaneous events, notice relevant details, respond to student cues, and connect student behaviors with instruction at least a portion of the time. To be as effective as possible, however, they must develop an even more finely tuned ability to interpret the many events in their classrooms and respond accordingly.

An inspired teacher maintains focus on the lesson, conversation, or assessment that she is conducting while simultaneously noticing events in the classroom. We will see this teacher move closer to a problem that she can see may disrupt learning; she may touch a shoulder, give a quick head shake, tap a paper, hand someone a pencil, and keep moving without interrupting the flow of an explanation begun while standing behind the desk. Each of these actions is a response to events that she noted, assessed, and effectively handled while continuing to teach.

The inspired teacher perceives patterns in students' verbal and nonverbal responses. When a student stands up or moves around the room, such a teacher doesn't automatically assume the student is misbehaving. Chances are this teacher has already established procedures for classroom activities that limit interruptions to the lesson, so this student may simply be heading for the pencil sharpener. On the other hand—because he is aware of body language and students' individual issues—this teacher may react quite differently to the next student who stands up. The teacher can quickly read *this* student's frustration level and knows this student's history of bullying, so intervention is in order.

One of the definitions of *inspiration* is the act of breathing. An inspired teacher inhales the ambience of the classroom,

which everyone present contributes to, and "breathes out" precisely the kind of teaching these students need. Thus, inspired teaching is highly interactive. No script could ever improve on the moment-by-moment response of a great teacher to a unique group of learners.

One way teachers can coach themselves to become attuned to student behaviors and the classroom atmosphere is to set up a video camera in the classroom and run it once or twice a week to catch students' actions in response to teaching. As the teacher watches the tape later, he or she can more fully sort out details of interactions and small events that can inform teaching. Students will show us how to teach them if we remain open to the clues they send.

## Being Sensitive to Context

Thinking back to my first year of teaching, I now realize that I expected students would react to things the same way I would. When they didn't, I was mystified. At the unaware level, I saw both students and situations simplistically and used one-size-fits-all approaches. It didn't occur to me to modify my lessons when students' reactions did not match my expectations or my plans.

Three years later, I worked as a teacher of homebound students, and my eyes were opened. I observed dozens of different ways that families did everything from washing dishes and caring for babies to socializing and interpreting events around them. The widely differing reactions students had shown in my classes made more sense.

Learning sensitivity to context means becoming a detective. Teachers need to learn about the attitudes and cultural norms in the surrounding community, patterns within the school, and the characteristics and typical reactions of individual students. We can never stop learning more about these kinds of things because there is so much to learn.

At the inspired level of teaching, teachers use a great deal of contextual information to understand how to best reach students. Identical instruction and assignments don't always make for equity. For example, a colleague of mine, Jay, recalled that he frequently got in trouble in elementary school because he had a terrible time sitting still—until one year a teacher let him walk around his desk while he worked. This teacher no doubt observed from the beginning that her admonitions to Jay to remain seated while working had no effect and that he actually did less work the more she tried to keep him in his chair. She realized it was wiser to let Jay work standing up than to waste a whole year scolding him.

Teachers may even draw on the small ways that students reveal themselves, such as through an unpredictable question or personal quirk. For example, I recall when one of my students, Jessica, declared during a vocabulary lesson that she absolutely hated the word *dinner* and always avoided using it. I filed away that bit of data; when the word *dinner* came up in a readaloud later, I said "dinner—or supper, right, Jessica?" At that moment, I sensed that Jessica and the other students felt that I was paying attention to them.

Teachers must also know which particular categories or labels apply to each learner because, although labels don't define students, they can illuminate facets of a student. The inspired teacher explores the neighborhood, interacting with community members and perhaps making home visits; studies the needs of students with disabilities and rehearses approaches to help these students until the tactics are second nature; and invests time in getting to know individuals, making notes about each student's traits, hobbies, and interests to be sure no one is overlooked. The end result is a teacher who can respond in a highly effective manner to all the complicated and interrelated contextual issues that are invisible to novices.

## Testing Hypotheses

Two types of hypotheses operate in most teachers' minds. Some hypotheses are purposely generated: *What will happen if I try this teaching method? I'll collect some data as I use it to find out how well it works.* Whether the hypothesis is found to be true or false, the teacher gains some useful information.

The second type of hypothesis might be called unconscious: *Surely these learners are not capable of that, so I will not ask it of them.* In this case, a teacher doesn't even identify the hypothesis as a guess to be tested; he or she assumes it to be true and acts accordingly.

I suppose all humans carry unconscious assumptions like this. Unaware teachers definitely do. They are often still learning and can barely think of ways to modify their daily lesson plan, let alone hypothesize about new ways to enhance learning. Their proposed solutions may be superficial and are rarely tested.

Inspired teachers, on the other hand, are adept at asking questions about everything they do. They generate many directions for investigation in their quest to meet instructional goals. They may borrow ideas from business, medicine, or any other field and test whether approaches that yield success in these fields can be adapted to the classroom. They pay careful attention to student responses during each lesson and make adaptations, even mid-lesson if necessary. They examine test scores and quiz results.

After experimenting with different ways to present a learning experience—and observing carefully what students reveal about how well the learning "takes"—a teacher at this level will alter his or her instructional priorities, reteaching, enriching the content, or skipping forward.

## Improvising

Unaware teachers may "wing it," but that is not improvising. Well-prepared novices plan laboriously and then may struggle through the plan with no alternatives in mind. They are prepped but not flexible; unexpected things confuse or frustrate them, and they resist changing their plans or expectations. Teachers who reach the inspired level of teaching, however, are quick to see possibilities where others see interruptions.

Consider possible teacher reactions to outlier student responses. Great teachers seek more information. During a lesson on plant life, a child mentions his grandfather's retirement. One teacher might admonish that child for being off-task. Yet, the teacher who asks, "How does that connect to our lesson?" learns that grandpa retired from the fertilizer *plant* and got a watch with a *stem*. This triggers an explanation of various meanings of these words.

Good improvisers carefully keep instructional goals in mind and use all available class time effectively, yet because they have in-the-moment awareness, they don't shrink from providing spontaneous explanations or creating an analogy to clarify a detail or enhance understanding.

## The Endless Road of Learning

Of course, being sensitive to context facilitates a teacher's ability to interpret events in progress, and interpreting events makes it easier to test a hypothesis. All four skills are interdependent, and each supports all the others.

So what leads a teacher from being unaware to aware, then onward to being capable and, finally, inspired? Clearly, desire, a curious mind, and a thirst for continuous learning are essential. But the final ingredient is a belief that two minds—or three or four—are better than one. The greatest teachers learn from everyone in their world. Every coteacher, aide, student teacher, or intern brings new approaches, new technology, innovative units, or lessons that inspire the veteran to greater heights; every conference, workshop, and lecture is a chance to glean at least one new idea. The road is endless and the journey a delight.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Bond, H., Smith, T., Baker, W., & Hattie, J. (2000). *The certification system of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: A construct and consequential validity study*. Greensboro: Center for Education and Evaluation, University of North Carolina.

*Author's note:* For more about how teachers can develop the 13 criteria for high-quality classroom teaching identified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, visit [www.carolsteele.net/?page\\_id=196](http://www.carolsteele.net/?page_id=196).

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