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Life in Classrooms: How do You Want to Feel in this Space?

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Abstract: *Life in contemporary classrooms invites the inference that educators cannot realistically know what, how, or when to teach until they understand both whom they are teaching and the turbulent cross currents in the world. Research suggests that there are distinctive social mindsets that enhance learner engagement and performance in classroom settings, including status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. As students search for their place and role in the world, educators will assume increasing responsibility for identifying and teaching the requisite skills, capabilities, and dispositions that allow learners to feel at home in the classroom while preparing for a world of endless disruption, ambiguity, and complexity.*

1. Introduction

The pulse of memorable teaching is connecting one's empathetic voice to an empathetic touch. Students learn and respond to what and who educators are in their voice and touch (Farson, 1997). In instructional settings, learners need to *feel* that their teacher is truly authentic. What earns one respect from students is "whether you are you and whether what you are embodies what they want to become" (Kouzes, 1996, p. 11). For educators, there is a prior task to connecting voice and touch: "*Finding* one's voice in the first place" (Kouzes, p.10). Finding one's voice is not a matter of technique. It is a matter of soul searching and commitment (Bowman, 2025). In his classic study of the dynamics of life in classrooms, Jackson (1968) observed that there are as many as a thousand teacher-student interactions a day. Each of those interactions presents educators with an implicit choice: A beckoning opportunity or a neglected opportunity to connect one's voice and touch. In visiting a middle-school health class recently, I observed a tense emotional interaction between a classroom teacher and a student related to cell phone use during class, with the teacher physically taking the phone away from the student. As the student exited the classroom at the end of the period, the teacher returned the phone to the student followed with a practiced refrain, "Have a nice day." The student responded to a perceived injustice related to being denied access to one's phone by exclaiming, "Impossible." Contextually, the student's emotive response echoed an enduring classroom concern: "Teacher, just who are you anyway?"

1.1. Life In Classrooms: A Social System

The human brain is a social organ. As social creatures, there is a "basic craving for connection ingrained in us when we are born and persists throughout our lives" (Fabritius & Hageman, 2017, pp. 230-31). Teaching is not a scripted practice. It is a complex portfolio of ever-deepening relationships. Whatever an educator's instructional goals or lesson plans, students' brains experience the classroom primarily as a social system (Bowman, 2020a). Neuroscience research suggests that the organizing principle of the brain is one of "minimizing danger, maximizing reward" (Gordon, 2000). Recent social cognitive neuroscience research suggests that there are five distinct qualities that minimize threat responses and enable reward responses in instructional settings: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness (SCARF) (Rock, 2010); Fabritius & Hagemann, 2017). These social qualities refer to a domain of social interactions in the classroom that tend to create a reward or threat state which contributes to how learners feel in classroom settings. In diverse academic environments, these social qualities reside at the core of Rock's (2010) psychological theory of motivation:

1.2. Status

As human beings, learners constantly assess how classroom social encounters either enhance or diminish one's status. Marmot's (2004) research findings suggest that because high status correlates

with human longevity and well-being, human beings are programmed to care about status because it favors survival. The neural circuitry that assesses status operates even when the stakes are meaningless, such as being the first to the drinking fountain following recess. Cortisol is the biological marker of a threat response (Bowman, 2020a). Feelings of low status trigger cortisol elevation in the body, such as when students sense that they might compare unfavorably to classmates, for example, on the 2025 Presidential Fitness Test. In contrast, inspiring and supporting students in acquiring a new archery skill in a physical education class, for example, ignites the reward regions of the brain, strengthening students' self-efficacy by having a direct experience of mastery (Bandura, 1997).

1.3. Certainty

Cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett describes a human being as an anticipation machine. Learners crave certainty because it enhances control over the instructional environment. When the brain registers uncertainty or confusion regarding a class assignment or instructional activity, the brain flashes an error signal disengaging the learner from the present (Bowman, 2020a). The antidote to uncertainty in academic environments is transparency. Clear instructional requirements, explicit grading practices, process safety rules related to fire drills, school lockdowns, and threatening weather serve as an antidote to uncertainty. Instructionally, breaking a team project into manageable components reduces the likelihood of learners being overwhelmed by a threat response while also triggering a sense of reward (Bowman).

1.4. Autonomy

Drawing on four decades of research on human motivation, Pink (2009) argues that exemplary educators provide learners with a contextual sense of their intrinsic worth by creating instructional environments that engage three overarching human needs: Autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Behavioral scientists contend that learners' default setting is to be autonomous and self-directed in seeking autonomy over tasks (what they do), time (when they do it), technique (how they do it), and team (whom they do it with) (Pink). Research suggests that team autonomy in both the classroom and surgical settings is a key predictor of team performance (Sawyer, 2007).

1.5. Relatedness

Learning has a social purpose---the development of the individual and society (Dewey, 1916). Teaching involves a mosaic of complex relationships. When learners work collaboratively on meaningful, engaging activities, knowledge creation functions as a social activity (Bowman, 2025). When extraordinarily gifted undergraduates arrive at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, they "rapidly discover that it is impossible to succeed solo" (Ancona & Gregersen, 2018, p. 38). Thoughtful educators attach meaning to instructional events through devices such as metaphors and stories. Because stories express how and why life changes, stories in diverse classroom environments tend to generate social interaction and an overarching feeling of relatedness as the brain secretes the hormone oxytocin into the bloodstream (McKee, 2003).

1.6. Fairness

In an academic setting, the assessment of fairness involves an emotional reaction. A learner's perception that one is being treated unfairly triggers a variation of "flight, fight, or pause," the colloquial term for the brain's threat circuitry located in a region called the amygdala (Bowman, 2020a). Changes in grading policies or student dress-code policies that are perceived as unfair, for example, often create strong threat responses in both students and parents. The perception of unfairness prompted by incidents involving group punishment, for example, "generates a strong response in the limbic system, stirring hostility and undermining trust" (Rock, 2010, p. 95). In contrast, holding a mock trial in a social studies class, for example, provides opportunities for students to contextually experience a sense of fairness (Bowman, 2020a).

1.7. Emotional Intelligence in the Classroom: How Learners Feel

Emotional intelligence (EI) in academic environments is "the ability to accurately perceive, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of others" (Goleman & Cherniss, 2024, p. 7). In an era of disruptive and potentially catastrophic events in school settings, the calming presence of emotionally intelligent educators in managing their own emotions and providing empathetic support to those that they lead plays a critical role in learners' feeling a sense of optimal well-being. Emotions are contagious

in instructional settings. An angry student outburst, for example, serves as a test of a teacher's ability to manage one's own emotions and those of one's students. Norms in classroom settings shape which emotions are expressible, how strongly they should be expressed, and when appropriate (Goleman & Cherniss). When educators and/or students violate those norms, it can have a negative effect on both how learners feel emotionally and on their instructional engagement and academic performance. In practice, emotionally intelligent educators are approachable, supportive, and empathetic.

1.8. Empathy: How Students Feel in the Classroom

Researchers have identified three kinds of empathy in instructional settings, each based in different brain circuitries (Goleman & Cherniss, 2024). Cognitive empathy allows students to understand how other students think from their perspective. Emotional empathy permits one to sense how other learners feel about an issue, challenge, or problem. Compassionate empathy invites one to genuinely want what is objectively good for the other person. Poetically, Senge et al. (1999) intimates that compassionate empathy radiates a "deep understanding of another so intimate that the feelings, thoughts, and motives of one person are comprehended by another" (p. 432). In a world that is battling poverty, inequality, and injustice, educators are confronted with a foundational question: Are today's students experiencing values-laden learning in classroom settings bounded by the philosophical question: What does it mean to be empathetically human? (Handy, 1976) While empathy is innate among humans, it often requires an immersive real-life experience to bring it to the surface. Experiential learning opportunities that provide students with exposure to adversity in the cauldron of everyday life are powerfully transformative in inspiring grounded, empathetic learners to build a more equitable, sustainable future (Krishnan, 2019). Giving students opportunities, for example, to serve as volunteers in a food pantry or shelter for the intermittently homeless provides them with the ability to go well beyond in-class discussions centered on a theoretical analysis of the multidimensional phenomenon of poverty. Providing appropriate opportunities to mentor younger students in reading and math in settings like a Boys and Girls club, for example, creates an empathetic understanding of the "other."

1.9. Feeling the Inspiration to Contribute

What is core to both religious and humanist traditions is that everyone has something to contribute to the development of society and the right to be recognized and rewarded for it (Kleiner, 2018). Today, students seek intrinsically rewarding experiences that allow them to contribute to their school and society that are reflective of their values (Sethi & Stubbings, 2019, p. 41). The implication for educators is that there is a compelling need to create an instructional context that helps learners "find the productivity that exists within them" (Kleiner). Thoughtful educators sense intuitively that students are wonderfully talented, are internally motivated when they believe in what they are doing, are naturally creative when they wish to contribute (Wheatley, 2017). Mehta & Fine's (2019) analysis of what works and what does not in American high school education revealed that for many students the most memorable parts of the school experience were participating in all-consuming activities such as a drama production, debate, school newspaper, and school yearbook, all of which occur on the edges of the core curriculum. As a first-year teacher, I was unexpectedly assigned the role of high school yearbook advisor. In the eventful months that followed, students produced something academically consequential, saw instructional purpose in what they were doing, had choice in how they learned new skills, received supportive feedback on their work, and felt that they were part of a school community that held them to a high standard (Mehata & Fine). In embracing their yearbook assignments, students could feel the rhythmic underpinning embedded in collaborative activities in which a vision is honored through contribution (Bowman, 2025).

1.10. Creating Safe Spaces for Deeper Learning: Psychological Safety

Harvard University professor Amy Edmondson (2018) coined the term psychological safety. The pivotal role of psychological safety in deeper learning was pinpointed in Google's now-famous Project Aristotle in which researchers identified psychological safety as the key determinant of a team's performance. In a culture of psychological safety, teachers make it safe for students engaged in instructional activities to speak freely, share information, contribute imaginative ideas, value diverse perspectives, take risks, and recontextualize failure. The latter, for example, is precisely what scientists at 3M did with the Post-It Note: A glue that initially failed to adhere became one of its greatest corporate successes.

Mitigating fear in instructional settings begins with modeling for students the importance of being open-minded, non-defensive, and intellectually curious in discussing sensitive topics, including climate change, illegal immigration, and community-police relationships. In a culture of psychological safety, teachers reassuringly invite challenges to their own views and beliefs and acknowledge and affirm constructive feedback. In academic environments, educators create an aura of psychological safety through modeling the essential skill of inquiry: "Why do you think so?" "Can you give me an example?" "What might we be missing?" "Who has a different perspective?" (Edmondson, 2019). These questions signal to students that their voice is desired and that it is psychologically safe to offer a thoughtful response (Bowman, 2023a). In contrast, in a classroom in which I was observing, a student searched for words while asking a conceptually challenging question. The instructor abruptly interrupted the student exclaiming, "You did not ask that question very well." Poetically, it was "zero at the bone" for both the learner and classmates gripped by palpable anxiety, fearful of asking additional questions.

In the everydayness of life in classrooms, a psychologically safe climate is characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which students are comfortable being themselves and expressing what they feel and what they wish to contribute to ensure a successful instructional outcome. When classmates respond to what others say, for example, with a dismissive "however" or "but" or by saying why someone's idea will simply not work or has not worked in the past can make one feel belittled, disrespected, impeded, and psychologically unsafe (Helgesen, 2021).

1.11. Feeling Heard: An Innate Desire in Classroom Settings

Thoughtful educators and students share an innate desire to be heard (Luna, 2022). Conversation is not what is said, it is what is heard. In academic environments, conversations involve the "co-creation of meaning between people" (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 43). In a classroom setting, intentional listening has six distinctive stages: Actively inviting classmates' thoughts and opinions, reflectively considering every aspect of what others say, thanking others for expressing their ideas and beliefs, putting what one has heard in a broader societal context, connecting peers with similar ideas and insights, and identifying the point of intersection between what you have heard and your own intuitions and experience (Helgesen, 2021; Bowman, 2023b). A body of research suggests that in influential institutions educators create a listening culture that evokes a sense of common purpose, belonging, emotional engagement, and a shared vision in which learners' best ideas and insights surface spontaneously (Bowman, 2020a; Mehta & Fine, 2019). In communities torn apart by fear, hatred, broken health-care systems, refugee crises, and destructive politics the essence of teaching is "listening to the whispers" of learners to create spaces of possibility, sanctuary, and compassion for those that one leads (Helgesen, p. 50).

To enhance students' and faculty members' ability to engage in clear and focused interpersonal exchanges, educators might consider introducing the four-sentence rule (Kohlrieser, 2006). Each participant in a class discussion or faculty meeting is encouraged to speak in four sentences or fewer. Doing so encourages others to think clearly about what they want to say before they speak, thereby enhancing understanding of mutual needs, common interests, and holistic understanding. In dialogic academic settings, the discipline of the four-sentence rule highlights the need to know when to speak, when to be silent, and when to listen (Bowman, 2023b).

1.12. Civility in the Classroom

In our media-drenched culture, students are being relentlessly exposed to a world of raw emotions in which visceral dislike becomes hatred, anger becomes narcissistic rage, opponents become enemies, and dismay teeters on despair. It is a world where individuals hear ideologically only what they want to hear always confirmed and never contradicted (Bowman, 2020c). Each human being is a "subject of human dignity, and without that recognition, conversation devolves into violence" (Barron, 2025). Recent assassination plots directed toward President Donald J. Trump and conservative activist Charlie Kirk expose a broader, "corrosive lack of civility that is evident in every segment of society, from politics to academia, from media to the blogosphere, from talk radio to the pulpit" (Dilenschneider, 2013. p. 8). History teaches, however, that civility is about the character of who we are both as individuals and as a nation. While civility cannot be legislated, "it can be taught-and it can be learned" starting with the power and force of personal example (Dilenschneider, p.12). When he was a young student in Virginia, George Washington copied a list of 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation" compiled by French Jesuit priests in 1595 and reprinted in English in 1640

(Brookhiser, 2003). The rules had such a "profound influence on Washington at age 14 that they shaped America's first president and guided many of his decisions and actions throughout his life and presidency" (Dilenschneider, p.12).

Recent research suggests that there is "one thing that consistently allows you to look into the heads and hearts of other people: asking" (Wetzler, 2024, p. 92). For students, embracing civility in an instructional setting begins confronting oneself:

- What are the core values that have guided and inspired my life?
- What principles do I stand for?
- Has incivility today become socially acceptable, commonplace, and instantaneous in electronic communications such as Facebook, blogs, and podcasts?
- Is the current societal slide into incivility neither inevitable nor unstoppable?
- Have I witnessed meanness, cruelty, or uncivil behavior during my interactions on social media?
- And have I joined in?
- Lastly, the tradition of open dialogue rests on two foundational assumptions: The dignity of the individual and the objectivity of truth. Does the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk symbolize a societal collapse of dialogue rooted in a loss of faith in humanity?

2. Discussion

Learners are immersed in an age of viral epidemics, technological disruption, ubiquitous terrorist acts, large-scale ecological destruction, disquieting natural disasters, fractured global political consensus, asymmetric wealth, and deep socio-technical change reflected in recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI). In the everydayness of students' lives, fear and anxiety frequently emerge around issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, bigotry, prejudice, civility, and feelings of being marginalized (Kennedy, 2009). Because everything in learners' daily life is in a continual process of change, educators cannot realistically know what, how, or when to teach until they understand both whom they are teaching and the turbulent cross currents in the world. (Bowman 2020b; MacLean, 1962). In practice, an effective instructional process "must explore questions that help people see where they fit inside this constantly changing reality" (Senge 1999, p. 257). But where does one start in preparing learners to adapt and embrace a world of endless disruption, constant crises, and heightened ambiguity and complexity? (Bryant, 2022).

In Tennyson's Ulysses, the poet observes that it is "not too late to seek a newer world." How students experience and prepare for a world of unrelenting change is something that educators can influence profoundly by providing learners "room to assert their humanity and tell us what they're going through" (Zaki, 2020, p. 102). Because students share an innate desire to be heard in an age of crisis fighting, the essence of teaching is "listening to the whispers" of learners to create spaces of possibility, sanctuary, and compassion. Mitigating learner anxiety and fear in instructional settings begins with modeling for students the importance of being open-minded, non-defensive, and intellectually curious in discussing sensitive topics, including climate change, illegal immigration, community-police relationships, extremist partisan beliefs, and violent political rhetoric (Bowman, 2020b) In an era of disruptive and potentially catastrophic events in school settings, such as the recent deadly assault at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis, the calming presence of emotionally intelligent educators in managing their own emotions and providing empathetic support to those that they lead plays a critical role in learners' feeling a sense of optimal well-being. Empathy is a distinctly human trait. The ability to connect with others is a critical and unrivaled skill unique to humanity (Seth, 2021). In The War for Kindness, Stanford University psychologist Jamil Zaki (2019) argues that it is possible for individuals to learn to be more empathic in classroom settings. Finally, with an alarming student dropout rate, there is a compelling need to create an instructional *context* that helps learners find the productivity that exists within them to contribute to the development of a vibrant, democratic society with dignity, respect, and validation.

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