

Cultivating the Habits of Self-Knowledge and Reflection



By Terry Heick

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Once it's begun, you can't fully separate the person from the task. When the artist is painting, the painter and the act of painting become a single "thing." The emerging artwork becomes a part of it all, too. As a teacher, your "self" is embedded within your teaching -- which is how it goes from a job to a craft. The learning results are yours. You probably call those young people in the classroom "your" students. The same goes for students as well. There is a pleasing kind of string between the eight-year-old playing Minecraft and his or her digital creation. This is the magic of doing.

The Insecurity of Student Performance

But this also presents some problems. The work and the performance of students -- both what they can and can't do -- is a part of who they are, and they are keenly aware of this. Even our language reflects this idea:

- Did *you* do *your* best on *your* homework? (As opposed to asking, "Was the best work done on the assigned homework?")
- Are *you* an A student? (As opposed to asking, "Does this student usually receives A's on his or her report card?")
- Are *you* confused? (As opposed to awkward sounding but entirely logical question, "Do you have confusion?")

In other words, it's all very personal.

The Habits of Insecure Students

So it makes sense that students' self-defense mechanisms kick in when they're challenged. This creates all sorts of messes in the classroom that you could spend the entire year chasing down:

- Lack of apparent curiosity
- Apathy
- Refusal to take risks
- Decreased creativity
- Defeated tones
- Scrambles for shortcuts

It just might be that these are all symptoms rather than causes -- that is, symptoms of not wanting to make mistakes, to fail, to be corrected, or to be thought less of by peers. As teachers, though, we tend to regard these behaviors as causes of the mediocre work we sometimes see.

How we feel and think about ourselves matters in learning. Confidence, self-knowledge, interdependence, curiosity and other abstractions of learning are all every bit as critical as reading level and writing strategies.

When students confront new content (a lesson with new ideas), circumstances (a collaborative project with students from another school) or challenges (self-direction in the face of distraction), how they respond may not always be ideal. But as teachers, we do the same thing. We may begin an open-ended unit that attempts to use a learning simulation to allow students to toy with STEM concepts, but the minute things don't work out, we can often retreat into bad habits of our own:

- Scripted work
- Negativity
- Essays as assessment
- Talktalktalktalktalktalk

4 Questions for Self-Knowledge and Reflection

So in the face of a challenge, what do your students "retreat to"? Below are four questions they can use to begin this kind of reflection and self-awareness:

1. How do I respond when I'm challenged, both inwardly and outwardly?
2. Which resources and strategies do I tend to favor, and which do I tend to ignore?
3. What can I do to make myself more aware of my own thinking and emotions?
4. What happens if I don't change anything at all?

Promoting Self-Awareness and Metacognition

So if these are the kinds of questions we face as educators, and if this is the reality students face as emerging independent thinkers, how can we begin to promote self-knowledge and reflection in the classroom? And further, how can we establish these actions as habits -- reflexive actions that students initiate on their own with little to no prompting?

Like anything, it is first a matter of visibility -- understand what is necessary, seeing it when it happens, emphasizing and celebrating it, etc. In the classroom, this might be stopping during an especially teachable moment when you sense students struggling -- or responding well -- and having them journal, share thoughts with elbow partners, or somehow reflect on both the challenge and their response.

Secondarily, it is a matter of practice. Anything complex or unnatural requires repetition. The more that students see themselves face major and minor challenges in the classroom, and then see the effects of how they respond, the more conditioned they'll become to responding ideally on their own.

Lastly, there is the possibility of a bit of Zen coaching to students. Help them to separate themselves from their work and related performance. Help them to understand that our lives aren't single decisions, but a vast tapestry of connections, with any single moment, performance or failure barely visible, and only important as it relates to their lives as a whole.

Source; <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/cultivating-habits-self-knowledge-reflection-terry-heick>