

FEEDING RELATIONSHIPS

WORDS THAT WORK

Acknowledging the tremendous power of nonverbal communication and silence, this is a list of words that have worked for me and on me. Spoken with humility and curiosity, they tend to enrich my relationships.

- **I don't understand what you mean.**
- Say more.
- **Those earrings are gorgeous. You've got such a strong presence.**
- I don't know you very well, but you write really well, and I notice you're really important in the building. You seem like you're really focused on your goals, and you're a good friend to the people you care about.
- **You're quiet today.**
- What comes next for you, when you're done with school?
- **It's obvious you really want to graduate — you keep putting in your time — but you're also really struggling with that one teacher. That's got to be tough to balance.**
- I wonder what your goal was, what you were trying to accomplish.
- **May I take a look at that paper?**
- Would you do me a favor?
- **Please.**
- I'm sorry.
- **Thank you.**



A LARGE CUP *of* INSIGHT

Educator hones student-teacher relationships one sugary coffee at a time

By Daniel Horsey

A couple of years ago, a few minutes after watching a teacher and student spiral into what might be called a spirited discussion about respect, I made a mistake. Fifty-six years old, with a shiny new conflict resolution master's degree and 20 years of improv and facilitation experience, I thought I could handle a difficult dialogue. The student had been bounced out of his class, and I said something like, "Hey, Jeffrey. That thing, that argument that just happened with Carol (not their real names). You were saying she was being disrespectful to you, and that seems really important to me. Would you take some time, maybe this week, we can walk up the block and I'll buy you lunch or something, and help me understand what you meant?"

Big mistake. A few days later, we sat at a lunch counter while he analyzed their conversation for me, word by word and gesture by gesture. He walked me through the double meanings, the nonverbal cues, the role he played in that classroom, and the multiple relationships that were im-

pacted. I began to realize how little I knew, and I've been paying tuition — in fast-food lunches and chilled cups of over-sweet coffee for student after student — ever since.

The Academy of Urban Learning is a five-year-old charter school in Denver, Colo., that has grown to serve about 100 high school students. Started by entrepreneur and U.S. Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., to serve homeless youth, the school attempts to provide wraparound services to students with a variety of needs. The staff of 14 includes seven teachers (one covering special education), a guidance counselor and a social worker, one principal, his assistant, two security professionals, and me, the part-time, grant-funded, restorative justice coordinator. Our community convenes in a building with too-small classrooms, too-large common areas, a dungeon-like finished basement, a temperature-uncontrolled first floor, and an Internet connection that often — but not always — works.

Painfully slowly, my sugary investment in tuition is paying off. I'm learning that everyone comes with a voice, that I will never be able to predict or even understand what any-

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one says, and that my own humility offers me the greatest opportunity to participate in this mysterious space. In other words, when I honor others with the same holy contemplation I reserve for myself, we may have the chance to serve each other.

Under the influence of any number of provocative thinkers, including Martin Buber, Paulo Freire, Dale Carnegie, U. Utah Phillips (and through him, Ammon Hennacy), Augusto Boal, James Comer, and even more influential, the people in our building — the Academy of Urban Learning is gradually disarming itself. Our policies are moving away from punishment and toward support, and our relationships are moving from the pyramidal and toward the flat. We've spent many professional development hours reflecting upon our own personal and professional relationships, defining their constructive and



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destructive characteristics, exploring signs of relational flux, and developing specific skills to be more present and intentional. Interactions with students and among staff members, especially during challenging moments, are more apt to start with apologies and appreciations than commands and threats.

Though our policies continue to change to reflect our more supportive atmosphere, we haven't adopted any particular behavioral program. Certain words — "program" and "staff" among them — make many of our students twitch. Ask why, and they'll talk about rules and regulations, the same old stuff, people who just don't get it. Many have spent time in Denver's Gilliam Youth Services Center, and they parse more quickly than I the puzzling twists and turns of the English language. Gilliam's attendees haven't felt served, and they sense the dehumanizing qualities of the best-intentioned program. Instead of focusing on programs, staff and students are learning to trust our humanity and

to respond to each person and situation in ways we ourselves appreciate: with empathy, understanding, boundaries, support, and other pillars of positive relationships.

Several elements have contributed to our learning. I've facilitated several hours of professional development during the past three years, and I've drawn on the principles of dialogue and storytelling and improvisational theater to elicit our existing values. Then we can evaluate policies and choose behaviors based on our core beliefs and the school's stated core values:

community, academics, respect, and empowerment. In the heat of a difficult moment, old, power-based responses can recur, but with time, continued practice, and reflective conversations, our relationship orientation is taking hold. Staff members are uniformly saintly in their patience with me and their willingness to experiment, reflect, co-create, and engage hopefully in collaborative change.

I'd like to believe the professional development sessions have inspired new behaviors for us all. Realistically, I believe change happens over time and that the primary function of our training sessions has been to keep us focused on intentional relationships. As I prowl the building each day, our shared experiences during professional development allow me to help teachers and others process difficult interactions, first by venting and then by considering different ways they might approach similar situations in the future.

The knowledge that power struggles don't usually work, a developing understanding of positive relationships, and our ongoing search for skill-based techniques for improving interactions, combined with schoolwide reflection and support, are making change possible.

As a staff, we are integrating more reflective moments into regular meetings, providing opportunities to exchange sensitivities and techniques. Updates about individual students include time to talk about words and nonverbals that deepen specific relationships more than simply control and pacify. We're becoming better able to ask each other for ideas, to give and to receive suggestions, and even to engage in mutually critical analyses. We're developing specific formats where we can learn from each other. Even our restorative practices, including mediation, serve understanding and mutual learning more than a court-like power structure.

These practices form the core of our perspective on social justice: First, we are human beings sharing equal relationships. Our roles as teachers and students, parents and staff, are subordinate.

One of my own guiding questions, still unanswered, is, "Who defines justice?" Many of our school's students live with poverty, abuse, racism, and hopelessness in a world I consider unjust. Should we, devoted to self-determination, accept the worldview some of them hold, that college and traditional success just isn't for them? Faithful to our belief that we can overcome, should we frame their education as a hero's journey away from much of what they've lived and toward our vision of some progressive future? Can we base our own actions in the classroom and throughout the building on the school's core values, or are our good intentions buttressed by the underlying values of power and enforcement? These are important questions, but

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less important than they might appear. If all of our stakeholders are human beings sharing equal relationships, these questions are exercises that don't make much sense. In partnership, we're more likely to ask how someone is doing and discover what he or she needs. In troubled situations, we offer our time, talent, and resources on their terms, and accept the same from them. Should our school be different?

True collaborative partnership is shockingly difficult in practice. We work regularly on specific techniques — see the list on p. 26 for a few basic examples — but my own challenge is to transcend technique and move toward a form of humility where all voices, mine and others, are holy. I suspect others struggle similarly. Some days I'm confident, and my cheer overruns that internal space that might be filled with another's presence. Days later, my inadequacies overwhelm, and the weight of others' emotions invades my psychic space, stunning me to passivity. Minute by minute, boundaries waver, empathy confuses itself with caring, my faith in my private sense of right and wrong or good and bad imposes itself on others, and I wonder what purpose I serve in our community.

Those demons are my own. I assume — and, for my own comfort, I hope — you have yours. Thankfully, professional development can offer us a compass, an integrated framework of values and techniques that provides a goal and the tools to move forward. When professional development works this way, it can also reinforce the concept that we, our students, their parents and guardians, and the community at large share more than we might assume. We each overcome some challenges and fall to others, survive as best we can, and strive to take our personal next steps. Professional learning that allows for our authentic

participation and provides real relationship skills applicable in varied and multicultural environments can help us take those steps.

Jeffrey and I have been texting as I type. He missed a day of school this week because his guardian ad litem asked him to address a gathering of attorneys. "jus got done speakin again," he writes. "i think ima be famous by the end of the night." He only cussed out a teacher a few times during the first trimester of 2009-10, and he completed more projects in those three months than he had in the previous two years. These days, he's more apt to use his performer's persona to encourage rather than to distract. The changes are probably more developmental than the result of any conversation or sticky coffee drink. And yet, during his graduation, I expect to be torn up. I've learned far more than he in the past few years, much of it from him, and at my age, very little of it was developmental. Years of education, workshops taken and taught, and courageous colleagues have helped me learn how to learn. Nurturing that capacity is one of professional development's invaluable gifts.

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