



Ask questions, rather than dispense advice, to transform conversations into teachable moments

Albert Einstein said, “We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead. It can only serve.”

Why can't the intellect lead? Because we make decisions first for emotional reasons, second for rational reasons. If someone attempts to engage our heads, but fails to engage our hearts as well, they will lose both.

We see this in business all the time. A brilliant new leader with good intentions and a great plan begins issuing directives. She eventually leaves because no one will follow her. Yes, she was smart, but we didn't feel seen or valued by her. The messaging was all one way — from her to us.

This happens in organizations, families, and schools that cling to the old view of “I teach, you listen.” Social and emotional learning can change that, creating a passion for learning in students and adults.

— Susan Scott

By Deli Moussavi-Bock, Janet Hagstrom Irving, and Lisa Bresnehan

Educators understand that schools with socially and emotionally sound learning and working environments help ensure positive short- and long-term outcomes for students and staff.

learning as the process for helping children and adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. These skills include developing empathy, recognizing and managing emotions, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and learning to resolve conflicts respectfully.

How can administrators, principals, teachers, and staff create an environment that is conducive to learning and maintaining these skills? Through skilled conversations, educators create a culture of trust and a culture that can interrogate reality, provoke learning, and resolve tough challenges. The goal is always to enrich relationships as we listen and have the opportunity to learn from each other.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO SUCCESS

Our relationships with one another and our sense of self are fundamental and managed through conversation — not just a single conversation, but a series of exchanges that happen over time. Students who are engaged in learning — students who ask questions and take part in dialogue with peers, teachers, and parents — are more likely to learn and retain that information.

When we can safely open up in a conversation, trust is nourished. Relationships and learning grow. Research shows that students who had more developed social and emotional skills exhibited greater leadership skills, received higher grades, and demonstrated a better ability to persist in challenging situations (Scales & Leffert, 2004).



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The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes social and emotional

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2013.

Maurice Elias, a psychology professor at Rutgers University, writes, “Research, observation, experience, and common sense have converged to suggest that student success, which includes but is not limited to academic learning, depends a great deal on the other side of the report card. Students who are actively engaged in class and come prepared, who cooperate with their peers, who resolve conflicts peacefully, who complete their work, who attend school often and are not tardy, and who demonstrate initiative are more likely to succeed in school and, ultimately, in life” (Elias, 2008).

Using a framework established by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, students can learn how to become good communicators, cooperative members of a team, effective leaders, and caring, concerned members of their communities. Through continual dialogue, students learn how to set and achieve goals and how to persist in the face of challenges. These are the skills employers consider important (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011).

In order for students to gain these skills, it is imperative that adults in schools model these behaviors with one another and with students. Nothing is as powerful as teaching by example. Administrators ask us, “How can we give our students a socially and emotionally rich environment if we don’t have the skills to embody it ourselves?” The answer is to invest time and resources to provide these skills to adults. Social and emotional learning, as well as building relationships among students and teachers and among adults at school, happens one conversation at a time.

MODEL EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS FOR STUDENTS

The principles and practices of effective conversations are critical in the classroom. Our careers, our relationships, and our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time. Teachers

have the responsibility of modeling for students the kinds of conversations that lead students towards a series of positive outcomes with teachers and classmates, friends and family, future employers, and themselves.

Helping teachers build this skill is critical to a young person’s education, where lack of engagement can lead to students on the honor roll who don’t finish high school because they are bored or at-risk students who may not learn foundational reading and math skills because their classroom fails to engage them. While most teachers have the desire to engage students in lively conversations and back-and-forth exchange that drives deeper understanding of a subject matter, many simply don’t know how.

In a *New Yorker* article titled “Most likely to succeed,” Malcolm Gladwell says what makes for a good teacher are things like creating a “holding space” for lively interaction, flexibility in how students become engaged in a topic, a regard for student perspective, and providing high-quality feedback “where there is a back-and-forth exchange to get a deeper understanding” (Gladwell, 2008).

This back-and-forth exchange to reach a deeper understanding is at the heart of conversation. The Latin derivation of the word “conversation” means “to associate with,” implying an exchange of sentiments and ideas. “Con” in Spanish means “with.” The notion of “with” is central to a conversation. Yet many students often feel the sense of being included is absent.

USE AN INQUIRY-BASED APPROACH

When adults and teachers begin to ask questions, rather than dispense advice, even typical punitive conversations transform to teachable moments. Teachers give more ownership to students by helping them dig deeper, evolve their critical thinking skills, problem solve, and collaborate with one another.

An inquiry-based approach

allows students to come up with and embrace their own solutions, gives them confidence, and helps them gain an ability to name their emotions so they can get ahead of them. Teachers tell us that they use these skills in the classroom to improve emotional competency for themselves and their students, engage students, and strengthen their resiliency in and out of school. In doing so, classroom management becomes a nonissue.

When administrators and principals gain social and emotional skills, they model them for teachers, who, in turn, teach their students by example. When teachers and students engage their collective curiosity, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges, and enrich relationships with one another, students connect with their own passion to learn.

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