

Turning the Tables: Teachers Learning from Students

By Debra Simes

All actual life is encounter.

— Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

When we think about teaching and learning, we tend to assume that teachers do the former and students do the latter. Were we to walk the halls of ABRHS or RJ Grey, we'd be quite sure which people are the students and which are staff, and we'd be largely correct. But when we consider teaching and learning in greater depth, we might begin to recognize that they don't always attach to particular roles, and are engaged in by both students and staff.

So who are the teachers and who are the students? Everyone. And how do they learn and teach? To a surprising degree, by means of the relationships they develop via the classrooms, hallways, offices, stages, and playing fields where they interact. Perhaps "relationship" represents a fourth "R"—along with the three "Rs" of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—in the education enterprise. It's an aspect of learning that gets little attention in an era so focused on metrics as a means of understanding and assessing education.

Theorists have long discussed the role of relationship in education—from Socrates to John Dewey to Martin Buber to contemporary educators. It has been called the vector of learning, an alliance, and an authentic encounter marked by mutuality of respect, cooperation, trust, and honesty. This mutuality does not mean that the teacher-student relationship is the same in both "directions," but that

both parties bring to the teaching/learning encounter a willingness to participate, to trust one another, and to grow. Children, even with obstacles and challenges, tend to do this by their very natures. Recent interviews with more than a dozen staff members of the A-B Regional School District suggest that these adults do the same.

Teachers as Students

Teachers and one administrator fielded two questions: (1) What do you learn from students? and (2) How have you been changed through your relationships with them? Their responses give us parents—who have, let's face it, relatively little contact with our kids' teachers—both a fuller sense of the folks who help our students become sound learners and good people, and perhaps more insight into the gifts our kids offer.

Some teachers talked about learning from content that students bring to the classroom. Fred Hohn (Science, ABRHS) noted that his students often introduce topics, especially through assigned media reports, that are new to him. Kellie Carter (Social Studies, RJ Grey) said, "Kids bring new content in every day. It's wonderful, daily learning for me, and keeps me fresh and on my toes." She noted, for example, that she's learned more about both Islam and Zoroastrianism because of students' classroom sharing about family traditions. A tale of learning to which many parents may relate came from Debbie Leavitt (French, ABRHS): "I'm always so thankful to my students for their technological know-how. It's

not my thing and they're a huge help!"

Nearly all interviewees spoke of ongoing learning about their own teaching from students' feedback (whether intentional or not), sometimes resulting in a shift in teaching strategies. Tim Nolan (Social Studies, RJ Grey) said that the particular "personality" of a class provides feedback he uses to adapt techniques or projects for kids' engagement with course material. For example, he might discover that he has a number of musicians in a class, and thus, offer more opportunities for musical and artistic expression in exploring class content.

Brian Dempsey (Science, ABRHS) described how students' AP biology job-shadowing experiences and year-end presentations about them inspired him to create a model-organism project for the classroom that involves many of the same kinds of experiences (e.g., research, lab visits, and lab work). Frank Calore (History, ABRHS) shared his experience of working with a hearing-impaired student. The student's need to see Mr. Calore while he spoke (for lip-reading) trained him to turn toward the class when speaking (thereby increasing eye contact), and to slow his speech just a bit—changes that have resulted in improved in-class listening and note-taking for most students. Keeping students' media reports has given Aaron Mathieu (Science, ABRHS) ample new curriculum readings. He also asks students to complete course evaluations at the end of their classwork, and uses the responses to help shape future teaching.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

"I learn about my teaching instantly," said Genevieve Hammond (English, ABRHS). "If I've prepared well, I see that played out immediately in class. What I know is very transparent, and the humility one gains is invaluable." Jane Reynolds (English, ABRHS) reported that students teach her how to work with them as dimensional people who have lives and responsibilities outside the classroom. This has made her more a more patient teacher and moved her to make more effort to learn something about students' lives outside of English class.

John Edmonds (Science, RJ Grey) said that in his classroom kids can speak openly, and students are pretty direct in their feedback. He invites all questions, as well as responses about what's working and what's not. These give him information about students' conceptual frameworks and pre-existing understandings (without which he believes teaching is largely unsuccessful), and insight about whether their thinking is changing—his goal and definition of success in teaching and learning.

Several teachers mentioned the interplay of teaching and parenting. Mr. Edmonds noted that when he became a parent, he was granted new eyes—the parent perspective—that made him "more considerate and understanding of students: I gave less, and more meaningful, homework." Debbie Leavitt reported that being a teacher helped her immeasurably with her own children, especially during the teenage years, and that having teens at home made her a better teacher, particularly during the stresses of the senior year. "Every teenager wants connection," she said, "and knowing that as a parent really helped my teaching."

Life Lessons

Staff members talked with some passion about how they've been changed through their experiences with students, and about the inspiration and life lessons students offer them. Kiki Moore-

Vissing (English, ABRHS) remarked that she has come to appreciate more the role of compassion in teaching. Recognizing that kids are human, with all kinds of needs, has made her more willing to allow extra time on assignments or cut a kid a break when it's warranted. "The real goal of teaching, after all, is to help kids become good people and good citizens," she concluded.

Fred Hohn spoke feelingly: "It's easy to put your head down and get so busy with the job, the family. But kids keep you real. You see the ups and downs of their lives, how they respond to tragedy, what makes them happy. They remind me of what's important about teaching and why I got started. And they remind me of the kind of person I want to be: knowledgeable, truthful, genuine, and able to have an impact."

Kellie Carter exclaimed, "I have the best job in the world! The greatest thing I learn is how I have to take my responsibility to these kids very seriously and laugh at myself at the same time. Kids this age [seventh grade] are in a very vulnerable developmental place, and need to be treated with great respect. And I know that who they are is more important than what I'm teaching them." Frank Calore's comment on this, after his many decades of teaching: "I've always known that no lesson I'm teaching is as important as the big-picture stuff."

This theme echoed through several conversations with staff—not that content is unimportant, of course, but that when learning is deep and alive, what's learned transcends content. For Genevieve Hammond, the larger learning that so inspires her is often the courage kids discover in themselves that allows them to stand out from the crowd and be OK. She finds that students teach each other about how to take risks, and that she, too, has learned from them to be more courageous.

Tim Nolan remembered that he came to teaching excited about content, yet

quickly realized that teaching is at heart about people. This has changed him as a teacher: made him more comfortable, a better listener, and more humble. "The line between what I teach and the people I'm teaching tends to dissolve. When kids make connections between something they know that matters to them and what we're talking about in class, it ties us all in a positive way into universal human realities."

Denise Roadman (Study Skills, RJ Grey) commented, "I think about this all of the time—how much they teach me. I have learned several life lessons from my students. The one that stands out the most for me is love. A stern hand with a bunch of love returns respect and kindness. Thus, the cycle is continually encouraged."

ABRHS administrator JoAnn Campbell, who has also taught, responded to the interview questions with this: "I have often thought that I learn much more from students than they learn from me, both in and out of the classroom. I am continually humbled by students' willingness to share their life experiences, challenges, struggles, and successes. Watching them struggle with adversity is one of my greatest pains, and yet seeing them overcome adversity is one of my greatest joys. They have taught me about perseverance, about facing seemingly insurmountable odds, about how to listen, how to be flexible, how to expect more than they want me to because they will rise to the challenge, and about how everyone has a chance to start over. Most important, they've taught me not to take myself too seriously and to look for the fun in life."

It is both enlightening and heartening to know that the people to whom we entrust our children are not only professionally accomplished, but also as insightful, responsive, and fully human as these folks are. That teachers are students, and students are teachers, is only superficially paradoxical. All authentic human encounter is reciprocal.

School Committee Response

As Debra Simes pointed out so well in her article, the Acton Boxborough Regional School campus is a hub of learning for everyone that enters it. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents are constantly learning from each other.

This year to help the school committee better understand how life is at the senior high school we ask our student representatives to give us an update. When school first started the student representatives gave us their opinion about the signage for the new credit union and also told us about some crowding during lunch periods and that one day the school ran out lunches. This was great information to receive and the school committee asked the administration to follow up on the items raised. While we did not have any profound discussion with the students; it certainly raised our awareness.

Increasing the school committee's awareness is particularly important as we are in the midst of budget season. Based on feedback the school committee and administration received from the department heads, parents and students, the school committee approved its initial budget for the 2008–2009 school year. The senior high school will be introducing a new language program, Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, for both the junior and senior high schools additional teachers will be hired to continue the regional school district's focus to reduce class sizes. The school district is also updating and increasing its previous investment in technology which continues to play a major role in our students' education. We look to your continued support as the budget process continues towards annual town meeting. Thank you.

— Bruce Sabot, School Committee Chair

Jr. High Response

Seeking constant feedback and displaying the willingness to listen is paramount if we expect our students to share their ideas and concerns with us. When we take the time to listen, often we find that our students teach us just as much, and sometimes more, than we expect. At times students surprise you by speaking up when it is not popular or assisting a stranger who has just dropped books all over the hall. These simple acts of kindness are a constant reminder to us all to listen and look for the lessons our children have to teach us.

— Allison Warren
Assistant Principal

High School Response

Learning from our Students through the Senior Survey Process

The ABRHS administration has been surveying seniors at the end of each year since 1994. The survey is now conducted electronically, and almost all seniors participate in the process. The types of questions on the survey vary. Some questions, such as those related to school climate and ratings of school programs, are asked each year and track student opinions over a number of years. Other questions are designed to get feedback on current issues, such as academic integrity and opportunities to build technology skills. The survey also tracks demographics, such as how many students hold jobs during the year and how many participate in athletics and extracurricular activities.

Each spring and summer, all of the

high school administrators read the student responses, including all of the individual comments. The data are analyzed for recurring themes or emerging trends. Because seniors know that their responses will be read carefully, they share quite a bit through the survey. Many of the responses are eloquent and thoughtful, for example, sharing the pressures and stress that students are feeling, or praising teachers and/or programs that have made a significant impact on their lives. Although some responses from year to year are remarkably similar, such as overall ratings of satisfaction with school and ratings of certain aspects of school climate, other responses indicate a changing culture and the reactions of students to these changes. For example, seniors have

repeatedly expressed a need for greater awareness and education concerning issues of diversity, corresponding with the changing demographic in the AB community.

Because seniors are the experts in terms of what it has been like to be a student at AB, the administration selects a few students each year and works to implement their suggestions. For example, given the recurring theme of student stress and pressure at AB, the faculty will make a school-wide, cross-departmental effort to address the issue over the next year.

— JoAnn Campbell, Assistant Principal
Kay Steeves, Student/Faculty Support
Coordinator

MARCH / APRIL 2008

INFOCUS

**Newsletter of the Acton-Boxborough Regional
Schools Parent-Teacher-Student Organization**

Acton-Boxborough Regional High School
Acton, MA 01720

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- ***PTSO's "focus" publication***
- ***PTSO Forum, Bill Ryan speaker, March 11
at 12 noon at Acton Memorial Library***
- ***Surviving the college search, May 15
at 7pm at RJG Auditorium***
- ***Check inside for pull out calendar***
- ***See <http://abrptso.ab.mec.edu>
for more news or to send feedback***

PRINCIPAL ANNOUNCEMENT

Superintendent of Schools Bill Ryan has announced the appointment of **Alexandra H. Callen** as principal of the Acton-Boxborough Regional High School. Dr. Callen received her B.A. and M.A.T. from Brown University, and her Doctorate in Education from Harvard University. She is currently the Assistant Principal at Needham (MA) High School. Mr. Ryan stated that "Dr. Callen has all the qualifications that the school district and the Acton-Boxborough Regional High School would like to see in a principal, and we welcome her to our school community." Dr. Callen will assume her official duties on July 1, 2008. For more info, see <http://ab.mec.edu>.



Mark your calendars for Project Graduation coming up on Friday, June 6th! Preparations are in full swing! Volunteers are still needed for almost every committee. No special talent is needed, just a desire to work on this rewarding project. Underclassmen parents are encouraged to help with this wonderful and successful event. It's a lot of fun!! Support the class of 2008 now and your future graduates will have the opportunity to celebrate in this exciting and rewarding (and safe) way. **If you would like to become involved, please contact Shaila Golikeri or Debbie Clough at ABProjGrad08@gmail.com.**

MARCH 2008

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<input type="checkbox"/> High School Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School Schedule						1 SAT's only
						7PM Jr. High Musical
2	3 MCAS Retests 2:30PM Faculty Meeting 7PM Pan Choral Concert	4 MCAS Retests Interim Reports 7PM Pan Choral Concert	5 MCAS Retests 7PM Snow Date Pan Choral Concert	6 MCAS Retests 7PM Spring College Night 7:30PM Regional School Com.	7 MCAS Retests 7:30PM Play—Frankenstien Local Scholarship Deadline Red Cross Blood Drive	8 3PM Play—Frankenstien
1:30PM Jr. High Musical			12:22 Student Council		7PM Jr. High Musical	7PM Jr. High Musical
9	10	11 7:30AM Career Breakfast 12PM PTSO Forum, Acton Memorial Library	12 7PM 8th Grade Parents Night	13	14 7PM Student Council Dance	15
1:30PM Jr. High Musical		Midterm Reports sent home 7–8:30PM School Council			2:30–4:30PM 7th Grade Social	
16	17 6PM School Council Meeting	18	19 11AM John Ashbery Poetry Assembly	20	21 Good Friday NO SCHOOL	22
23/30 Easter	24/31	25 MCAS Long Comp	26 MCAS ELA	27 MCAS ELA All State Musical Festival	28 All State Musical Festival	29 All State Musical Festival
	MCAS— March 31st	7th Grade ELA Long Comp MCAS	Project Wellness	MCAS	MCAS	

APRIL 2008

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<input type="checkbox"/> High School Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School Schedule		1 7:30PM PTSO Board Meeting at High School Library	2 MCAS Long Comp Make-up	3 Early Dismissal Faculty/Senior Variety Show	4 PC NYC Trip	5 PC NYC Trip
		MCAS	7th Grade ELA Long Comp Make-up 12:22 Student Council MCAS	MCAS	MCAS	
6 PC NYC Trip	7 End of Term #3 2:30 Faculty Meeting	8 8:15AM Junior Class Meeting	9	10 Band Trip to DC	11 Band Trip to DC Murder Mystery Nights	12 Band Trip to DC Murder Mystery Nights
		7-8:30PM School Council End of Term #3				
13 Band Trip to DC	14 Admin. Visits to Elementary Schools	15 Student Elections	16 9:06 Homeroom/Report Card Distribution	17 9:07 Senior Class Meeting	18 Admin. Visits to Elementary Schools	19
		Admin. Visits to Elementary Schools	Admin. Visits to Elementary Schools	Admin. Visits to Elementary Schools		
20 Passover	21 Spring Recess Patriots Day NO SCHOOL	22 Spring Recess NO SCHOOL	23 Spring Recess NO SCHOOL	24 Spring Recess NO SCHOOL	25 Spring Recess NO SCHOOL	26
27	28 6:00PM School Council	29 NHS Induction Romeo & Juliet performance (for freshmen)	30 7PM 6th Grade Parent Meeting; H.S. Auditorium			
		8th Grade Picture Day				