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Myth #1: Don't Smile Until December

*Reality: Smile as Early On
and as Often as You Can to
Build a Healthy Classroom Climate*

*Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the
most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make
glad the heart of man.*

—Ezra Pound

THE MYTH

It took me three years as a neophyte teacher to understand that students did not have to sit in rows and listen to my words of wisdom all day. I knew participation was important, but because of advice from others it was difficult to find my

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own voice. I was fortunate to have mentors who encouraged me, but it was here during my early teaching years that I first encountered the myth well known to teachers, "Don't smile until December if you want to maintain control of the classroom." The specific version of the myth I learned advised not smiling until Christmas, but I'm sure other cultural traditions have similar versions of the same myth, repeated over and over by seasoned teachers to the beginner. While it is well-meaning advice from experienced classroom teachers, it doesn't resonate with my observations as a teacher and a teacher of teachers. Behind this myth is the idea that the most important aspect of teaching is maintaining control of the classroom. Control is important, but when students do not have a desire to learn, a healthy classroom climate does not exist.

CARING TEACHERS ARE PART OF YOUR HISTORY

One of the questions students entering our teacher preparation program are asked is "If you think back to teachers who were important mentors in your life, what are the qualities that made them good teachers?" The answers to this question are amazing in their similarity. While candidates often say a teacher's knowledge of the subject matter is important, the one theme that comes through in most responses relates to how much the

*Good teachers
care about
their students.*

teacher cared. Examples are cited of teachers who took time to listen to their concerns, ones who saw their struggles and worked to help them achieve, teachers who were available after school and willing to work with them. These are the teachers with heart and passion for their students as well as their subject. These are teachers who care. While many were perceived as strict, you can bet they smiled early and often and certainly before December.

Caring is another aspect of maintaining control. It is a delicate balance of demonstrating your authority early and supporting the students with actions that show you care. A healthy classroom climate builds a strong environment for learning.

STUDENTS NEED TO WANT TO LEARN

We as teachers are authorized to teach, we are given the authority, but each student has to sign off on it in order for it to work. Without buy-in from the students in class, a teacher's authority is worthless.

My first teaching job was in an urban junior high school. I was 22 years old, idealistic, and teaching my two favorite subjects, history and math. I was out to change the world. My fifth-period class (right after lunch—always the most difficult time of the day) was an eighth-grade math class, labeled the "Z" group. There were 15 students in the class, many of them taller than I, and, as you have probably guessed, their math skills were lacking. This was a challenge for which I was not prepared. I had always loved math and really didn't comprehend that there were students in eighth grade who couldn't add or subtract. One day we were doing a math problem that required a student to plug in the number of siblings in his or her family to get a predicted outcome. One young man's calculations would not work. We checked the math; it was correct. After careful rechecking we finally discovered that for the problem to work the number of siblings needed to be fewer than ten, and Freddy had fifteen brothers and sisters.

I tell this story because this is where I learned one of the most important lessons of my teaching career. Students do not learn unless they want to learn, and this desire to learn was closely tied to my ability to care about them as human beings. We made progress in the area of math, but where we really made progress was in the way the students felt about themselves. They loved me, and I loved them. They exhibited this love and appreciation in a very tangible way soon after spring break. I was pregnant and had to leave my position as soon as the pregnancy showed (archaic, but true), and this marvelous group of students, who would be classed misfits by many, gave me a party and pooled their resources to present me with a car bed for my first born. I can assure you I smiled before December, and we were a community of learners.

*Good teachers
develop a community
of learners.*

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TEACHERS OPEN THEIR HEARTS

It is important for a teacher to know the students in his or her class, and to do this, the teacher's heart needs to be open to them. Each student comes with a story, and as the stories unfold, the caring teacher uses the information to help each student attain success, both academically and socially. This thought was brought home to me a few years ago when Parker

*Good teachers
have heart.*

Palmer was on our campus sharing his learning with us in a faculty workshop. Before meeting with him, each participant was given a copy of Palmer's (1998) book *The Courage to Teach*. This powerful book is filled with insights and examples, but, in his gentle way, Parker brings his stories to life. His book is built on a simple premise: "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." He shared stories of great teachers in his life. Some were lecturers, others hands-on instructors, yet all created a connectedness and sense of community that is the bread and butter of teaching and learning. I am certain these teachers revealed their hearts to students, certainly smiling before December. The following quote from Palmer's *Courage to Teach* gets at the essence of an effective teacher:

Teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching the more heart-breaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require. (p. 11)

THE JOY OF TEACHER/STUDENT RECONNECTION

A good friend of mine, Myrna Wheeler, received an inquiry via the Internet from a former student, Steve, asking if she was the

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person who taught at a certain middle school in the early 1960s. When she responded with a yes, he was overjoyed to have the opportunity to reconnect with her because of the profound effect she had on him in seventh grade. He recounted coming back into the classroom from lunch and seeing her in the front of the classroom with her head on the desk, crying at the news of President Kennedy's assassination. He identifies this experience as one of the most important moments of his life. He stated, "It was really a gift to me. . . . There is absolutely no doubt that an honest display of emotions is one of the greatest gifts we can give young people. And, ever since that day I have carried with me the idea that, when something bad or sad happens, and one is at a total loss as to what to do, crying isn't a bad choice."

*Good teachers
are authentic with
their students.*

Steve went on to obtain his PhD, has been professor, dean, and vice-president at the university level, and does consulting with agencies in the field of community panic (issues such as Columbine, multiple homicide, or child abuse allegations). He is making a difference in the world, and carries to this day the image of his seventh-grade teacher openly expressing her grief over a tragic personal and national loss. She was not afraid to let her emotions show, both joy and sadness.

As teachers, we never know when a word or a deed may be remembered by one of our students. Many years later a former student may tell the teacher, or the story may be passed on through a third party, or we may never know. In the case of Mrs. Wheeler, and her student, Steve, he trusted her, and he reflected, "For a seventh-grade boy, struggling to learn what it meant to be a young man, your tears that day were a revelation. To this day, I am grateful that Mrs. Wheeler was there when we got back from recess, and didn't go outside or to the teachers' lounge or didn't hide her tears." Mrs. Wheeler made a lasting impression on Steve; his emotional growth was promoted by her willingness to be authentic with her feelings. She certainly smiled and cried before December.

*Good teachers
are remembered.*

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A TEACHER'S LEGACY LIVES ON

At our local mini-mart adjacent to the university, one of the managers, Bob, shared a thought with me. He said, "Your mother, Mrs. Deal, was my kindergarten teacher, and I thank her every morning when I get up for teaching me to read." My mother has been gone since 1988, but her legacy is carried on in the lives of the many students she taught. She had a strong sense of discipline in her classroom. Children knew what the expectations were, but she loved them, and they knew it. Bob is just one of thousands of students who were a part of her 35-year career. Three former students from her seventh-grade class, taught in the 1940s, planned and coordinated her retirement party. One is a principal, another is a teacher, and the third played an active role in the education of children at his church. All three are members of the Latino community and were part of the integration of this elementary school in 1952, before *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Each continues the legacy of education modeled by Mrs. Deal.

**RELATIONSHIPS ARE CRITICAL
TO EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

Several years ago, Lee Cantor, the guru of Assertive Discipline, consulted at our university. One of the most significant things he shared was the importance of developing relationships with the students. He emphasized the building of relationships as important for both student achievement and teacher retention. After years of study and practice, he knows that positive

Good teachers

*build relationships
with students.*

teacher/student relationships are a key factor in an environment where learning takes place.

I remember a former student in the teacher preparation program relating a practice he used in his classroom. His teaching assignment

was at a large, diverse urban high school where he was a biology teacher. He identified the most difficult student in each

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class and made that student his project. He made it a point to give encouragement, create opportunities for success, and most important, to develop a relationship with the student. While it may not have worked in every case, the relationships developed helped give the students a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment that is often missing in a high school student who is struggling.

RESPECT IS ALWAYS PRESENT IN A LEARNING CLASSROOM

In order for a classroom to function effectively and for learning to take place, it must be managed well. Management of a classroom is more than a set of rules. It is sound instructional planning and delivery. It is establishing good relationships with parents. It is making positive social interaction a priority, helping students to care about each other. It is teaching behaviors—how we transition, how we line up. But in all cases, the management of a classroom is the job of the teacher *and* the students. Respect needs to be present, but it is a three-way street: students' respect for the teacher, teacher's respect for the students, and students' respect for one another. Relationships are forged, and an environment established that encourages learning, a true learning community. If this community is to work, the teacher needs to be honest with the class, honest in both words and actions. Teachers, in order to be authentic in who you are and to celebrate the joy of teaching, you **MUST** smile before December.

*Good teachers
make respect a key
component of
their classrooms.*

*Good teachers
smile before December.*

*If we succeed in giving the love of learning, the learning
itself is sure to follow.*

—John Lubbock

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the kernel of truth behind the myth, "Don't Smile Until December"? Give an example from your experience.
2. What are the benefits of developing a positive relationship with a difficult student?
3. How does developing a community of learners in a classroom enhance learning?
4. What is one way you would show students you have an open heart?