Talking to Kids about Things That Matter

Classroom discussions on moral issues can be productive if teachers set clear expectations.
Forming an identity and learning to make decisions were never easy, even when parents, churches, and schools reinforced essentially the same values. Today, with values and family structures in flux and mixed messages on TV every day, the process has become tortuous.

Many kids today are growing up alone, developing their personalities with little moral, ethical, or personal direction from any significant adult in their lives. Most parents would like to give more attention to the nurture of their children, but they are simply too busy trying to make ends meet to do so.

Lack of adult direction exacts a price. From my work on the radio and in the classroom, I have come to believe that many youngsters are growing up amoral. In addition, the children are not blind to other circumstances around them: the arms race, adults' hypocrisy, environmental degradation, famine, and greed confront them on the news almost every night. And they sense that their country, their planet, their species—and their futures—are in deep trouble.

In despair, some children commit suicide rather than go down with the ship. Others retreat to the cynicism reflected in this comment: "I might as well keep on smoking because we're all going to die soon."

Fortunately, most kids don't want to abandon ship, but they do want adults they can talk to. As one of my students, Keeley Smith, said the other day: "There are a lot of things going on in the real world—like AIDS and stuff like that—and we have to deal with it. It's out there, like it or not. So help us adapt."

Recently on my radio talk program a 16-year-old remarked: "I think kids are often willing to try to communicate better with parents and teachers, but sometimes they just don't know how to go about it—especially if the adults aren't receptive to changing their own communication patterns."

Kids want to talk about the tough choices facing them. For most people—young and old—the question is how to do it.
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Establishing Parameters for Dialogue
To begin the process, it is essential to tell young people—and adults for that matter—what is expected of them. In a classroom, on the radio, or in an inservice meeting, I like to engage everyone actively in thought and conversation. Since I want to assure everyone an equal chance to be heard, I explain that verbal or rude individuals will not be allowed to dominate discussions, interrupt others, or otherwise distract the group. Moreover, I emphasize that emotional language, personal attacks, and gross generalizations won't be tolerated because free expression of thoughts cannot occur if students are maligned or put down for what they think.

After all, respect for different views is basic to dialogue. In my classes only one person may speak at a time and then only after raising a hand and being called on. This habit helps to maintain an atmosphere conducive to careful listening, respect for everyone, and opportunities for all students to express themselves. Also, when any
one displays persistent lack of respect, I talk to that person outside of class about social justice and respect issues; if that doesn't work, I do not hesitate to involve school counselors and/or parents. Further, since young people respond well when treated as equals, I address students as "Mr." or "Ms." to allow us to operate on the same level; they address me as "Mr. Landfried" or "Mr. L."

Our discussions become the place where students can practice giving meaningful responses. When opinions are asked, saying "I don't know" is interpreted to mean "I'm too lazy to think" or "Get off my back." If students begin with "I don't know," they can expect further questions rather than being let off the hook. If they need more time to think, I give them a minute or so, then come back to them. Once they learn to come prepared to be more than "a bump on a log," they find that school can be exciting.

In this day of information overload, it is more important to know how to learn or how to obtain information than to remember who invented barbed wire. For that reason, I concentrate on teaching process skills, such as listening, speaking, and communicating nonverbally—skills that students will be using long after they've forgotten that Millard Fillmore was the 12th President of the United States. A good exchange of ideas calls for everyone to practice assertiveness skills. Together we learn that it is appropriate to question each other about our motivations or behaviors with the intent of clarifying meanings and understanding each other. I encourage students to view corrections as constructive feedback that may spare them embarrassment or problems later.

Everyone is expected to participate every day. To minimize "tuning in and out" of the conversation, I periodically call on people to restate what others have said. I use physical proximity and eye contact to bring daydreamers back to the flow of discussion and then throw a query at them to let them know I expect their attention. As a rule of thumb, students who raise their hands and offer their comments to the class once a day will achieve a C grade, those who raise their hands 2–3 times a day will receive B's, and A's will be given to those who consistently make 3–4 contributions to class per day. (The quality of their contributions and their conduct are also factors in their grades.) Students are invited to keep track of how many times they raise their hands—most people think they participate more than they actually do.

Setting expectations like these should help any teacher to conduct lively, provocative discussions—the kind that can and should be a prominent part of any curriculum in any discipline. We all realize that information about population dynamics in India compared with those of the West may not serve a girl particularly well if she lacks both the skills and the assertiveness to say "no" to a pushy boy friend. By drawing students out and relating the concepts and material in our courses to their lives, we enrich our curriculums, our students, and ourselves.

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Bridging the Gap, Creating Bonds
Few great teachers are known for their ability to dispense information. Rather, they are dynamic, vital individuals who relish the freedom and the discipline to think and act—on principle. Somehow, as they bridge the gap between ideas and life, they create a bond between themselves and students. The risks are real, but the rewards are worth it. There is nothing quite as exciting as watching self-esteem blossom as students—especially those with few positive adult role models and little self-affirmation—discover that there is an adult who respects their views, their experience, and their intelligence.

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