

Contingency in the Classroom

Kirke Olson, Psy D

Take a moment now to think about the best teacher you ever had. Perhaps your explicit and implicit memories are similar to a woman in her late 50's, talking animatedly about her high school English teacher and a local legend, Doc Blanchard. Having talked independently to six of his students, I can vouch for all of them saying similar things, with great enthusiasm as their warm memories flow into consciousness.

“He helped me change how I viewed the world and how I viewed myself *by who he was*. He made my view of the world more expansive about things larger than [my hometown]. There were beautiful things in literature and the arts and music and culture and plays. He made them fascinating. Made me *challenge myself* and think about the fact that *I was more than I thought I was*. He had *high expectations for himself and for us*. I can see him as clearly today as if it was all those years ago. He was tall, his posture was confident, his hair was thick salt and pepper brushed back in an Einsteinish way, but neater—a red bow tie and a suit with a formal brief case. He would *walk into class with a lot of energy* and stand behind the podium and talk animatedly. He was so excited about what he was talking about, *you felt the excitement*. *When he looked at you, you felt he was looking at just you* and not the whole class. I was shy, so I talked to no one, but *I felt connected to him not like in a friend way, but a connection with his passion and energy about the subject matter*. It was the hardest class I had ever taken. And he had the clear expectation you could step up to the plate. *He was a unique individual*. He was *like a mirror; if he could do that, why couldn't I?* He is the only person I ever think about when I think about



teachers, throughout my whole experience in school.” (The *italics* are mine, for later discussion.) Perhaps your memory of your favorite teacher is similar. Most of us would agree that there are so few teachers like our favorite ones, it is no wonder people believe excellent teachers are born, not made. Yet, our knowledge of genetics, incomplete as it is, tells us that this belief cannot be completely true. While there are no doubt many reasons for the scarcity of inspiring teachers, one contributor to the problem may be how they are trained. Here is one typical list of undergraduate education courses: High School Teaching Methods, Instruction and Curriculum Design, Development, Exceptionality and Learning I (and II). In most education curricula, there is a dearth of courses on the brain and the mind, something Dan Siegel has also discovered in psychology curricula. In addition, there is nothing in the titles or the descriptions to suggest that teachers spend a great deal of time learning about relating with students, particularly the relationship between emotional connection and the ability to learn. Yet it seems clear that Doc Blanchard's students are primarily

remembering transforming aspects of the student-teacher relationship, not the content of the class itself.

Rereading the italicized words, what can we learn about the magic transmitted by teachers like Doc Blanchard? Without knowing the

term, they make good use of *contingent communication*. To consider this way of relating in the context of teaching, I would like to quote the definition from Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell's *Parenting from the Inside Out* (2003), replacing the word “parent” with “teacher” and “child” with “student.” “...contingent communication means that the signals sent by the [student] are directly perceived, understood and responded to by the [teacher] in a dance of communication that involves mutual collaboration. [Teachers] feel good and their [students] feel good, too, when interactions are respectful and responsive to each individual. This contingent

communication enables a vitalizing sense of connection that may be at the heart of nurturing relationships across the life span. Collaborative or contingent communication allows us to expand our own minds by taking in others' points of view and seeing our own point of view reflected in their responses" (p. 80).

The living memories of Doc Blanchard's students certainly show they have a "vitalizing sense of connection" even forty years later. We could also state that a description of a good learning experience would be "to expand our own minds by taking in others' points of view and seeing our own point of view reflected in their responses." Including information about contingent communication, as well as practice with implementation, in the curriculum for teachers might stimulate awareness of how much more their students will learn if they are connected. A further step might help them identify personal roadblocks to staying connected.

Teachers tell me that when they wake in the middle of the night and worry, they are not primarily fretting about instruction and curriculum design. In one way or another, they are most often troubled by their relationships with their students. It may be in the context of student misbehavior or trying to reach a withdrawn student, but it is the relationship that concerns them the most, not the course content. Many tell me they sometimes find themselves swamped by emotions that interfere with connection and contingency. Turning again to Siegel and Hartzell's *Parenting from the Inside Out* (2003), the chapter entitled "How We Keep It Together and How We Fall Apart: The High Road and the Low Road" can explain what goes awry in these situations, as well as offering help in finding the high road again. They explain how a parent's

[teacher's] unresolved issues can be triggered by their child's [student's] behavior. When this happens, the limbic region dominates, and the middle prefrontal cortex shuts down. This is the low road. It leaves the parent or teacher in a state of intense emotions, impulsive reactions, rigid responses, lack of self-reflection, and inability to consider another's point of view. High road



processing, on the other hand, involves the middle prefrontal cortex, allowing for mindfulness, flexible responses, an integrating sense of self-awareness, and the ability to stay connected with others. In other words, high road processing is the

state of mind that enables contingent communication and excellent teaching.

Consider the teacher with twenty students, each with the potential to trigger the teacher's unresolved issues, sparking this low road processing. There must be hundreds of times per day that a teacher is "invited" by students to go down the low road. Our favorite teachers have figured out how to ignore the invitation. Most teacher training programs (and continuing education workshops) do not prepare teachers to deal with these situations. Nor, do they teach how to repair the ruptures in the aftermath of low road processing. For conscientious teachers, the aftermath may be guilt and confusion. They ask themselves, "How could I have reacted so poorly?" The long-term result can be teacher burn out.

As a GAINS members, we have the opportunity to share interpersonal neurobiology with friends and acquaintances who are teachers. When teachers have the opportunity to learn about and practice these crucial skills, there will be more teachers like Doc Blanchard and your favorite.

Kirke Olson is a New Hampshire licensed clinical and school psychologist, who sees himself as an "IPNB applicator." He applies neuroscience (IPNB) and positive psychology in his individual and family sessions with clients and in his school consultations with students, staff, parents, and administrators alike. With his wife, Sher Kamman, (also a NH licensed psychologist) he offers workshops that apply neuroscience, positive psychology and EMDR, to help people create a life they would love to live. For more information about Kirke, go to his website www.alifyoulove.com or email him at kolson@wsfca.net.

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