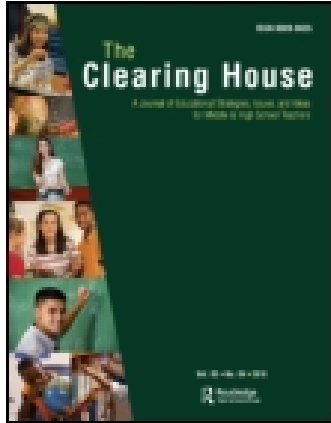


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Connecting with Sullen Students: Using an Emotionally Honest Classroom to Reach Out to Disengaged Students

JENNIE HANNA

Abstract: Secondary students are notorious for appearing to be disengaged and unmotivated in the classroom. Many students may contribute their attitude to having contempt for school, their teachers, or both. In this article, using a recent novel study of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, I seek to show that creating a safe classroom environment where both the educator and students are emotionally honest with themselves and one another is the best way for teachers to overcome these issues in their classrooms. I also offer four ways in which I have been able to create an environment where trust is established and student engagement is evident by modeling desired behavior, using humor as a motivator, holding myself accountable as a role model, and confronting my own shortfalls as an educator.

Keywords: classroom environment, student-teacher relationships, student engagement, teacher effectiveness

Accept who you are and revel in that.
—Morrie Schwartz, *Tuesdays with Morrie*

Far too often students arrive at school with issues that affect the way in which they learn or behave within a classroom. These issues may include poverty, a lack of social skills, an unstable support system, or even a disillusioned concept of school as a whole. These issues can result in students who appear disengaged and unmotivated to participate in their own learning (Curwin 2010; Daniels and Arapostathis 2005). While outside concerns are often factors beyond the teacher's

ability to fix or control, there is one issue educators can control that may help turn around students' motivation: the learning environment a teacher creates within a classroom.

In this article I dig deeper into some of the underlying causes for disengaged and unmotivated students in secondary classroom settings. I further explore the nature of the problem and, finally, I draw on literature and personal experience to discuss ways in which secondary educators may be able to begin combating issues of waning motivation by creating a safer and more trusting classrooms for students.

The Problem

These days there are copious complaints about sullen and detached students in classrooms everywhere. This concern reminds me of the lesson about the tension of opposites that my students learned recently during a novel study in my English class regarding Mitch Albom's memoir of Morrie Schwartz, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. In the story, Schwartz, a beloved college professor dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, shares with Mitch, his favorite student, that we are constantly being pulled in different directions in life based on "what we want to do and what we are bound to do" (Albom 2002, 40). My students grasped this concept and applied it easily to several areas of their lives, including balancing the demands of athletics and academics, completing school work and the desire to be with friends, and even being in a relationship where one person might not treat the other very well. However, this metaphor can also apply to the daily dilemma many teenagers face that

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results in disengagement at school. Many of my students want to better themselves by getting an education, but appearing to be “into” school is not always deemed popular (Ogbu 1985), so they often arrive with an “I don’t care” attitude to protect their image. However, the fact that these students are in class in the first place means that at some level they want to be there, even if they sometimes arrive with an attitude of contempt. As Ogbu (1985) points out, this perceived detachment may be an attempt to balance a desire to learn with the need to protect personal or cultural identity and may explain the divide between students and teachers.

Creating a welcoming classroom environment is one way teachers can build strong relationships with their students (Pigford 2001; Stipek 2006). However, some teachers are uncomfortable stepping away from the narrowly defined roles of teacher and student by sharing parts of themselves or by creating anything more than a superficial bond. According to Parker Palmer (2007), teaching occurs at the “dangerous intersection of personal and public life” and some teachers often “disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves” in order to reduce that vulnerability (18). Teachers like Morrie are successful in their professions because their passion comes from places of reciprocal respect and this creates an allure students cannot ignore.

One potential cause for student disengagement is that they feel little connection and see little value in the material being taught in the classroom; thus, they have no reason to feel motivated to participate (Jones 2012; Ogbu 1985). In other words, these students feel disillusioned about the basic premise of working hard in school because minimal effort in the classroom has already gotten them so far and they see no reason to change.

Disengagement has also been linked to a lack of high-quality student-teacher relationships, which build trust and engagement within the classroom (Daniels and Arapostathis 2005; Locke Davidson 1999; Stipek 2006). Students may have developed issues with trust where their confidence in teachers was eroded in previous classrooms or, even more sadly, they may have never learned to trust adults within their home environment (Cook et al. 2005; Ennis and McCauley 2002). Moreover, the lack of motivation in the classroom can be seen as a cyclical problem. If a student appears unmotivated, this may cause a rift between the teacher and the student that results in an inability to learn because one or both parties simply gives up. The following year, such students begin further behind than their peers, thus repeating the cycle of disengagement and lack of learning.

However, perhaps the most prevalent reason for a lack of student motivation are the fears that many of them face: a fear of being vulnerable, a fear in looking foolish in front of their peers, and a fear in wounding their already tenuous self-esteem (Morganett 1991;

Palmer 2007). While developing a caring relationship with students might be one of the best ways to increase motivation, Maslow (1987) reminds us that students must first feel safe and fearless in their surroundings before they can begin to meet social and emotion needs.

Echoing those same concerns, Palmer (1997) states that what teachers generally perceive as disengagement is nothing more than fear, but we simply do not recognize it because we teachers are afraid to admit to the fear that first resides in ourselves about our profession:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. . . . Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. (Palmer 1997, 14)

Just like with the tension of opposites, it is beholden upon us teachers to confront our own fears and better understand ourselves first before we can begin to help students with their worries. This is the best way in which a trusting classroom environment can take shape and teachers can begin to see changes in the engagement of their students—and hopefully—in themselves.

Ways to Create an Emotionally Honest Classroom Environment

While reading *Tuesdays with Morrie*, I found myself fascinated with the learning environment that Morrie created as a college professor and how it carried over to his “final course” with Mitch. It wasn’t until after we finished the novel that I realized why: It reminded me of the classrooms in which I’ve been lucky enough to learn. The classrooms I loved the most were taught by teachers who were much like Morrie himself—caring, patient, honest, open, and truly enjoying me and my peers on a personal level. In many ways, this relates to bell hooks’s (2006) idea of engaged pedagogy, which focuses on engaging the whole, collective side of students modeled in part by the passion that educators bring to the classroom for their craft and their students. Far too often teachers lead their classroom from a dictator role that not only dehumanizes themselves but the students as well. Moreover, teaching in this manner means that educators neglect what I feel is the best part about this job: getting to know the students and all their idiosyncrasies. That is why I do my best to try to create a learning environment—an emotionally honest classroom—like the one my teachers modeled before me. I found that the best way to do this is by ensuring that trust is established and that risk taking is not only an option but also an action encouraged by the teacher. By consciously putting in the effort to build this atmosphere, I have found that this has resulted in an increased motivation among my students to participate and learn.

There are four different ways in which I have worked to create an emotionally honest and trustworthy classroom. Because what I have discovered results from the models of excellent teaching that came before me, I offer these ideas through the use of my own personally crafted teacher aphorism, in homage to the late Morrie Schwartz and the power that his aphorisms about life still have nearly 20 years after his death, because the teaching does indeed “go on” (Albom 2002, 189). These four approaches include modeling the behavior I wish to see from my students, weaving humor into the fabric of the classroom, holding myself accountable for my own errors, and overcoming the fear that comes from showing both weakness and strength in front of students.

Don't Expect a Miracle if What You Are Modeling Is Mediocrity

One way to create an emotionally honest classroom is through modeling the kind of behavior I wish to see from my students. As the teacher, I am obligated to model the desired behavior and effort I expect in order to build trust and increase motivation. Kelly Gallagher (2011) states that modeling writing—mistakes and all—in front of his students is the best motivator in helping to improve their writing; however, modeling work is the strategy that most teachers avoid in their classroom. Teachers who fear making mistakes in front of their students may erroneously link their identity to being infallible. In my experience, this couldn't be further from the truth. Modeling that even teachers make mistakes can give students confidence and make them more willing to take risks in sharing their own thoughts without fear. As a result, I have seen my students grow to become more supportive and compassionate to each other within the classroom climate, encouraging each other when they proofread sentences on the marker board and listening when we have class discussions, which further increases motivation in the class.

Laughter in August Is Better Than Smiling after Christmas

Another way to create an emotionally honest classroom is by finding ways to infuse humor into the natural flow of the class. When I first started teaching as a middle school English teacher five years ago, some of my new coworkers encouraged me not to be too nice early in the school year to maintain classroom management: “Don't smile until after Christmas” was what one veteran teacher specifically told me. I attempted to follow this advice for the first few days but found that I was unable to stick with that strict, formal approach to teaching. Humor in all its many forms—laughter, joking, sarcasm, and even the sharing of personally embarrassing stories on my part—not only happens on a daily basis in my classroom, but I also feel strongly that the

element of laughter helps me create a more engaging classroom environment.

In addition, because the students are hooked through the humorous give and take I have with them, they are less likely to be absent from class since the atmosphere is an enjoyable place to learn (Locke Davidson 1999; Shibinski and Martin 2010). Moreover, once your reputation as a teacher is established, the harder it is to break. This year I moved up from the middle school to the high school level, and during the first day, while the students were writing personal memoirs to share, I overheard one student whisper to another, “You better get writing. Mrs. Hanna, she don't play.” The fact that my reputation followed me from one school to another and the students started regulating and motivating each other from day one reinforces my belief that an emotionally honest learning climate builds mutual respect, because these students sensed the authenticity in my approach to lead them and were more motivated to participate and encourage each other.

Honorable Teachers Grade Themselves Just as Rigorously as They Do Their Students

A third possible way to create a trusting and emotionally honest classroom is to hold high standards for not only my students but also for myself as the educator. In keeping with the theme of modeling that mistakes are a part of the learning process, good teachers also take the time to assess their own teaching effectiveness and own up when they make mistakes. For example, I had a student early on in the school year, one that many have labeled a problem child, who acted defiantly in class. In an attempt to squash the situation, I approached it the way I generally handle instances of teenage defiance: with a little bit of humor to relieve the tension and redirect the focus of the class. Now, this young man has several of his friends in that same class, so what was meant to lighten the mood quickly put him on the defensive. Let's just say words were exchanged and he was sent to the principal's office with a referral slip. However, once I finished my lesson and got the class started on their individual work, I began to replay the situation in my head and realized that my reaction to his small defiance—although it came from a good place in my heart—made his classmates laugh and I could see his perception might be that they were laughing at him, thus making his reaction almost entirely my fault. As soon as class was over, I walked down to the principal's office and asked for my referral slip back, stating that I had made a mistake and I wanted to handle it on my own.

The following day, before class began, I stopped this young man in the hallway and told him that while he must remember to follow directions in my class, I could see how my reaction the day before challenged his self-image in front of his peers and I was sorry for my

actions and asked for his forgiveness. He quickly forgave me and also apologized for his own behavior in class, stating that he was upset from an incident that happened just prior to our class and he didn't mean to act up in my class. Since a trusting relationship was already established between me and my students within the classroom, one look into his eyes told me he was sincere and as we are approaching the end of the year, I have yet to have another issue with this young man. He participates in class generally without fail—something that I hear is still not happening in his other classes. Prior to writing this article and curious as to why his personality and engagement level appears to be different in my classroom than in others, I questioned him about this—while he was at in-school suspension for ditching another class, nonetheless—and he told me he had never before known teachers to admit that they were wrong, and that my actions meant something to him. He went on to say that where he comes from it is a sign of respect to admit when you are wrong, and he didn't want to show disrespect to someone who offered him mutual respect like I did the day I apologized. In this instance, my ability to own up to my own part in our disagreement didn't override any authority I have in the classroom; in fact, it actually made it stronger because students are more willing to be pliant with a teacher who shows them mutual respect.

It Is Your Stars and Your Scars That Measure Your Worth

Yet another possible way to help create an emotionally honest classroom stems from teachers who share their personal accomplishments and catastrophes equally. In trying to build a relationship with students, some teachers may only share the good facets of their lives and their accolades. There is a fear that sharing the failures and struggles people face will diminish the authority they possess in the classroom. During my time teaching, I have found that when I talk about the “gold stars” I've earned in my life, it may inspire the students. But what endears them more to me is when I share the mistakes, fears, embarrassments, and fiascos that I have endured in my life. By sharing my own attempts to try new things that failed miserably and left “scars,” I show that these parts of my life can only define me if I fail to learn from them and decide to never try again. Teachers who share the countless sides of who they are and display the continued work we put in to better ourselves will find that their students are more motivated to reciprocate that same level of effort in the classroom.

As an example, during the final day of reading *Tuesdays with Morrie* in class, I found myself having an emotional and physical reaction to the story that some might be embarrassed or fearful to ever display: I cried in front of my students. My emotions overwhelmed me as I read the pages aloud in that first class and that emotion didn't waver as I made it through the fifth and final

one at the end of the day. While I recognize that some might have an issue with revealing this much emotion as a teacher, I look at my reaction as a chance for me to show the authenticity of the trust that exists in my classroom. In other words, since I feel comfortable and confident enough to expose such a vulnerable side of myself, this further reaffirms the safety contained within the classroom and allows my students the chance to open up more so we can develop a closer teacher-student relationship.

In addition, it was surprising to see how eager the students were to read this rather sad memoir each day. These students, the same ones who had complained for months about having to read all the time in class, would arrive with an appetite to learn more about what aphorisms of wisdom Morrie had to share with them about life and death and love and would complain when we had to stop each day. The day we finished the novel, the same day I had my emotional reaction to it, I found that the students began writing with great fervor and passion for their final journal entries about their hopes, dreams, and important people in their lives; it was nothing short of amazing. I recognized that my ability to overcome my insecurities and shed this tough outer layer was the very motivation they needed to do the same, and that resulted in me getting to see a side of the students that I'm not sure I have ever seen before.

In sum, I have come to recognize that students may not honestly be detached and disengaged from their education, but that their reaction may stem more from the fear they feel and their desire to protect their social and personal identity. Learning this lesson has allowed me to see that my students need a classroom environment where they can trust that they will feel accepted and respected no matter what. By modeling the expectations I have for my students, using humor as a hook for engagement, ensuring my own accountability to maintain high standards as an educator, and being honest about my own triumphs and tragedies, I have been able to create an emotionally honest classroom where each day feels less like a job and more like a calling.

These suggestions—or any other ones for that matter—are not some magic wand that will ensure that students will engage in their own learning each and every time. Students are humans and not robots—they can't be expected to work day in and day out without fail and there are always going to be those who have built high walls to protect themselves that appear impossible to break through. According to Curwin (2010), the common error educators make is thinking that they need to tear down those walls when, in fact, those walls are necessary for some students to help protect them for when they leave the safety of your classroom. The goal then should be in finding the cracks in those self-created barriers and never giving up on trying to make that connection. Remembering this lesson is perhaps why I have

come to find that the students who often give teachers the most grief—what Palmer (2007) refers to as “the students from hell”—are the students who flourish in my class and the ones I honestly tend to enjoy the most.

Not all teachers will want to take the same approaches in their classroom as I have, but that is not ultimately the point I’m trying to make. Good teaching that engages others and sparks motivation comes from connecting with students and finding a way to attach meaning to the relationship that educators have with their students. Ultimately, learn to not be afraid of sharing yourself, your heart, and your passion for this profession with your students and it will make all the difference.

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