In Focus…

Just Get Out of the Way

Adelyn Steele

Not too long ago during a typical planning period, I was in my classroom working on lesson plans when I walked my colleague in the math department. As a first year teacher, he is full of questions and ideas and has the ability to see with fresh eyes those situations that some of us just take for granted by now.

His question this time had to do with filling out papers for the special education department. After we talked about what he should do and why, he remarked, “You know, at some point I hope to get back to doing what I am supposed to do.” I smiled the sympathetic smile of a paperwork weary comrade and watched him walk out the door.

But his statement haunts me and leaves me to wonder: What is it that a teacher is supposed to do?

I have asked the question to many people: students, colleagues, principals, parents, and friends; and their answers are startling. Everything from inspire, guide, and rescue; to show up, present facts, and record scores are mentioned. All I know is at the end of every one of these conversations; I feel frustrated, confused, and down right exhausted.

So I really don’t know what a teacher is supposed to do (which alarms me slightly as I show up everyday to do it), but maybe the trouble is that I am trying to find a single phrase or idea. A slogan of sorts that could keep me focused and put everything into perspective. Teaching is much too complex for that.

There is one idea that keeps coming back to me, however, and that is that the job of a teacher is to set up the task and then get out of the way. Sounds simple, but I assure you it is not.

A teacher must either design or find tasks that will allow students to engage in the mathematics. The task must be rich enough to give students something to talk about and wrestle with. It ought to have some significance and build toward an understanding of mathematics in a way that will be powerful and lasting. I use to think that this was the hard part, but I have since come to understand that selecting the tasks is much easier than deciding what to do with them.

Earlier I said that a teacher should get out of the way, and I mean that, but not in the sense of heading to the teacher’s lounge or reading the newspaper in the back of the room. I mean it in the sense of letting the students do as much of it on their own as possible. A teacher should watch the interaction between students and guide what is happening, be on the lookout for evidence of both correct and incorrect observations and understanding, and absorb what is happening in the classroom.

Now, most people who have a stake in education seem to say things very similar to what I am saying; yet we disagree at every turn. That is, we disagree with how this is done. The reason, I think, is that we start with different beliefs. See, I believe that understanding and making sense is internal. So if I want that to happen in my students, I need to allow them the time to see that through. If they don’t “get it” in a specific amount of time and I rush in and tell them, then I have robbed them of the opportunity to construct an understanding for themselves. I may have left them with the ability to say back what someone might expect to hear, but they do not own the idea. They are repeating mine.

To that end, I need to make the observation that thinking is hard. It can require concentration and awareness to be able to synthesize content. Then a person has to find the words to express what they are thinking. I watch and listen to students, and find that throughout much of their lives people are speaking at them rather than to or with them. If they do not have the opportunity to think and discuss what they are thinking, I believe that those skills are stunted. If, however, students are encouraged to try to find words and are given time to synthesize and articulate then they create within themselves the confidence to wrestle with increasingly complex ideas.

I also believe that learning is social. Therefore, my classroom needs to be a social environment where students both talk and listen. They need to respect

Adelyn Steele is a mathematics instructor and K-12 mathematics chairperson for Cheney High School in Cheney, KS. She received a BSE in Mathematics from Emporia State University and a Masters in Teaching from Friends University. Adelyn has been named a state finalist in Kansas for the Presidential Award of Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.
ideas and people and learn to manage themselves in a conversation. (What is this business about having to raise your hand anyway? Where, outside of a classroom, do you see people raising their hands for the opportunity to speak? We owe kids better.) This takes practice and can be messy at the beginning, but as a vehicle to true discourse it is imperative.

Core to my beliefs is also the learners’ ability to ask and answer their own questions if given the chance. So often teachers, upon observing and noticing a misconception, jump in to “fix it,” often before a child has the opportunity to really understand that they have that question. I had an algebra teacher who would say to us, “By now you all are thinking…..” It was so strange because sometimes we were not thinking whatever he said we were. Once, when this was pointed out to him, he said, “Well, if you are not thinking it now, you should be.” Which brings me to my next belief.

People ought to have the right to believe what they want to. This one, ironically, causes all sorts of trouble for me from my colleagues. “So if I want to believe that the sum of 5 and 3 is 7 then that is ok with you?” they have asked. But my point is a real one. So often adults tell students not only what, but also how to think. This creates a dependence that is problematic for years. It is much more powerful to have students defend their own beliefs with data and/or proof. As students do this they develop skills as autonomous learners and profit much more than might be imagined.

So what does this have to do with staying out of the way? Well first, if I believe what I say that I do, then my actions will reflect that. So by staying out of the way, I again mean that I let students do as much on their own as possible. I wait. I listen. I probe. I ask questions. I wait. I listen. I give them an opportunity to think. I am silent. I wait. I listen. I encourage them to test their ideas. I encourage them to talk to each other. I wait. I listen. My intent is to have their thinking on the table for examination by themselves and others, not to dictate what I think. As I listen, I gather information about student understanding (and lack thereof) and look for opportunities for students to build understanding and make sense of the mathematics for themselves. I ask questions much more often than I make statements.

I wish to make it clear that I am not passive in the classroom. I am silent much of the time, but that does not equate to passivity. I am actively participating in what students are doing and saying by listening. I will certainly make observations, give relevant information and guide conversations if needed. I just strongly believe that students need very little intervention in their thinking and certainly much less than what they usually encounter. I do not just leave students to falter and stumble, but I only help them up (so to speak) if they demonstrate an inability to do it themselves.

The result is not chaos as many might predict. Nor does it take too much time. Certainly there is a trade off in the beginning, but the reward (that of students who think for themselves and articulate and defend their knowledge) far surpasses it in just a few weeks. The beauty of mathematics is that it does make sense and can be explained. Students are just as capable of making sense and building an understanding as anyone else is. The bonus is that if they become confident learners who value their ideas and the ideas of others in addition to the discipline of mathematics at the level they are in, they will have some interest in a future study of mathematics and/or in learning in general.