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## ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

### Motivation

#### ***Making Room for the Self in School***

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*Spring 2009*

It was cold, a November evening, and I was the administrator on duty, so I was walking around the campus shortly after dinner on my way to the athletic center to lock the building. The last coach to leave after practice was supposed to lock up but never did.

My mood was not good. The sun had set at about 4:15, and the hours of darkness and gloom seemed to move in and out of me with each frosty breath. As usual, I was thinking about my English class, trying to come up with ideas to engage this group of pleasant, not very motivated juniors. Like most of my colleagues, I was frustrated — feeling guilty over my inability to transfer my enthusiasm for literature and writing to my students. Wasn't that my job, to motivate my students?

As I approached the athletic center, the building looked deserted, just the glow of the night lights seeping weakly into the darkness. I yanked on the door handle, and it opened; the building was unlocked. I'd have to walk through the whole place to see if anyone remained inside.

As I climbed the stairs to the second floor to check the weight room, I heard the thumping of a basketball muffled in the cinderblock walls of the stairwell. It grew louder as I walked down the hall toward a window overlooking the basketball court, and I saw Pharaoh, a junior who wanted to make the varsity, dribbling and shooting, first with his right hand and then with his left. He moved in and out of the shadows, intent on his drills, perfecting his game — running, jumping, turning, pounding the ball, sweating, and completely unaware of me.

Pharaoh wasn't much of a student. In fact, he was at that moment on academic probation, so I should have gone down to the court and suggested that he use this time between dinner and study hours to study. But I couldn't do that. It was wonderful to watch him, to see his enthusiasm for the game and his work ethic as he repeated drill after drill. Although I didn't share his passion for basketball, I could certainly see and appreciate it.

I wondered if, perhaps, the students in my English class could see my passion for literature and simply didn't share it. We are so accustomed to bromides about teachers' passions igniting student motivation. Quite reasonably, we want teachers who model a love of learning, but although we can cite occasions when such models have inspired students, these seem more the exception than the rule.

The truth is that motivation is both simpler and more complicated than we tend to acknowledge in schools. Too often, motivation is confused with happiness, with the result that teachers worry about keeping their students happy. Teachers struggle to become entertainers and stand-up comics — learning must be amusing and undemanding; they inflate grades and maintain sufficiently low standards to avoid student discomfort; and they lavish praise on the most mediocre achievement.

Yet there was Pharaoh that night sweating on the dimly lit court, doing the tedious drills over and over, alone — no one telling him what to do, no assignment, no judgment, no encouragement, no coach. He was the embodiment of motivation. Though he wasn't amused, wasn't diverted, if I had stopped him and asked, my bet is that he would have said he was having fun — the sort of fun that comes with intense, hard work doing something you love to do, something that matters to you, something you want to master, rather like the painful fun some of us have when we immerse ourselves in creating a new course or an exciting lesson — all that intellectual sweat of reading and thinking and writing and imagining and rethinking and rewriting.

And it is here that we teachers and administrators so often lose sight of the simplicity and complexity of motivation because we forget about a fundamental difference between teachers and students. Why are teachers in school?

Why are students in school?

Teachers are in school because we love literature or math or Spanish or history, just as Pharaoh is in the gym because he loves basketball. Somehow, for reasons that differ for everyone, this thing we love matters to us. It touches the core of who we are, our sense of self — that bundle of emotions, experiences, needs and knowledge that we recognize as self, the source of meaning and our sense of truth as we live it. It really doesn't make any difference whether our passion emerges from positive, healthy reasons or from unhealthy reasons; the passion and the self are fused into a need that we experience as motivation. And, despite its frustrations, school seems to satisfy teachers' needs.

Students, on the other hand, are in school because they have to be — before they have any idea what they might want from school. Their studies, generally, don't matter much to them. Their academic choices are either made for them by various adults or are selected by them from options determined by adults — the limited options of a prison. What does matter to them is the social life of school — their friends and enemies and surviving the sociocultural jungle of hallways, dining rooms and locker rooms — which is the reason their social lives consume so much more energy than do their studies. Some students, like Pharaoh, discover another dimension to school. They find meaning in basketball; others find meaning in math or art or science. While the majority appear simply to serve their time until released into the relative freedom of college, these lucky few enjoy a successful fusion of self and endeavor.

**You can't let someone tell you to have confidence and then have it. I had everyone from teachers to friends to therapists telling me I just needed to be confident in what I did. No matter how many times they told me, it wasn't enough. Compliments, good grades, long sincere one-on-one talks, no amount of positive reinforcement from other people could boost my confidence. You have to find it yourself. That's what [this school] has been trying to teach me. I need to discover things on my own, and it starts from within.**

Another of our bromides is that success in one area breeds success in other areas, and although there is some truth to this lullaby, Pharaoh's passion for and success in basketball never inspired passion or success in his studies, beyond the need to get the grades that would keep him eligible to play. English and history never touched his sense of self. He was happier in the classroom when he played basketball; he would have been miserable without it. But his studies didn't matter to him, nor did he become a scholar as a result of basketball anymore than I became a math whiz because I loved literature.

So students are in school because they have to be, and teachers are in school because they choose to be. And we choose to be because, regardless of whether our reasons for being there are noble or rather sad, school fulfills fundamental needs of our self. In schools, teachers are the meaning-makers; students are the receivers of the meaning we have made. Making meaning is an intimate expression of the self, the source of our engagement and our willingness to do the hard work of thinking and studying that our subject, our passion, demands — and to put up with the more tedious ancillary activities like attending meetings and making sure the athletic center is locked. For Pharaoh, meaning comes from basketball, and he is engaged and willing to work hard and think in his domain — and to put up with the tedium of the classroom.

The key to the sort of positive motivation we long to see in our students, Pharaoh's motivation for basketball or our own passion for history or science, is this fusion of self and endeavor. Years of working with students and teachers, along with studying some of the current research into how the brain learns, have convinced me that we need to rethink school structures and teaching methods so that we find ways to tap into and involve the students' self in their education. Despite the claims in our glossy catalogs and our conviction that our schools are "student-centered," they remain largely teacher-centered.

During the many years I chaired a department and then served as assistant head of school, I interviewed hundreds of teacher candidates, and whenever I asked them why they wanted to teach, EVERY ONE OF THEM responded with some variation on the theme that they wanted to pass their knowledge on to students. Not one said, "Because I want to help students learn how to make sense of their life. I want to help students develop their own sense of meaning." Sure, they wanted their students to care deeply about science or whatever they taught, but their strategy was to model their own passion and dazzle their students with the meaning they had created. It was not to help students find science or literature or history within themselves, perhaps even to discover how Latin or math might satisfy the deeper needs of the self. Little wonder that schools are structured and designed to include not the students' selves but the teachers' selves.

We have this idea that learning is a rational, logical, and linear process and that we can summon students' rational functions, cut them free from the emotions and the body, and teach them to think what we think, value what we value, care about what we care about. We insist on our ability to separate reason from emotion even though our own thinking and caring are rooted in an integrated self in which, although we might pretend otherwise, mind and body and emotion are linked. While Pharaoh's experience with basketball might be like my experience with literature, the experience of school for most students differs from the experience of school for most teachers.

Recently, I spoke with a colleague, a 30-year veteran of Spanish and ESL classrooms, about her frustration with her Spanish 3 students. She had just corrected their latest test, and she felt discouraged by their lack of progress and their apparent indifference to learning — indifference not to the grades but to learning. Earlier in the term, she had suggested to them various strategies to improve their Spanish. So, now, she decided to develop that conversation further and to see if, together, she and her students could reduce the frustration both felt — she because her students learned so slowly and reluctantly, and they because their grades were so poor. Below is a compressed, redacted version of that conversation, which I videotaped. What is evident in the conversation is the difference between the assumptions and context of the teacher's point of view and those of the students' point of view.

**TEACHER:** Before you see the results of the tests, I want to know if you did anything different to prepare for this test as opposed to the last test, which you remember we talked about individually to pinpoint some things you might do.

**STUDENT A:** I spent a lot of time studying, but when it came to test time, I had a kind of memory lapse.

**STUDENT B:** Yeah, it was totally a bling. I spent like such a long time studying.

**STUDENT C:** We should have smaller quizzes on each part of what will be on the test so that it's all more in your memory.

**STUDENT D:** And the book goes really, really fast. And there's only one practice exercise for each new thing.

**TEACHER:** Does anyone remember a suggestion I made to deal with that problem?

**STUDENT E:** Yeah, I did try the websites and did some practice, but practice quizzes would help more. If we have more practice quizzes, maybe you don't even have to put them in the grade book. They would be more like just for us, for our practice. Or maybe it would be a really small grade that would count like a homework.

**TEACHER:** Let me ask this. What's the difference between me doing that and you doing that on your own?

**STUDENT A:** It would be your format. We might make a practice quiz in a completely different way, and then we would be unprepared for your test because your way is different.

**STUDENT E:** Also, on the day of the test, I had to memorize a map for my history class, and there were two other courses I had to memorize things for. And even in this class we had something else due on the same day as the test.

**STUDENT A:** I usually have an easier time talking about a thing than I do with writing it. Like with show and tell, I can probably get up there and use the command form of the verb, but when I have to write it, it's something completely different. Speaking and writing are two different things for me. Speaking Spanish and writing Spanish are completely separate for me.

**TEACHER:** So what can you do as a student to work on the one you feel less confident about?

**STUDENT A:** I would appreciate some ideas.

**STUDENT F:** It takes time to learn the preterit. You have to keep going over it and practicing, and that gets back to the speed issue, how fast we cover this material. I know this must be frustrating for you because this should be more review for us.

**TEACHER:** Well, but my job is to take you where you are and move you forward. But what's frustrating for me is that I don't think at the third year level I should be taking class time to conjugate verbs with you or memorize verbs with you. However, if you need that, what can we work out together? If you are feeling that the verbs are a problem and there's just so much to memorize, we have to deal with that problem or neither of us is going to accomplish what we need to.

**STUDENT A:** The problem with every homework assignment is that you just look at the previous page for the answer and write it in. You have the answer right there to get it right, and you've done the homework.

**TEACHER:** So what's the next step? The next step is actually knowing it, and that's where we are stuck. If you don't have all the little pieces in your working memory, you struggle when asked to apply it. Whose job is it to get you to know it?

**STUDENT G:** Another teacher last year had us applying the stuff more. We wrote stories using the preterit. Or after each weekend, she asked us what we had done over the weekend, and we used the tense to tell her. It wasn't something that was graded. It was just practice to help us know.

**TEACHER:** OK, so you're talking about contextualizing it without the penalty of the grade. And the other idea I'm hearing is the smaller practice quizzes. What about the issue of whether the smaller quizzes should count or not count?

**STUDENT G:** I think it should count less than a test grade. But we need to feel the pressure so we must study for it.

**TEACHER:** So *is* it the grade that puts the pressure on? What about just wanting to know it? Am I being totally unrealistic? It almost seems that I have to be punitive to get the kind of behaviors that I think will make you successful. There's something about that that bothers me.

**STUDENT A:** Well, we *are* teenagers. We know that colleges look at grades. Thirty years from now, I'm not going to need what I learn in history class, but right now, I need to know it for the grades. That's the drive behind everything — needing the grades.

**STUDENT B:** It's like he said. If we have homework and we can flip the pages back and forth and get the answer, we are going to do it. We get hours of homework every night, and we want to get done what we can fast. So if we know we have a quiz coming and we won't be able to look up the answer, we'll spend more time on that that night memorizing so that we can get the grade. If we can short-change something else, get it done quicker, we're going to do it.

**TEACHER:** What I want is for your skills and knowledge to improve, and I can facilitate that, but there's a big part that has to come from you. And the key is doing a little each day. You can't short-change the work as you go along and then cram for the test. Each topic builds on the previous one. What I would like you to consider is what you want to get out of all the time you put into this course. Maybe we could try a sort of scientific study to see if we can get a better result — try different strategies for studying and preparation to see if they result in improvement.

*[The students mumble some assent to this general idea. The teacher pulls the tests from her folder and prepares to return them to the students.]*

Don't let this test, this grade, define you. It is just an indication of a point in time. Success is determined by what you do with this information, how you respond. I know it's not fun to put in a lot of time and then not get a good result. That's why we're talking about this. We want to try to do some things — you and me — to produce better results.

This teacher cares about her students and struggles to find ways to motivate them to learn. She also loves the language and the study of Spanish cultures and fears that the combination of poor grades and her prodding them to take more responsibility will defeat her students. "I hate the thought that I might make them hate language when it's really their approach to learning that needs adjustment." Despite having "always felt it was [her] job to motivate them," she has discovered that learning must be a partnership between teacher and student with each sharing the responsibility for motivation. "I think I try to do a lot to motivate them, but it doesn't always work, and then I get very frustrated or discouraged. Maybe it would help the learning if we all had some input into motivation. Maybe this is something we need to do together. Maybe making this more transparent will enable them to move away from the cookbook approach or from their just giving up when they meet an obstacle. The teacher and the student have to be motivated, and maybe we need to be emotionally involved in the process together. I think, without realizing it, I have been setting up the emotional context based on what I think will motivate them instead of hearing from them."

Yet, despite these significant discoveries, the class discussion between this teacher and her students suggests that their differing assumptions and interests will continue to generate frustration. The teacher, whose interest includes getting the students to learn Spanish well enough to be able to enjoy communicating in it, assumes that in helping the students understand the nature of learning, she can bring them to a new level of consciousness. She hopes that consciousness will result in change. Ideally, her students will embrace the need to do the daily work to fix the basics of vocabulary and grammar in long-term memory and will accept personal responsibility for this work. But even as she gently pushes them toward the notion that a good part of the responsibility for learning falls on the learner, they push back and reveal their very different assumptions and interests.

Their honesty in articulating the reality of school for teenagers is instructive. They have too much to do and too little time to do it and feel rushed to get it all done. They must triage and find short-cuts in order to manage the load. As a result of the messages they receive from parents and teachers and the way the whole system is constructed, they assume what matters are the grades, which are the currency of colleges. The issue for them is not speaking Spanish but getting into college. Spanish really doesn't fulfill any deep need arising from the self; it has no deep meaning for them. But getting into college does, regardless of whether the need emerges from healthy or unhealthy sources. Each time the teacher pushes the students to accept responsibility for their learning and for their test grades, they push back. "Here is what you can do," the teacher suggests. "Here is what we need you to do," the students counter. "And here are the reasons we can't do what you suggest."

In terms of how school is currently structured — as an institution reflecting the passions and needs of teachers — it doesn't seem particularly surprising that some of the issues for students are grades, homework, quantity, pace and coverage. We need to look at these issues to see how they affect motivation, learning, and responsibility. The concerns and values reflected in their conversation with their Spanish teacher and their resistance to becoming as involved in the classroom as she wanted are reactions to a system that has always pretty much ignored students' selves.

Occasionally, a few brave teachers and administrators create alternatives to the status quo. The most rewarding teaching of my career happened in one of these ventures — a school-within-a-school that allowed a few students to have what was frequently a powerful and transforming educational experience. The Independent Immersion Program (IIP) had only two criteria for admission: a passion to study a specific area and the ability to work independently. Prior grades and standardized test scores were irrelevant. In fact, many of the most successful students in this program had done poorly in more traditional schooling. For students in the IIP, the usual distribution requirements for graduation were waived, replaced by a web of courses they chose or created because the courses were related to interests that mattered deeply to them. The IIP was an invitation for the students' self to guide and participate in their education.

Individual students over the years came to the program with interests in astronomy, painting, writing, music, genetics, architecture, medicine, international studies, film-making, mathematics, environmental science, computer science, marine biology. They built their curriculum around these centers of interest, which led them to a mixture of some traditional courses at the school, some courses at colleges or at other schools, some independent studies with professional mentors, and internships. These students created their own schedules, which usually involved work in their program not just during the regular class day but in the afternoon and evening, as well. And there were no grades. All assessments were narrative and included extensive narrative self-assessments by the students. The focus was on learning and on the students' development, not on grades. The students made decisions and choices for themselves. They were guided by advisors and professional mentors, but their choices determined the direction of their studies. Any mistakes in their decisions were theirs, as were the successes.

Freed from the fear and loathing of grades, students in IIP learned to make their own decisions and developed the sort of confidence we all need. Two of the IIP graduates spoke for many others in the self-evaluations they wrote. The first was written by a visual artist, a painter:

*This year I let go of a lot. I let go of having to mimic reality directly on my canvas. I let go of painting and drawing from photographs, a tool useful when beginning to paint and draw, but a tool that also hinders one's form of expression. I began painting from my mind and emotions. I let go of caring how so-and-so would react to a painting and started painting for myself. I gained self-confidence and realized that not everyone is always going to like my paintings . . . the clothes I wear . . . or even me.*

The second was written by a dancer:

*Beyond all of the skills and knowledge I've gained and beyond all the work I've accomplished, there is one thing I have gained this year that I only dreamed of last year and even this fall: self-confidence. I'm naturally a shy and easily intimidated person. I often have no confidence in myself and think the worst of everything I do. Often, I'm embarrassed to share my work with others in fear they will not like it and think I'm not good enough.*

*I felt I needed someone else to decide what was good so that I wouldn't be wrong. It was as if I couldn't think for myself. I didn't trust myself. I guess I've always had this issue; I was so hung up on acceptance from others because I never accepted myself. I had it backward for the longest time. I thought acceptance from others would bring self-acceptance. Something was only good if others said it was.*

*Somewhere in the middle of my [IIP] program, I found confidence. I stopped caring about the opinions of others and realized they wouldn't be able to accept me or like my work until I do. You and only you have the power to make yourself happy. This has been the ending of a three-year search for myself here at the Academy.*

*You can't let someone tell you to have confidence and then have it. I had everyone from teachers to friends to therapists telling me I just needed to be confident in what I did. No matter how many times they told me, it wasn't enough. Compliments, good grades, long sincere one-on-one talks, no amount of positive reinforcement from other people could boost my confidence. You have to find it yourself. That's what [this school] has been trying to teach me. I need to discover things on my own, and it starts from within.*

These are persuasive testimonies to the power of bringing the students' self into the classroom. These students become the sort that teachers long to teach: motivated, able to make meaning, skillful, knowledgeable, confident.

Several years ago, I taught a student named Angela in honors junior English. We struggled together. I tried to teach her how to write, but I failed. The grade always stood between us. She was afraid of the grade and tried to please me so that I'd give her a good grade. Then, in her senior year, she became a music student in the IIP. Like many students who are given the freedom to design their own program of study, Angela followed paths connected to her central interest in music, though perhaps connections not immediately obvious to an outside observer. For example, she felt she needed to improve her writing; it was important to the future she envisioned for herself, which included writing lyrics. So she asked me to teach her an independent course in writing. I can't describe how much I enjoyed, I think we both enjoyed, that experience. We felt liberated from the tyranny and oppression of the grade. We focused on writing. She experimented. She wrote for herself about things that mattered to her. She read the work of good writers and became a stronger reader and thinker, and her writing improved dramatically. She became a scholar.

The partnerships that characterize education in the IIP represent an ideal; not all high school students have discovered an area of real interest, though it might be revealing to examine whether this lack of deep interest is a function of American adolescence or the result of years of schooling that excludes the self of the student. But the fact remains: IIP isn't for everyone. (No single approach works for everyone, another truth we too easily and typically forget.) As a result, some of my colleagues continue to insist that the majority of adolescents need the schools we have created for them, and our job is to expose them to a variety of possible areas of study and to motivate them. My colleagues are both right and wrong. They are correct that adolescents benefit from

experiencing the array of possibilities for study and careers, but the schools we have created, schools structured to coerce or cajole students to become passionate about the things that matter to teachers, are the reason we have so few motivated students. Each of us thinks our course — our passion — is the most important, the most meaningful, and most of us assign homework as though our course were the only one in which the students were enrolled. Those Spanish 3 students voiced the sorry results of the schools we have created for them.

We can do better if we recognize that just as our passion became the source of our motivation, so their passion, once discovered, will be the source of their motivation. And since motivation is rooted in the needs, interests and emotions of the self, the key to tapping adolescent motivation is to create classrooms that welcome the emerging self of our young students. That is our job — not to motivate our students but to create circumstances and conditions that allow motivation and discovery to occur, to invent different ways to increase the likelihood that school will be emotionally relevant to students so that their studies begin to matter to them as much as what goes on in the halls and gym matters to them.

In the last two decades, we have begun to learn more about how the brain works. And the more we learn, the more reasonable becomes the notion that students' emotions, past experiences, psychology, beliefs, knowledge — the amalgam we call the self — affect learning. Although it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions, some of the current research, particularly that of Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a neuroscientist with a doctorate in education who works at USC with Antonio Damasio, is provocative. Contrary to the traditional view that reason can be separated from emotion, Immordino-Yang and Damasio (and others) have found compelling evidence that, for the most part, they are inseparable. Meaningful learning may be the result of “emotional thinking.” Their hypothesis is “that emotion-related [neurological] processes are required for skills and knowledge to be transferred from the structured school environment to real-world decision making because they provide an *emotional rudder* to guide judgment and action.” They go on to suggest,

*First, neither learning nor recall happen in a purely rational domain, divorced from emotion, even though some of our knowledge will eventually distill into a moderately rational, unemotional form. Second, in teaching students to minimize the emotional aspects of their academic curriculum and function as much as possible in the rational domain, educators may be encouraging students to develop the sorts of knowledge that inherently do not transfer well to real-world situations. . . . [K]nowledge and reasoning divorced from emotional implications and learning lack meaning and motivation and are little use in the real world.<sup>1</sup>*

Emotion fuels the brain; we engage in endeavors that are emotionally relevant to us. For our primitive ancestors, these endeavors — like finding food and shelter and eluding predators — involved physical survival. Today, though the jungle may be a more sophisticated sociocultural world and though survival may have a more prominent social aspect, the neural mechanisms remain the same. So adolescents, like the students in the Spanish class, master emotionally relevant knowledge that they can use, for example, to fit into a clique or protect themselves from the alpha bullies. And they learn emotionally relevant skills to manage massive amounts of emotionally irrelevant exercises so that they can achieve grades that will gain them admission to college. But the Spanish itself remains largely emotionally irrelevant, distant from the needs of the self. Some students, like Angela, find themselves: they discover a connection between a need emerging from the self and a school-sanctioned endeavor, at which point their education becomes emotionally relevant. The real world and the world of the self unite.

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Even students who, unlike Angela, haven't discovered a passion that focuses their education can experience moments when the self and classroom material meet. I recall one such moment in my classroom. We were studying *Hamlet*, and a student named Will was struggling to talk about what the play meant to him. He fumbled with words and made little sense trying to use the standard English-class-speak about tragedy and tragic flaws that had been stuffed into him for years. So I and the other students kept asking

## the key to tapping adolescent motivation is to create classrooms that welcome the emerging self of our young students.

him what he meant. Finally, there was a moment when his face flushed and he broke through a sort of mental constipation, and he said, "You know what this play is about? It's about this guy who worshipped his father, and his father was this distant, demanding perfectionist — this 'Hyperion.' And Hamlet could

never please his father, so he was probably closer to his mother, who was a lot warmer and approachable. And then his father dies and his mother turns all her attention to Claudius, and Hamlet has no one." On and on he went, flipping through the pages of the text, reading lines that supported the emotional logic he had made of the play. He became excited and engaged for the first time in classroom literature. He was talking about the play, but the play was also a mirror in which he saw much of his own life. It was the emotional logic of his own experiences that made the play meaningful to him. Will's self had entered the classroom.

Another important aspect of the self is the individual way that we perceive and understand the world and the problems that confront us. Not only must the problems be emotionally relevant to the self in order to motivate us to solve them but our perception of them, what they mean to us, influences or even creates their emotional relevance.

In her research on two children, Nico, who had the right hemisphere of his brain removed, and Brooke, who had his left hemisphere removed, Immordino-Yang (2007) has suggested that people have differing profiles of cognitive strengths and weaknesses and that we tend to recruit our strengths and compensate for our weaknesses to understand and solve problems. As a result, a teacher and her students might understand and, therefore, attack a problem in subtly to widely differing ways, depending on their individual profiles:

*... [E]ducators should think seriously about the problems they put to their students and the various neuropsychological ways that these problems could actually be interpreted and processed. What we intend as a simple math exercise, for example, could in essence be a verbal problem to one child, a spatial problem to another, and even an affective or social problem to a third, who may be thinking of the emotional implications of, say, the solution to a mathematics word problem.<sup>2</sup>*

This theory could have important implications for the interactions between the teachers' and students' selves in the making of meaning. In its suggestion that teachers become more aware of the differing ways individuals understand the problems and explanations we present, it also provides insight into what might be the causes of the many communication problems that arise between teachers and students.

In his book *Successful Intelligence*, Robert Sternberg tells a personal story that seems to illustrate the importance of understanding our students' ability to transform problems so that they can solve them. Sternberg describes the difficulty he had as a boy with spatial problems:

*By the time I was in high school, though, a strange thing had happened. My scores on tests of spatial ability improved radically. . . Or so it seemed. Had my spatial ability improved? Not really. It was no better than it had been years before. But I had come to realize that many spatial-ability problems on these tests can be solved verbally rather than visually. In other words, instead of trying to visualize what, say, a set of forms would look like in another spatial position, I tried to talk the problems through to myself. I would describe the figures verbally and then try to match that description with the answer options.<sup>3</sup>*

In Sternberg's description, I hear echoes of the student in the Spanish class who said that for him, "Speaking and writing are two different things. Speaking Spanish and writing Spanish are completely separate for me." Teachers with good spatial intelligence and teachers who cannot appreciate the difference between speaking and writing frequently tend not to understand students like Sternberg or that Spanish student. We become frustrated by students who fail to understand our "obvious," "easy" assignments. If we don't understand how a student perceives a problem and dismiss her attempts to solve it, we only succeed in making the problem emotionally irrelevant and in alienating her self from the classroom.

These illustrations reinforce my belief that we need to design schools that intentionally include the students' self in

their education — include their experiences, their emotions, their profile of cognitive strengths, their perceptions of the world and of problems, their evolving sense of who they are and what they believe. The old days of assuming that schools can isolate and address a rational portion of the whole and transform it into an echo of the teachers who lecture it may at last be finished.

In her essay on Nico and Brooke, Immordino-Yang also observed that “their families and teachers may have played a major role in their recoveries [from their hemispherectomies], through allowing these boys the freedom to actively engage in their own learning, without restricting them to preconceived notions about how they would function or recover after surgery.” We teachers typically approach students with preconceived notions, derived from our sense of self (how we function, what we need, what we understand). Too infrequently do we allow the freedom for students to engage in their own learning, even though we think we do. Watching Nico and Brooke approach problems, attempting to understand their perceptions, listening and responding to their needs allowed the teachers to become partners with the boys in meaningful and successful learning — an approach very similar to the relationship between teacher and student in the IIP.

Students and teachers, self-serving partners in learning — seems like a slam-dunk.

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### Notes

1. Immordino-Yang, Mary Helen and Antonio Damasio (2007). “We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education.” *Mind, Brain, and Education* 1 (1), 3-10.
2. Immordino-Yang, Mary Helen (2007). “A Tale of Two Cases: Lessons for Education From the Study of Two Boys Living With Half Their Brains.” *Mind, Brain, and Education* 1 (2), 66-83.
3. Sternberg, Robert. *Successful Intelligence*, Plume (1997).

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