

Walking the talk

In his book *The End of Education*, university teacher Neil Postman describes how he sets the scene with a new group of students at the beginning of the college year. He says something like this:

‘During this year I will be doing a good deal of talking. I will be explaining things, answering questions, and conducting discussions. Since I am an imperfect ‘knower’, and even more certainly a fallible human being, I will inevitably be making factual errors, drawing some unjustified conclusions, and perhaps passing off some of my opinions as facts. I should be very unhappy if you were to remain unaware of these mistakes. Your task in my classes is to make sure that none of my errors goes by unnoticed. At the beginning of each lesson I will, in fact, be asking you to tell me whatever errors you think slipped by in the preceding lesson. You must, of course, say why you think these are errors and, if possible, suggest a more accurate or less biased way of formulating what I said. Your assessment this year will be based partly on the rigour (and courtesy!) with which you pursue my mistakes. And, to further ensure that you do not fall into the passivity so common amongst students, I will, from time to time, deliberately include some patently untrue statements and attempt to smuggle past you some opinions disguised as facts. You don’t have to do this critical thinking on your own. Please talk to each other and form your own study groups to review the things I have said. I would be very pleased if some of you were to ask for class time in which to present a revised or improved version of my own presentations.’

Clearly Postman is talking to university students who might be expected to have developed the critical faculties and resilience to be able to deal with the kind of challenge he makes.

But what if we were to adopt a similar approach to knowledge when talking to younger people at primary and secondary schools? Some teachers seem to feel that it is their job to be—or at least seem to be—omniscient and infallible. They believe that if they say ‘I don’t know’ that means they do not know their stuff as well as they should, and risk losing the respect of students and parents. Yet, assuming teachers are knowledgeable and passionate about their subject(s), and assuming they are not always saying ‘I don’t know’, most teachers find that this is, in fact, a very positive role model to offer pupils, provided they move on from their position of uncertainty to a discussion with a learner about how they can find out what it is that they are keen to learn.

There are parts of the world, and groups of parents, who do not distinguish between ‘acknowledging genuine uncertainty’ and ‘being incompetent’. If that is the situation in your school, then you have a job of work to do, to help those parents learn to make that distinction. But wherever possible, teachers have found that it is not only more honest, but also more productive, to be a model of a fallible finder-outer than a brittle know-all. If we want children to grow up to be capable of exploring and experimenting, able to make mistakes and learn from them, then we should be able to model those qualities ourselves as much as possible. BLP teachers are not afraid to let students see them using their learning muscles: it encourages them to use theirs. Where students see that teachers are non-defensive and inquisitive, they are less likely to be ashamed of their own ignorance.

Questions like Postman's are, in fact, exactly the kinds which BLP teachers ponder when thinking how to be a powerful role model for their students.

In practice, this might mean:

- deliberately sharing new or contested findings and ideas in our subject with students
- cheerfully acknowledging when we don't know the answer to a question we are asked
- inviting students to throw tricky questions at us, so they can see how more expert people 'think on their feet' when faced with uncertainty
- being happy to share with students the task of finding things out
- pausing and thinking aloud when lessons do not go according to plan.

BLP teachers act as role models by noticing and highlighting certain aspects of learning (as in the many examples earlier in this chapter). But they also tend to:

- talk about their own learning lives
- talk about people they admire who have particular learning strengths, and what they have learned from them.

The panel opposite shows just some of the ways in which BLP teachers choose to model the different aspects of learning power.