

Classroom Creativity: Pedagogical Adaptability in Film

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A pair of remarkable cinematic teachers illuminates how adaptability can be central to success in the classroom. Katherine Watson (in “Mona Lisa Smile”) and Mark Thackeray (in “To Sir, With Love”) are able to win over skeptical students because they possess an array of virtues, ranging from openness and responsiveness to humility and courage. These virtues enable Watson and Thackeray to improvise entirely new curricula once they realize that their original pedagogical plans are ill-suited to these particular pupils. The result is that although they teach radically different kinds of students, both groups learn to think for themselves.

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INTRODUCTION

Most of us have had at least one teacher who stood out as having made a profound difference in our lives. Film portrayals of such teachers help crystallize the qualities that make for pedagogical success in actual classrooms. Analysis of two remarkable cinematic educators focuses on how they are able to win over students who resist and doubt them by radically changing their pedagogical perspectives in order to adapt to their pupils’ needs and interests. To do this, Katherine Watson (in Mike Newell’s *Mona Lisa Smile*, 2003) and Mark Thackeray (in *To Sir, With Love*, James Clavell, 1967) must possess an array of virtues, ranging from receptivity and responsiveness to humility and courage.

Although Thackeray (Sidney Poitier as “Sir”) is thrown into a rowdy, working class school in London and Watson (Julia Roberts) is the newly appointed art history lecturer in a posh women’s college, they face similar challenges. Each must contend with students who are skeptical of them: their person, background, and abilities. Thackeray has to deal with pupils from a lower socio-economic and educational class than he, whereas Watson’s problems are the reverse. In order to overcome the social distances separating them from their students, these exemplary teachers must jettison their prepared curricula to respond to the instructional needs of their students. Sir sees that his lower class charges need lessons in life--how to function effectively in an adult world of work and non-violent interaction. Watson immediately discovers that the privileged girls have already mastered the art history book that was to have spanned the entire course. Momentarily abashed, she soon improvises challenges to their conventional thinking about art.

Virtue in Action in the Classroom

Watson and Thackeray possess the cluster of virtues essential to adapt to their students and create a vibrant, rewarding classroom: openness, responsiveness, humility and a bit of courage. Adaptation begins

with openness. We cannot modify our behavior towards others to constructive effect unless we first perceive how these individuals are reacting to our initial actions. Openness entails a kind of attention, one especially alive to the experience of the individuals with whom we are interacting. Nel Noddings portrays the attentiveness needed for caring teaching as “receptive attention” (Noddings, 2002, pp.15-16). Teachers with this virtue habitually set aside their own preconceptions in order to understand what their students are thinking and care about. Ideas about what should be taught do not keep these educators from making themselves accessible to their students’ interests and feelings.

The intrinsic reward of instruction that issues from receptive attention is found in the very responses of the students themselves: it is internal to the instructional interaction (Noddings, 2002, p.19). In other words, the manner in which their students appreciate the efforts of the teacher fulfills the promise of the teacher’s attention to them. The teacher needs no outside or extrinsic payoff (such as student scores or awards) because her openness reaps the immediate delight of students who are wholeheartedly engaged with what she offers.

Openness needs to be accompanied by responsiveness: a readiness to act on what is perceived as the needs, problems, and successes of the students. The responsive teacher seizes upon what her openness has disclosed to tailor her behavior to her students’ perplexities and enthusiasms. Her receptive attention leads to educationally efficacious action. Openness and responsiveness are, therefore, mutually reinforcing. The openness is animated by the readiness to respond to what is perceived; the eagerness to best educate her students motivates the openness. Openness without auxiliary responsiveness would be little more than curiosity or fact-gathering, and responsiveness without openness would be guesswork, as the teacher would have no experiential basis on which to shape her behavior to the concrete demands of the actual students before her.

To take student experience and interest seriously, and be willing to give it priority over one’s own, requires humility. Both Watson and Thackeray are quick to see that student reactions to their previous mode of instruction do not bode well for future success. To see that they must change their strategy almost before it’s begun requires humility. Humility disposes us to appreciate what is valuable in a world that exists independent of ourselves. As Sara Ruddick describes it, “Humility is a metaphysical attitude one takes toward a world beyond one’s control” (Ruddick, 1984, p.217). People with humility admire human achievement and natural grandeur; they are humbled by these things. Humility is “an attitude which measures the importance of things independently of their relation to oneself” (Hill, 1991, p.114). Nancy Snow claims that humility leads us to recognize our human limitations, while experiencing worthwhile features of the world that extend beyond us. The emotionally appropriate reaction to such realization is feeling suitably appreciative of the human or natural good (Snow, 1995, pp.203-16).

On the positive side, humility includes a realistic awareness of our strengths, as well as of our limitations. The absence of self-inflation in humility does not demand a false, denigrated perspective on oneself. For this reason, Norvin Richards observes that humility includes an accurate assessment of oneself, coherent enough “to resist temptations to overestimate oneself and one’s accomplishments” (Richards, 1988, p.257). Accurate positive self-regard is crucial to the success of Watson and Thackeray, as they must have faith in their own talents to tackle their pedagogical tasks with new and untried agendas. It is because this pair of instructors pays close attention to what their students need or want, that they question their own pedagogical methods.

Along with humility, it takes some courage to depart from what at first seems like a viable instructional approach. As the willingness to take reasonable risks for the sake of valuable ends, courage involves enough confidence to overcome one’s fears or reservations. After all, re-envisioning and then revising a teaching perspective and syllabus is risky; one risks scuttling a large investment in time and energy for an uncertain or unsatisfying outcome. The teacher must then have enough faith in his or her resourcefulness to take the plunge into uncharted waters. Something like pedagogical humility and courage are needed for Watson and Thackeray to first identify the reasons for the unpromising response of the students, and then adapt to their needs and interests.

Openness and courage are also at work here, in the second signature behavior of excellent teachers: creative questioning. Openness is needed in asking good questions of students, because questions arise in

response to what is going on with them, including how they react to what has already transpired. Questions open an inquiry, and seek understanding. The teacher tries to get students to see how and why their understanding is incomplete, including their self-understanding: to question how well they know their own opinions. A productive question probes, penetrates the thinking and feeling of the students and begets further, worthwhile, thought and feeling.

Asking good questions also aims to help students learn how to formulate their own questions. When self-formulated, questions put students in a dual relationship with themselves: they are both negatively and positively oriented toward themselves. They are first aware that there is a gap or deficiency in their understanding; but, the awareness of this inadequacy is positive, as it initiates a remedial quest by means of a fresh question. Grappling with the challenge of formulating a productive question, students begin to see something of why they do not understand. Provoking the self-reflexive relationship of students to themselves and helping them to begin their own intellectual quests is part of what Socrates means when he describes his educational work as midwifery (Plato, 1921, p.33). The gifted teacher is able to discern the state of her students' incomplete or cloudy thinking and, like a good midwife, facilitate their labor toward greater comprehension.

Unless the teacher is truly paying attention to what the students are experiencing and expressing, she will not have a vital basis for posing an energizing question. Instead, she will have to fall back on a preconceived, packaged set of questions that may not speak to the concrete needs or preparedness of these particular students in their present situation. Asking evocative questions also takes some courage on the teacher's part, because they do not know how (or whether) the students will respond. Teachers risk having the question fall flat or being surprised by the students' reaction to the question. Questions venture into unknown territory, and teachers have to be courageous enough to sally forth intrepidly, without the security of a scripted answer. Of course, some questions will be fairly routine; however, insightful teachers are able to generate unanticipated questions, improvising on the spot in the face of student perplexity, and the questions in turn evoked from them!

Humility, Adaptation and Rapport

In her first day of teaching art history at Wellesley College in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), Katherine Watson is overwhelmed by her precocious and privileged students. Presenting art slides to the class, Watson is hit with a battery of expert answers as the girls have already read the semester's entire text. This display of expertise by her students reinforces Watson's insecurity in tackling the prestigious school with her modest credentials. By the next class, however, Watson shows her resiliency and ability to adapt on the fly. Offering slides of art that is not in the book, she catches the girls off-balance, encouraging them to think for themselves--outside the box, and the book. Watson presents a disturbing painting and asks, "Is it any good?" The class starts giving their opinions: "It's not art;" "I think it's grotesque;" "There's something aggressive about it, and erotic." One student asks, "Is there a rule against art being grotesque?" And another wonders whether there are standards.

Watson improvises a new syllabus in response to her students' hyper-preparation. They know books, and how to accept what they are told is good, but can they think and judge for themselves? Amidst the energetic class interaction, Watson prompts the girls to consider basic questions: what is art; what makes art good or bad; who are the experts of taste? For the rest of the semester, Watson will encourage them to open their minds, about art and about themselves, especially about their traditional roles as women. For Watson, art and feminism are entwined; the iconoclastic power of art resonates with the movement to liberate women from the social norms that stifle their freedom and creativity.

Watson soon takes her class on an outing to an artist's loft. Confronting a painting by Jackson Pollock, the students are apprehensive, lacking an authoritative framework within which to view the ground-breaking work, and express the hope that they will not have to write a paper on the expansive canvas. Watson again counsels direct experience: "Do yourself a favor. Stop talking and look." This reinforces her message that the girls must trust themselves and put aside concern with school assignments or grades. Watson tells the girls, "You're not required to write a paper. You're not even required to like it. You are required to consider it." We see her students really looking at line, color, texture, layers of

paint, brushstrokes, having recourse to their own experiences and reflections, rather than to authority and traditions of taste. The students will later debate the meaning and value of DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, relying on their own responses rather than well-regarded texts.

Watson offers direction and insight about the art she loves. Discussing Van Gogh, she tells the girls that "he painted what he felt, not what he saw." Watson suggests that Van Gogh's brushstrokes "seem to make the night sky move." She proceeds to note that contemporary packages of paint-by-the-numbers of Van Gogh's work purport to make everyone artists. We see the irony in the commercialization and standardization of an artist who simply could not conform to traditional artistic standards. Watson seems to be implying that the artist is a role model for the students, who also have the choice of whether to conform to what other people expect of them. (Watson is shortly delighted when the girls' give her their own, idiosyncratic versions of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers-by-the-numbers*.)

When fall enrollment for Watson's class goes through the roof, the administration invites her back. The restrictive conditions attached to her future employment, however, convince the art historian to decline the offer. Although Watson had initially coveted working at Wellesley, she learns that it is not the best place for her to be an educator. She has questioned her own initial enthusiasm and reexamined her priorities. On the other hand, Thackeray chooses to remain at the high school; having discovered his true vocation, he declines the engineering job he had thought he desired all along.

Learning What to Teach

Mark Thackeray in *To Sir with Love* is an impeccably dressed, well-spoken black engineer, bidding his time and making ends meet by teaching working class London high school kids. Amidst the unruly, unresponsive students, Thackeray is at sea, trying to stick to the standard curriculum, teaching such subjects as math and geography. Then he has an epiphany, uttering the word, "Kids." Thackeray dramatically throws the traditional school books in the garbage, calling them useless, and tells the students that things are going to change.

Informing his pupils that they may call him either Mr. Thackeray or "Sir," he promises that he will treat them as "responsible adults." Sir will augment the standard high school fare with "life lessons:" comportment, respect, proper form of address, and hygiene. The educational goal is to prepare his students for civilized life. When the students ask what they will talk about, Thackeray replies: "Life, survival, love, death, sex, marriage, rebellion. Anything you want." To scrap his class preparations and adapt to the everyday needs of his students, Sir must first be open--to their interaction, speech, and values.

Because Thackeray is discussing subjects that are inherently interesting to the students, they are engaged; their hands shoot up when asked what they want to discuss. One student asks how you know a boy is the right one? Thackeray admits that he's never been married, and, in turn, asks what a girl should look for in a man. Overcoming resistance from the school's principal, Thackeray finally gets a museum trip approved. When the kids show up for the outing scrubbed, nicely dressed, and eager, Sir quips, "For a moment, I thought I was in the wrong classroom." After the trip goes well, Thackeray teaches them cooking, saying "This is survival training," and explains that he was poor too. He soon enlists a friendly female teacher to help his girls with makeup as well.

A teaching moment occurs in gym class, when the Phys. Ed. instructor unsympathetically pushes a heavysset boy who falls trying to perform on a piece of apparatus. The boy's classmate, Potter, threatens the insensitive teacher, but Thackeray, quickly summoned by a student, intervenes in the nick of time. Alone with the students, Sir explains that Potter, who was sticking up for the maligned student, would be viewed as the aggressor and could have gotten into serious trouble--especially as an adult, outside of school. It is not just about the teacher pushing the overweight boy; it is about self-control and dealing with anger in a responsible way. The boys erupt when Sir tells Potter that he has to apologize to the bullying teacher, and protest that the teacher should apologize to the overweight student.

Sir says that his business is with them, not with the teacher. He asks Potter whether he's a man or a hoodlum. He points out that if Potter apologizes out of fear (of reprisals) then he is a child, not a man. In this life lesson, Sir offers the alternative of being a (responsible) man, rather than a (violent) hoodlum or

(cowed) child. Sir adapts his thinking, and tailors his teaching, to address what he sees as ineffectual modes of coping with problems. He questions the students and offers them choices.

Taking over the gym class for the former teacher, Thackeray is inveigled into boxing with the recalcitrant, wise-cracking student named Denham. Having absorbed several blows, Sir thumps Denham smartly in the solar plexus and immediately regrets it. Later Denham asks why Sir did not follow up his punch with more. Sir answers that hitting does not solve anything, and suggests that Denham get a job teaching younger boys to box.

Thackeray is soon delighted to be offered the engineering job he had long sought after, only to be strongly encouraged by his colleagues (including the crusty cynic of the bunch) to continue teaching. Sir dances with the infatuated female student Miss Dare, whom he has counseled to forgive her mother's indiscretions. He is visibly moved when the students give him a present, and the film's title song is sung for him. Unlike Watson, Sir decides to stay at the school, for he has found his true calling. Both have learned a great deal about themselves, and maybe that is ingredient in all truly fine teaching. Excellent teachers are engaged in a process of authentic self-discovery, thereby helping students explore their own deficiencies, preferences and personalities.

Undergirding the sparkle and charm of Thackeray and Watson are the virtues that enable them to be exceptionally effective educators. Genuinely open and responsive, they appreciate their students' needs and creatively meet them. Thackeray and Watson are humble enough to recognize when they should change their approach when necessary, yet confident enough in their abilities to take pedagogical chances for the sake of student success.

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