

# WHAT MAKES CLASSROOM LEARNING A WORTHWHILE EXPERIENCE?

by Noam Shpancer

What makes the classroom experience worthwhile? This, I believe, is a fundamental question for teachers who seek to understand what they do and improve at it. Granted, it is easy for most of us to articulate what makes the classroom experience worthwhile for us. We can readily list the usual suspects without resorting to overheads: the satisfaction in glimpsing the “a-ha” expression on a student’s face; the continual encounter with talented youth, through whom we can extend our own lives both backward and forward; the tingling pleasure and subtle disbelief you (and your mother) experience every time someone calls you “Doctor.”

But we have been less committed to—and less successful in articulating—why the classroom experience is worthwhile for students. This question is crucial because, as alternative methods of instruction and content delivery evolve and multiply, the answers to it will determine the character and shape—indeed the very existence—of our profession in the long run.

It has become a cherished tribal ritual of a sort for college teachers to

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lament their students' ever-eroding attendance, participation, attention spans, and fashion sense, and to conveniently attribute these trends to varied sources safely removed from our classroom: contemporary teen culture with its conflicting messages and noisy, shallow preoccupations; shoddy high-schools; broken homes. And while all these may be factors, they are neither necessary nor sufficient explanations.

Rather, students' failure to show up for class—physically or, often, mentally—is in large measure a telling commentary on the classroom

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experience itself. The honest question for us in this context is: Why should students show up for class? What unique value is offered in your class that should compel a student to get up for it at 8 a.m. on a frozen winter morning? Or rush to it from work at 5:30 p.m., sacrificing a lovely evening at home watching *Jeopardy* reruns? What happens in your classroom that justifies the serious effort and rising expense involved in continual attendance? What are you providing in the class-

room that cannot be obtained elsewhere—in the textbook, in the newspaper, on the Internet, on TV, or in the library—with far greater convenience and at less expense?

It seems clear to me that if what we offer in the classroom is indistinguishable from what is offered elsewhere for less, then the laws of economics and plain common sense dictate that people will eventually go elsewhere. We can see the clear beginnings of such a trend in the continuing expansion of online courses. Our main task as classroom teachers who seek to understand what we do and improve at it is thus twofold. First, we should identify our unique niche—the educational elements that can only (or most effectively) be delivered by a teacher in the classroom. Second, we should create a classroom experience that will facilitate the delivery of those elements. The goal of this essay is to address these two questions.

To keep the teacher-in-the-classroom format viable, we need to identify first its unique educational features. What might these features be? This important debate is yet to be decided, or perhaps even seriously joined, but here are my suggestions.

First, the classroom is an efficient way to deliver you to the students in person. At this point you may sheepishly ask: "What's so special about me?" Fair question, but anyone who entertains it cannot possibly be an

academic. As an academic, you know what's special about you. I believe that, in general, as far as your students are concerned, the classroom is unique in that it offers them a safe, up-close, real-time glimpse of the workings of a trained mind, the mind of an expert—your mind.

In day-to-day life we—and our students—often interact with experts in different fields; but, for the most part, we only get to hear their final judgment on things. Joe, my auto mechanic, takes one look under the hood of my car and usually can quickly identify what's wrong and how much it will cost to fix it. I do not get to hear and understand how he arrived at this conclusion. What process did he follow? What questions did he ask himself? The students, on the other hand, are with you, the expert, as you identify and work through a problem. They watch as you dissect an issue to reveal its internal processes. They observe and offer comments and suggestions as you respond to a question by approaching it critically: separating the trivial from the essential, evaluating various logical possibilities, and weighing several lines of evidence. They cannot readily get that from TV or the Internet.

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A teacher in the classroom may offer students not only expert process, but also direct give-and-take and focused, personal attention. Other learning situations in the students' lives either lack expertise or attentive interaction, or both. The Internet, for example, provides a pale imitation of reciprocity—you type in a question and get a list of (usually many) Web sites that contain your search term—but this process is a weak substitute for real, live interaction, partly because the Internet is a passive entity (it doesn't initiate dialogue) and partly because it lacks the attentive component: it doesn't look you in the eye, it doesn't smile at you with encouragement or appreciation, and it doesn't respond to non-verbal nuance. You can't get attention from a search engine, or even a book. You *can* get attention from a teacher in the classroom. As the students engage in the problem-solving process with you, learning in the classroom becomes uniquely interactive: it is a reciprocal, live dialogue in which you and your students continuously negotiate the material as well as each other's abilities, needs, demands, and goals. If you focus solely on "the material," the students will promptly check out of the interaction, classroom energy will deflate, and the experience will wither. They can get the material from a book. Care and attention to their learning process is what

*you* provide, in the classroom.

The classroom experience is further distinguished from other teaching media—such as the traditional apprenticeship, for example—in that it affords not only direct access to the expert’s processes but also immersion in fundamental *group* processes: communication, debate and negotiation, cooperation. The classroom offers students a safe, face-to-face, and academically productive group experience. Other learning experiences may combine one or two of these qualities, but not all three. For example, the Internet may be safe and academically productive, but it lacks the interactive aspect.

Acknowledging that student interaction is a unique feature of the classroom experience inevitably calls into question our reliance on the traditional lecture. A classroom dominated by the lecture severely limits group interaction. Unless you happen to be a gifted orator, when you lecture, you are in large measure competing with the textbook and the Internet on *their* turf: straight-up delivery of factual material. Moreover, when you lecture, you inevitably enact in your classroom a familiar and characteristically dismal “school schema.” By assuming the prototypical “teacher” role, you practically force the students to assume the concomitant “student” role. In my experience, students tend to perform more poorly and become bored—and boring—when they are forced to act “like students.” In other words, the “student-in-class” schema for most students includes behaviors such as sitting down, doo-



dling, daydreaming, copying notes, and trying to remain silent and, in extreme cases, awake. These behaviors are not conducive to learning. What is conducive to learning is a live classroom, where students engage the material through dynamic interaction with each other and with the teacher.

The classroom is unique in its ability to provide direct access to both expert and group processes, rather than merely delivering content. Interestingly, however, while an ongoing and lively debate over “the canon” and “core curriculum” is a staple of university life, one hears very little buzz regarding “core classroom processes,” as if process is somehow incidental or secondary to content. It is neither.

In fact, the classroom experience distinguishes itself most from other teaching media not in its content delivery properties but rather in its unique processes. To the extent that we are selling a product—to use a problematic but probably necessary metaphor—the product we are sell-

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ing is not just the knowledge base of our discipline but also the meta-skills that underlie knowledge acquisition and application *across* disciplines: immersion, curiosity, resilience, critical thinking, the embrace of complexity, the persistent quest for converging evidence. Students will have little memory of—and little use for—much of the specific course content, but they will remember the dominant class processes, because these processes apply across a broad range of circumstances and life paths. In the long run, internalizing the fundamental mechanics of the discovery process—as well as its thrill and challenge—is more important than any particular discovery.

So the classroom experience is unique in how it affords direct access to expert and group processes. In the classroom as it should be—alive and interactive—students may learn about handling knowledge and handling people. But how do we create such a classroom? If nothing else, this is a worthy debate to enter into. It is safe to assume that thoughtful answers will vary by discipline, individual temperament, and institutional culture, but here are my suggestions.

Clearly, for the class to be alive and reciprocal requires allowing—even cultivating—a measure of flexibility and unpredictability. The classroom, in this context, is to the textbook what the live show is to the studio recording. People who own the CD still want to catch the live

show since it contains a promise of immediacy, intimacy, surprise, and an opportunity to not only hear, but also *be with* the artist and the material. Granted, the attraction of some live shows is the presence of a celebrity, a famous, iconic, or admired person. We do not have that weapon at our disposal. Unless you happen to be that rare type of Academic All-Star, your students will not gather around the front row of your classroom to bask in your reflected glory. But you can still provide a good show, allowing for immediacy, give-and-take, intimacy, and surprise.

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To accomplish this, you should remember what makes the classroom experience worthwhile: expertise, focused attention, and group interaction. To set the stage for these qualities, I find it useful to avoid rigid lesson plotting, micromanagement, reading from notes, and, perhaps most of all, long, detailed overheads that the students must feverishly copy.

Classroom time is a precious resource that should be used mindfully. One would be hard pressed to identify a more vacuous classroom

activity than copying notes; it is the hallmark of the dead classroom. I challenge any teacher to provide a straight-faced, reasoned account of how this practice adds unique value to the students' classroom experience. Your students should not have to copy your overhead or Microsoft PowerPoint notes; rather they should be summarizing in their notes the ideas and explanations that emerge during class interaction and discussion. If detailed overheads are clearly indicated, you should furnish the students with a written copy of them.

Using broad outlines and a flexible approach will allow you to more easily seize on and develop emerging, unscripted moments or moods in the classroom. Such unexpected occasions that arise organically from within the classroom journey offer opportunities for strong educational and personal benefits, in the same way that travelers to a foreign country often gain more from chance encounters with the locals than from sticking to the planned itinerary. If you approach the classroom from this perspective, you can seize upon situations and make them instructive. Those two students whispering in the back with their baseball caps backwards, do not represent a threat to your authority and further evidence for the decline of civilization, rather they embody a teaching opportunity. Stop what you're doing and ask them to repeat what they were saying (I tell students in advance that everything said in the class-

room is the intellectual property of the entire class and that they should thus be prepared to share it). Your challenge is to seamlessly incorporate their content into the classroom discussion, just as a good architect incorporates elements of the surrounding landscape into successfully designed building sites.

Years ago, when I was teaching elementary school children, a boy got up one day during class and crawled into an empty bookshelf in the corner. When I asked him why, he said: "I wanted to know what it feels like to be a book." Had I yelled at him to get back in his chair or ignored him, neither I, nor the class, would have experienced such a touching response; we would have missed the insight it provided into that boy's mind, and the minds of children in general.

I would further suggest that once in a while you should come to class unprepared. I think the reason many classes so often seem dead is that they are over-scripted. When we

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hear the word "preparation" in the context of teaching, many of us associate it with a meticulous lesson plan, a minute-by-minute itinerary for the class hour. Perhaps we should hear "preparation" differently, as in being prepared to meet the students, to interact, to improvise, to explore. I have noticed over time that my most enjoyable classes had the character of being works in progress—a process of assembling, rather than merely buying, the product. Coming into class with a germ of an idea—a theme, a question, an activity—and letting its emergent properties crystallize in the course of the class is often an exhilarating learning experience for students, and for the teacher.

A few semesters ago, for example, in a large introductory class, we were talking about gender schemas and their role in shaping one's interaction with the world. On a whim and without any clear plan, I separated the class into small same-sex groups and asked each group to write down the top five components in its "schema"—the general way of interacting or thinking—of the other sex. A lively debate ensued within the groups. I instructed each group to write its list of components on the board, thus making public the results of the small group discussions. Once done, I asked all students to read the different lists. I then said: "Here's the data. Now, what can scientists do with data?" A student said: "Look for patterns." I asked if they saw any patterns. They had no difficulty seeing that each sex described the other in primarily negative and

hostile terms. I pointed out to them that my instructions did not include any prompts about what kind of traits to include in the lists. I asked them what effects might interpreting the world using such ideas have on their actual interactions with members of the other sex. There was a lively discussion.

Looking to continue to explore, I asked those who disagreed with how their sex was depicted in any of the lists to come up, briefly explain

why they disagreed, and erase the offensive terms. As they were excitedly doing this with much back-and-forth, I overheard a student say that it would be much more accurate for each sex to describe *itself*. I made a mental note of the comment. After the students of both sexes finished erasing each other's lists, we discussed another emerging theme: men did not see themselves as women saw them, and vice versa. What might be the reasons for this? And what are the implications? After a lively discussion, I asked each group to compose its own sex's

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schema and put it on the board. Lo and behold, the descriptions were overwhelmingly positive. What does that tell us, I asked, about gender bias? About perception?

As in romance, an opening gambit is often all that is required to open up the road to discovery. As in romance, a prepared speech is no match for the improvised, heartfelt response. In class, as in life, an unexpected turn carries risks, but also opportunity, excitement, and fun: You get shown the light in the strangest places.

As teachers, we are often preoccupied with the question "Will I be able to cover all the material?" Instead, we would do well to spend some class time *receiving* material from students. For the class to be alive, it needs to incorporate the students' stories, their concerns, and their culture. This is important because students respond to course material best when they see that it is applicable to their lives. To apply the material to students' lives, you need to know something about them. I make a point in all my classes to take some cherished class time every week to ask students things like: What's new and different in your life? What did you do this weekend to care for your soul? Tell me one interesting, important, or funny thing that happened in your life last week.

This is not a waste of classroom time. Having students copy notes is a



waste of classroom time. Reciting the textbook from behind the lectern is a waste of classroom time. For me, inquiring about students' lives is not trivial chitchat but rather an essential feature of the live classroom. First, it keeps me reasonably well-informed about what is going on with the students, which is important since every year my own experience becomes further removed from theirs, as I am aging while they are not. Second, asking individual students in class about their experience implies that their experience matters. Students find this reassuring in the same way you find it reassuring when someone says or does something to imply that your experience matters.

In addition, inviting students to share their stories nurtures the social aspect of the classroom—the sense of community—and facilitates students' level of comfort with each other and with me. My questions provide students with an opportunity to talk in class about an issue in which they have some expertise—themselves. In turn, they become

less apprehensive about talking in class in general. Moreover, the students' stories provide me with a steady supply of relevant anecdotes with which to illustrate the concepts and ideas discussed in class. A single story may surface repeatedly in different contexts, facilitating the class's sense of shared history and illustrating the multi-dimensional nature of things. For example, a student's story about her upcoming wedding may become relevant when we discuss in class the topics of stress, the power of cultural institutions, the role of physical attractiveness, or the dynamics of decision-making.

Finally, my interest and willingness to listen model for students the open and engaged stance about learning, and life, that I would like to nurture in them. This kind of modeling is something that even the best books and most interactive computers cannot do. A book does not learn from the reader and a computer is not a role model.

If you want to see vibrant, searching, creative, and expertly guided student interaction you should head to your university's preschool playroom. I did. As it happens, my research involves long hours of observation in daycare centers. Over the years, I have come to perceive that, as a learning environment, the preschool playroom is generally superior to the typical college classroom.

Preschool researchers have long documented the differences between low- and high-quality preschool environments. In low-quality

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preschools, the children are either unsupervised, wandering aimlessly, bumping into the furniture and each other, or they are overscheduled, moving rigidly and hurriedly among a few preplanned and mechanically executed “activities.” The low-quality caregiver lacks warmth and expertise, and is either withdrawn or controlling—continuously lecturing the children about “being good.” Such environments have a certain feel to them: either noisy and chaotic but lacking warmth, or rigid and without spirit.

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High-quality preschool environments provide a balance between freedom and discipline. A variety of age appropriate toys and play spaces are set up in the playroom. There are well-defined areas: the sand table, the water table, the Lego corner, the kitchen space. The children can move about, explore, interact, and find their niches. The noise is joyous, and instead of chaos you see freedom of movement and expression. The high-quality caregivers are at once omnipresent and invisible. They

float about, in and out of interactions, attending to each child and group. They get a sense of the children’s ideas, projects and plans and may then elaborate, illuminate, encourage, or make gentle suggestions, but they do not overwhelm, dominate, or dictate child interaction. The high-quality caregivers facilitate the educational, emergent properties of each situation. They serve to support the children’s ongoing interaction and knowledge construction processes. In this atmosphere, ideas can develop organically; story lines create themselves; and safe, genuine, involved exploration occurs. The high-quality preschool playroom delivers a valuable, unique experience that cannot be replaced or even approximated by the Internet, books, or television.

For college teachers, operating within this preschool metaphor will require redefining both the students’ and their own roles. Here’s a thought experiment: Think of your classroom as a high-quality preschool playroom. Let ideas be the materials. Supply the students with an adequate, not overwhelming number of specific, discipline-relevant ideas—or tasks to master, or problems to solve. The students, in small groups, pick them up and begin to “play”: What can we make of this idea? How can we fit it into this environment? How does it change things if you stick this idea here? You float about—suggesting, pointing, clarifying, facilitating and in turn responding to the emergent properties of the liv-

ing interactions and explorations occurring around the room. The fluid structure allows for a livelier dialogue in which if you don't know the answer to a question, you admit it and say: "How do we go about finding an answer to that question?" By doing so you model honesty and teach students how to approach a gap in knowledge as an opportunity for learning rather than as a weakness or deficiency. You also create a safe learning atmosphere, and help frame the classroom situation as a work in progress—not only for students but also for you.

**I**ronically, as I mentioned earlier, the unique value of the classroom situation is almost patently lost when students are assigned the "student role." In keeping with the preschool playroom metaphor, it is useful to have students engage in "pretend play" by assigning them in class to roles that they don't yet occupy but will occupy in the future.

For example, in my developmental psychology class, I may cast a group of students in the role of parents and ask them to come up with an appropriate response to their 5-year-old girl's question: "Where do babies come from?" I ask them to justify their response using data and arguments from theories of cognitive, social, and language development. In my abnormal psychology class, I cast them in the role of therapists and ask them to interview a "patient" (usually me), arrive at a diagnosis, and devise a treatment plan. I cast them in the role of teachers and ask them to find a creative way to teach a freshman some concept or idea. As they take on "adult" roles, they tend to enact and practice new, emerging behavioral schemas; they have to think ahead, stretch, and imagine. They engage in more fruitful interactions, come up with a good understanding of the material, and have more fun.

In the classroom, as in life, all else being equal, more fun is better than less fun. It has been reported in the literature that students rate a dynamic, enthusiastic teacher higher than a cold, businesslike one even though each type produces similar exam scores. But exam scores characteristically measure content learning. Class evaluations add a measure of process, and when students have fun learning, they learn that learning is fun, which is, in my mind, one of the goals of teaching. Unenthusiastic teachers are much like unenthusiastic lovers: they may get the job done technically, but in the process they communicate something depressing about you, about themselves, and about love. We can be of lasting assistance to

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the students if, in teaching them to become capable learners, we help them to perceive the inherent joy of such pursuit.

And what of technology? Clearly, arguing as I have done here for the unique advantages of the classroom situation over low- and high-tech teaching media, such as books and the Internet, does not mean that we should keep technology out of the classroom. On the contrary, the latest technology should be used in the classroom to aid the classroom learning process, but not as an end in itself. The medium is definitely *a* message, but it's not *the* message. As

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teachers, we should not let gadgetry distract us from the core undertaking. In the classroom as in the movies, fancy pyrotechnics can often mask an absence of depth and meaning. And while technology changes dramatically and often, the core questions that preoccupy higher education—what and how to teach—have not changed much at all and are as fresh and urgent now as they were in ancient times. The new technology may illuminate the big questions in

new ways, but the big questions—not technology—should remain the focus of the classroom, and students should explore these questions using the processes uniquely afforded by the classroom experience: observing and interacting with a trained mind in a dynamic and reciprocal group process.

**I**n summary, my hope is that the ideas discussed here provide one important direction in which our ongoing conversation about teaching should go. I have argued that to keep the teacher-in-the-classroom format justifiable and viable we need to identify—and protect and nurture—its unique value, its beating heart. I have proposed that the classroom experience uniquely affords students direct, live access to trained minds as well as safe, face-to-face, and academically productive group interaction. In other words, the classroom is a great place to learn how to deal with knowledge and how to deal with people—both of which are essential for success in the world, and neither of which can be downloaded from Yahoo.

Furthermore, for students to reap the unique benefits of the classroom experience, we as teachers need to change our understanding of the classroom, and much of what we do in it. I propose we take important conceptual cues from the preschool playroom. We should frame the classroom as a safe zone for intellectual exploration, rather than as a site of

one-way knowledge transfer. We should cultivate creative interaction and emergent properties in the classroom, viewing it as an open-ended essay question rather than as a true/false item. We should invite the students' experience and stories into the classroom.

**T**hese observations and suggestions are by no means comprehensive or definitive. Underlying them is a more general and urgent call for us to identify the worthwhile features of the classroom experience and to learn how to deliver these features to students. Such exploration will require courage, since it implies the teacher-in-the-classroom format can no longer be taken for granted. To search honestly for the unique value of classroom teaching requires admitting that it has been, in an important sense, lost. But an honest search is the best way of finding what is lost. And an honest search for elusive truths is, at the end of the (school) day, the essence of higher education. 