Paying attention to what matters most for lifelong learning

(and it is as good for the adults as it is for the kids)

Enter most schools today and you will hear discussions about substantive changes to how we do school. Conversations revolve around programmes, structures, use of time, resources, and accountability. The question raised in this article focuses on the attention to both teachers and students that can bring about lasting change: How do we shift the way teachers and students think and work together? Regardless of any policy, structural, or curricular change you make, this article contends that the change will not be sustainable or practical unless you partner this work with the attitudes and dispositions necessary for learning.

Over the past two decades, our attitudes and dispositions have become increasingly shaped by powerful external forces and structures that continue to standardise the ways that we account for learning. Too often there is a disconnect between what is in the teacher's head, what is in the student's head and what is in this week's/month's/year's rhetoric of school reform. We do not create the conditions for teachers and students to become immersed in a learning experience in which they have some control over the pursuit: access to information and ideas, regular opportunities for feedback and guidance; and parameters (e.g., sufficient time, clear criteria) that honour the messiness of the work.

This narrow focus has translated into a culture in which teachers and students are actors in a pre-determined curriculum that does little to promote active engagement. How teachers and students feel about the work they are being asked to do impacts their degree of engagement. Their attitudes and dispositions are pivotal to success in being able to handle the complexity of challenges, problems and tasks within

and beyond the school walls. We want every learner both teacher and student to engage in rich, creative problems and ideas that require inquiry, analysis, and inventive solutions and creations. Teachers and students need to partner as they make transitions into new ways of learning.

Too often, we become so concerned with what the student needs that we forget to take care of ourselves as teachers. The stress and weariness that many teachers feel are transmitted to students. We need to resuscitate the curiosity, discoveries, and opportunities that we are too busy to make time for. Therefore, we take a parallel approach to the question of change: every attitude and disposition we are asking of students, we are also asking of teachers because the health of our classrooms depends on it. Although this conception of learning has been in existence philosophically and in practice since the days of Aristotle, we are now challenged with modernising teaching and learning in contemporary contexts such as job shadowing and maker spaces. Teachers need to believe that the work that they are doing with students is important and valuable for the students' future. Likewise, students need to believe that the work they are doing is important and valuable for their own future.

Operationalising Thinking for Teachers and Students in a Contemporary Model

Regardless of what instructional model or programme a school may be pursuing, teaching and learning necessitates critical and creative thinking that broadly and deeply engages learners. Teachers and students need to develop attitudes and dispositions such as applying past knowledge to new situations; creating, imagining, and innovating; considering alternate perspectives; and taking responsible risks (Costa and Kallick, 2014). The progressive development of knowledge about thinking and the practice of using thinking strategies can increase teachers' and students' motivation for, and management of, their own learning. They become more confident and autonomous problem-solvers and thinkers.

The chart on the following page illustrates how critical and creative thinking can be operationalised in pedagogical practices. The first column delineates four psycho-social attributes that can improve engagement and performance. How we feel about the work impacts our effort. These attributes are: relevance, growth mindset, self-efficacy, sense of belonging. The second column offers related teacher and student actions in relation to each attribute that are aligned with the shift in identities described above: teacher as coach, student as explorer. The third column connects the attitudes and dispositions (Habits of Mind) specific to each attribute that are essential for learners to navigate collaborations inside and outside of the classroom to achieve goals and to produce something of value.

Psycho-Social Attributes	Sample Teacher and Student Actions	Related Habits of Mind
Relevance: "This work has value for me." The work challenges me to apply my understanding to complex and intriguing problems.	Teacher explores ideas and interests outside of the classroom to inspire students. Student immerses him or herself in an idea or investigation because they believe it can impact others.	Remaining open to continuous learning; Questioning and problem posing; Drawing from past knowledge and applying it to new situations
Growth mindset: "My ability and confidence grow *with my effort.*" The belief that I can learn — realising that I can get better.	Teacher provides candid and constructive feedback to facilitate thinking and development. Student persists realising that he/she can improve whether success comes easily or proves to be more elusive.	Finding humour; persisting; taking responsible risks; Remaining open to continuous learning; Thinking flexibly; Thinking about your thinking
Self-efficacy: "I can succeed at this." Managing the learning: how I plan for, act on, and monitor my own progress as I am learning.	Teacher provides strategies and tools for self-management (e.g., organisational tools, time-management tools) to encourage students to accomplish goals and reflect upon what they are learning as they progress toward goals. Student manages his/her learning using tools to manage time, resources, and work with others. Student takes ownership for learning plan and progress monitoring. Student reflects on progress toward reaching goals.	Thinking about your thinking; striving for accuracy; Persisting; communicating with clarity and precision; Managing impulsivity
Sense of belonging: "I belong in this academic community." How I am accepted — how I fit within the community and accept/celebrate differences.	Teacher sets up and ensures a safe, respectful environment. Teacher sets up an environment that is a collaborative partnership rather than a hierarchy. Student finds value in listening to and interacting with others. Student feels safe and accepted to openly express ideas and thinking.	Thinking interdependently; listening with understanding and empathy; Responding with wonderment and awe

Psycho-social attributes have been adapted from Farrington, A.L. et.al. (2012).

So what follows? What do I do now?

If the typical teacher role of delivering content and student role of passively receiving and regurgitating knowledge has been rendered obsolete by easily accessible technologies, what happens now? How do we envision our roles within a modern context to prepare teachers and students for the world? In the spirit of partnership, here are six recommendations that are as true for the teachers as they are for the students.

Recommendation #1: Get off the treadmill.

We keep going without a sense of purpose. What are you trying to accomplish? We know that we are sometimes increasing our speed but that doesn't mean we have accomplished anything purposeful. Get clear and define your purpose. Sit down and write a journal reflection defending what you are doing and why you are doing it. ***HOM: questioning and problem posing***

**Recommendation #2: *Stop and smell the roses and take a look around.***

Breathe deeply and find a way to settle down. Allow for silence rather than jumping in to fill awkward pauses. As Adrienne Rich suggests, "The impulse to create begins... in a tunnel of silence." Notice the questions that arise out of silence and reflection. How do you respond to those inquiries? Do you pursue them? ***HOM: gathering data with all senses***

Recommendation #3: Be curious about something. What makes you wonder?

Find something that you are intrigued by — an idea, a problem, a challenge, a topic, a text, an issue. Think about the ideas that are triggered. Why is it compelling? How is it connected to you — your perception of the world, the string of information and ideas? What associations occur to you? ***HOM: creating, imagining, and innovating***

Recommendation #4: Be inspired by an idea and go for it.

Design a question, clarify a problem, pursue an idea and then take action. Might you use the following graphic to help you take your inspiration and move it to something actionable? ***HOM: thinking about your thinking***
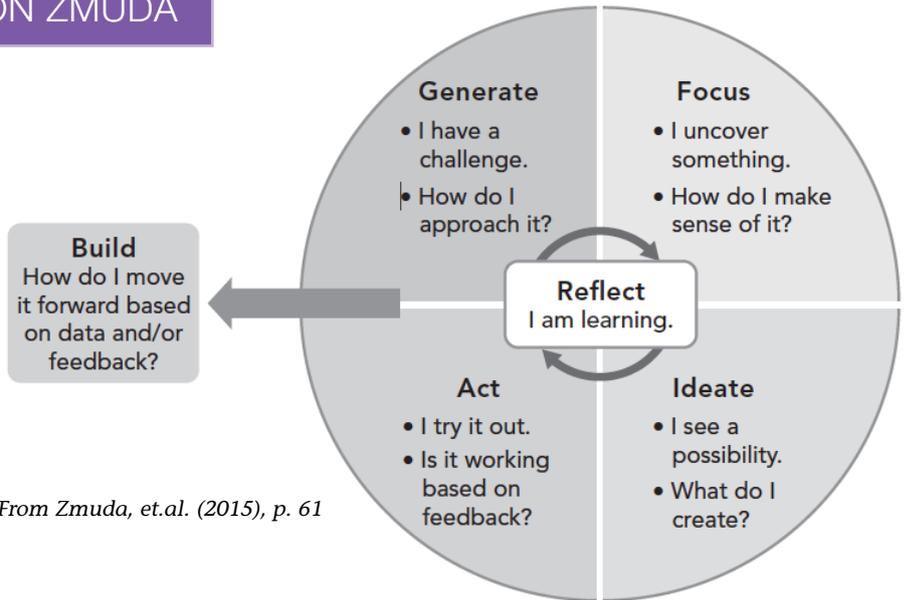
From Zmuda, et.al. (2015), p. 61

Recommendation #5: Contribute something to the world.

Set your ideas free from the confines of the classroom. How does your work have impact on the possibilities for improving the work and the lives of others? How does your work, once out in the world, continue to evolve through the interaction of others? How does the feedback you receive inspire future development? New ideas? ***HOM: communicating with clarity and precision***

Recommendation #6: Celebrate the journey.

Often times we are too hung up on the destination. In the midst of your pursuit, you may stumble upon another aspiration, a different idea that perhaps shifts your focus. The questions that you ask, the skills you acquire and refine along the way, and the ways you process what you are learning are often as important as the destination you are trying to reach. What did you learn throughout this experience? How will you celebrate your journey? What will you do next? ***HOM: responding with wonderment and awe***

Teachers, as significantly as students, need to be in a culture that attends to the same psycho-social needs. Teachers and students need to have a sense of belonging to a community that offers camaraderie, care and an ethic of excellence in which all members are accountable to one another for the quality of the work they do. They must be treated in ways that foster a growth mindset in which they can experiment with new ideas without the fear of premature evaluation. Teachers and students need to have better control over regulating and monitoring their own work as they continue to develop their self-efficacy. Teachers and students need to be reminded about what is compelling about new and deeper learning. They both need to be trusted as innovative, entrepreneurial, and creative individuals who collectively make a significant contribution to society. 🅜

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Teachers Matter