Walking the Talk is the Only Way

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, May 2017

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Imagine that you are forced to sit with a group of your peers and share your opinion about sensitive and personal topics. Would you immediately feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings? Would you jump at revealing your private experiences? Would you worry what your peers think about you? Would you be tempted to respond with the safest answers possible or not answer at all?
Now imagine you are asked to do this when you are in middle school or high school.

The reality is that this is exactly what we demand of young people when we teach any kind of social emotional learning (SEL), bullying prevention, diversity or character building programs. But we rarely put ourselves in their shoes. Nor do we ask ourselves the same questions we ask our students or make ourselves vulnerable in the ways we ask them to.

If we are going to teach these topics successfully, our students must feel that they can take the risk to be authentic. And the only way to do that is if the educator takes the same risks. It doesn’t mean you have to reveal your most intimate experiences with your students. But you do need to challenge yourself in similar ways.

Here's an example of an activity many SEL and diversity educators will recognize: the facilitator reads a statement aloud and asks the students to take a step forward if they have experienced what the statement describes. As a facilitator, we can easily forget what it feels like to participate in this exercise; you hear the question, you decide if you’re going to answer honestly, and then you “out” yourself in front of your peers.

Here are few questions we adapted from our work with young people that educators can ask themselves:

- My professionalism has been questioned by a parent.
- People have talked behind my back or gossiped about me.
- I have pretended to be more confident in my teaching than I really feel.
- I have heard negative gossip about someone else on the faculty.
- I have been drawn into a conflict between adults at school and not known what to do.
I have dreaded going to school.

I have seen another adult at a school disrespect a student and I didn’t handle it the way I should have or wanted to.

When we do this we are literally “walking our talk.”

Just to be clear, these questions should not be answered in class for two reasons: 1) it’s always good to maintain healthy boundaries with your students and 2) you don’t want to be the teacher who tells weird personal stories.

But you can tell your students that you have challenged yourself to answer similar questions. It could sound something like this:

In this group, I may ask questions that are really challenging you to tell the truth about what you think. That can be hard--sometimes it can feel easier to avoid the truth and just keep the discussion superficial. But my hope is that each of us can speak our truth in this class, especially if and when we disagree. Because when we take risks, that’s when things get more interesting and real.

It’s also possible I may struggle with some of the things we talk about. I may really disagree with some things I hear in class. When that happens, it may be hard for me so I will be learning with you. But if we stick with the idea of everyone deserves to be treated with dignity we should get us through the moments when it gets awkward or tense.

So let’s do it: let’s show the young people we work with that we are willing to take the same risks we ask them to take. Let’s admit how hard it can be. It’s all about showing what authenticity looks like in action. And when young people see that in us, it gets a lot easier for them to follow in our footsteps.