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MOVING BEYOND BLAME

CATHERINE MINTEER*

The English teacher, standing in the hall, waited for her eighth-grade general semantics class to meet. She saw students milling about — some shouting angrily, others crying openly. She heard the words: “That bus driver should be lynched.” “We should go out on strike.” “Let’s march on the Board of Education.”

One boy told the teacher what was happening. “You know Bob Davis. He lives in Malibu and used to come to school on the bus. The kids have been misbehaving, so the driver said that anyone who receives two warnings will lose his bus privileges. His parents will have to drive him to school. Bob had two warnings. So, the third time he lost his bus privilege. His mother drove him this morning. They were late so she stopped the car and let him out. He ran across the highway, was hit by a car and killed.”

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Speechless, the teacher struggled with her feelings of sorrow and helplessness. By this time there was a class waiting for her, seething with excitement. She felt that continuing the emotional outbursts would not lead to an alleviation of their feelings, and that routine lectures and explanations would probably fail to clarify their thinking. She became aware of her own tension as she stood before them, flipping a piece of chalk. She looked down at a girl seated close to her, who sat with her mouth wide open, looking to her hopefully for some reassurance.

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Then a possible direction dawned on her — explore feelings and thinking together, move to the verbal level.

She asked Linda, the little girl: “Would you do an experiment with me and let me use you as an example?” Linda agreed.

The teacher waited until the class quieted and she had their attention. Then she said: “Since this is our regular general semantics period, I would like you to think about something. I have been playing with this piece of chalk, and Linda has been sitting close to me with her mouth open. What if I tossed it too high, it went down Linda’s throat, and she choked to death. What would you say?”

There was a long silence and many puzzled faces. Finally, a boy in the rear of the room ventured a comment. “You shouldn’t have been fooling with the chalk.”

“Right. Anything else?” There was another long pause. “Linda shouldn’t let her mouth hang open.”

The teacher turned to Linda: “Do you agree, Linda?”

Linda, with a smile, answered: “Yes, I do.” The teacher continued: “Any other comments?” There was a flurry of excitement, hands waving.

“Your mother should have taught you not to fool with small objects.” The teacher nodded and invited more responses. She accepted all their contributions without criticizing.

“Linda’s mother should have taught her to keep her mouth closed.”
“'The janitor should not leave tiny pieces of chalk laying around.’
“The principal should not hire a janitor like that.”
“The manufacturers should not make chalk that breaks into small pieces.”
“Artists should not buy from such manufacturers.”
The “shoulds” and the “should nots” continued with the students adding to the list until they arrived at the early artists who drew pictures on the walls of caves, insisting that each action had contributed something to the chain of events. When the flow of comments dwindled, the teacher said: “We have been placing blame on many individuals. In fact, we seem to enjoy blaming someone when a tragedy occurs. I have often absentmindedly tossed small objects, and, probably, Linda has often sat with her mouth open — neither with dire consequences. This time we happened to meet in space-time with a tragic result.”

The teacher presented the class with another case. “A young couple, newlyweds, visited their parents for the Thanksgiving Holiday. They went to the bride’s parents’ home first, where they enjoyed themselves so much that they hated to leave, but they had promised the husband’s parents that they would visit them before dark.

“The bride’s parents urged them to stay, but his parents kept phoning, pleading with them to hurry. They finally left, just at twilight. The road was covered with ice and visibility was poor. They skidded and both young people were killed in the crash.

“Her parents mourned: ‘If only we hadn’t detained them, they would be alive today. We are to blame.’ His parents said: ‘How can we ever forgive ourselves. If we hadn’t hurried them on their way they might still be alive.’”

The teacher asked the class: “In this case, what other factors were the grieving parents ignoring?”

There were several responses: each of the young couple shared in the decision to stay or to go; perhaps other people were involved in the condition of the car or in the maintenance of the road. It is important to recognize that many factors were involved in the accident and that these factors need to be examined carefully in order to prevent future occurrences.

The teacher then said: “I would like you to apply this lesson to your thinking about what happened to Bob Davis this morning. Take a quiet moment to acknowledge your feelings of grief and helplessness, then think about what we have discussed.”

The students left quietly, appearing to be less agitated.

Unfortunately, the community continued its old way of pointing to one cause and one cure. In the local newspaper, letters to the editor began: “If only the boy had behaved himself....” and “If the teachers did their job....”

However, one unexpected payoff of this lesson happened a year later. At an open house for parents, a couple approached the teacher and said: “We think our daughter is alive because of something she learned in this class.”
They then related the story of what happened to their daughter while on a camping trip with the Girl Scouts in the mountains. She and a friend wandered away from the group. They lost their way, slipped over the side of a steep cliff, and landed on a narrow ledge below, where she clung to the wall. Her friend was unconscious, and she was in a state of panic, feeling impelled to throw herself off the ledge. She said to herself: “I led her away. If she is dead, then I am to blame.” Then the thought flashed into her mind: “No, I am not the only one to blame. She followed me. Calm down, someone will find us.”

They were picked up by a helicopter and returned to camp safely. Both the girl and her parents were convinced that the thought she had previously given to the idea of blame aided her in a time of crisis.

A teacher who has been developing open communication with students needs to be alert for opportunities to involve them in dealing with stressful, critical events. Learning comes through participation in the process. The greatest reward a teacher can have is to observe students’ growth in self-awareness and self-management.