

Dr John Edwards

The Things we Steal from Children

Gifted Education Conference: Melbourne, 1999

One evening, on returning from lecturing to my students, my wife asked me:

"And what did you steal from your students today?"

The question rocked me, and as I examined my practice under her skilful questioning, I realised how much of the processes I kept for myself. So we sat down and together we wrote the following:

If I am always the one to think of where to go next

If where we go is always the decision of the curriculum or my curiosity and not theirs

If motivation is mine

If I always decide on the topic to be studied, the title of the story, the problem to be worked on

If I am always the one who has reviewed their work and decided what they need

How will they ever know how to begin?

If I am the one who is always monitoring progress

If I set the pace of all working discussions

If I always look ahead, foresee problems and endeavour to eliminate them

If I swoop in and save them from cognitive conflict

If I never allow them to feel and use the energy from confusion and frustration

If things are always broken into short working periods

If myself and others are allowed to break into their concentration

If bells and I are always in control of the pace and flow of work

How will they learn to continue their own work?

If all the marking and editing is done by me

If the selection of which work is to be published or evaluated is made by me

If what is valued and valuable is always decided by external sources or by me

If there is no forum to discuss what delights them in their task, what is working, what is not working, what they plan to do about it

If they have not learned a language to discuss their work in ways that are intrinsically growth enhancing

If they do not have a language of self-assessment

If ways of communicating their work are always controlled by me

If our assessments are mainly summative rather than formative

If they do not plan their way forward to further action

How will they find ownership, direction and delight in what they do?

If I speak of individuals but present learning as if they are all the same

If I am never seen to reflect and reflection time is never provided

If we never speak together about reflection and thinking and never develop a vocabulary for such discussion

If we do not take opportunities to think about our thinking

If I constantly set them exercises that do not intellectually challenge them

If I set up learning environments that interfere with them learning from their own actions

If I give them recipes to follow

If I only expect the one right conclusion

If I signify that there are always right and wrong answers
If I never openly respect their thoughts
If I never let them persevere with something really difficult which they cannot master
If I make all work serious work and discourage playfulness
If there is no time to explore
If I lock them into adult time constraints too early

How will they get to know themselves as a thinker?

If they never get to help anyone else
If we force them to always work and play with children of the same age
If I do not teach them the skills of working co-operatively
If collaboration can be seen as cheating
If all classroom activities are based in competitiveness
If everything is seen to be for marks

How will they learn to work with others?

For if they have never experienced being challenged in a safe environment
Have had all of their creative thoughts explained away
Are unaware what catches their interest and how then to have confidence in that interest
Have never followed something they are passionate about to a satisfying conclusion
Have not clarified the way they sabotage their own learning
Are afraid to seek help and do not know who or how to ask
Have not experienced overcoming their own inertia
Are paralysed by the need to know everything before writing or acting
Have never got bogged down
Have never failed
Have always played it safe

How will they ever know who they are?

