

Invitations to Learn

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Students care deeply about learning when their teachers meet their need for affirmation, contribution, purpose, power, and challenge.

Do students care about learning? The answer is, of course, that “it depends.” At 4 years old, David asked his teacher a question as a lesson began: “Is this going to be a ‘learning experience’? Because if it is, I don’t want to do it.” That same 4-year-old had the patience of Job in trying to figure out how to navigate a new computer program at home.

In 10th grade, Kenisha did what she had to do to pass her classes. By 11th grade, she was part of an AVID group¹ and was proud of the high grades she was making in advanced classes.

Josh was often reduced to tears by homework. Yet, the best part of his day was the discussions and debates on such topics as ethics and philosophy that he shared with his family over dinner each evening.

Until this year, Bethany was convinced that students who did well in class were either smarter than she was, or luckier, or just better liked by the teacher. She drifted through school and the principal's office, alternating between anger and resignation. Now she loves parent-teacher conference days, when she can share with her mother her learning goals and evidence of her growth.

The students in Ms. Larrick's 6th period English class began the year by skipping class whenever they could. They hated English. By the end of the year, they refused to miss class discussions of *Antigone*.

Early in the year, Jana was skeptical about math. Her teacher told the students that he expected them to work like mathematicians. They would learn math as a language—a way of thinking. They would have to decide which tools to use to be effective with a range of problems that would crop up in school, in town, or in the news. Jana wasn't sure that she could do math that way. It seemed less predictable than math had always been in the past. In June, she wrote her teacher a note saying that she thought that she might like to be a math teacher, or maybe an engineer.

Javier was angry last year that his family had moved to a place where he knew no one and no one understood him when he spoke. This year, he works hard at spelling and math. His teacher asked him to tutor a Spanish-speaking boy three years younger than he is. The boy looks forward to sessions with Javier, and Javier can't let him down. Javier's teacher also helps him find books about Mexican culture and Mexican Americans that he can share with his young friend as they work together on reading.

Jessica and Dane had always found history boring. Ms. Brittle asked them to go on a personal odyssey in their community as they read Homer's *Odyssey* and studied the history of ancient Greece and Rome. They found possibilities in themselves and their town that they had never considered. They also saw a purpose in history that they hadn't seen before.

Do students care about learning? Absolutely—when they are invited to learn.

What Is Invitational Learning?

Few students are drawn to lists of facts. Not many find computations, theorems, and proofs inherently interesting. Worksheets evoke little satisfaction in the young.

Although there are students who dutifully learn the facts, perform the computations, and complete the worksheets, it would be hard to argue that such activities lead even these students to be eager learners. At best, such tasks promote intellectual compliance and a hunger for stars and As—not an insatiable desire to learn. The impetus to learn generally does not come first from content itself, but rather because a teacher has learned to make the content inviting.

What invites students to learn? Because students vary, what is inviting will vary as well. In general, however, students have at least five needs that teachers can address to make learning irresistible: affirmation, contribution, purpose, power, and challenge. Sometimes, teachers find that the learning environment is key to meeting student needs. Sometimes the mode of instruction is key. Generally, environment and instruction work in tandem to invite, inspire, and sustain student learning. Together, they make the content important.

Affirmation

Many young people seek first an affirmation that they are significant in the classroom. Perhaps more and more young people are uncertain of their significance in the world at large, or perhaps the young have always been on a quest for significance. Whatever the reason, students come to school needing to know that:

- I am accepted and acceptable here just as I am.
- I am safe here—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.
- People here care about me.
- People here listen to me.
- People know how I'm doing, and it matters to them that I do well.
- People acknowledge my interests and perspectives and act upon them.

Initially, Javier did not feel accepted and acceptable in his class as he was. The class did not feel safe, either emotionally or academically. Javier felt as though his lack of English was an inconvenience for his teacher. He did not feel listened to. No one seemed to know his interests or perspectives.

Kenisha also lacked a sense of affirmation in her 10th grade classes. She was often the only African American student in advanced classes. No links existed between her community and the content of her classes. When she didn't complete her work, teachers generally "let it slide."

Josh does not feel affirmed in his class. He has a learning disability, and despite his best efforts, he cannot keep up with the written tasks. Homework is especially problematic because there is so much of it and he is already exhausted from the effort of the day. He believes that he is a poor student and that he is not smart. The work that his teacher assigns is not designed for him; it makes him feel like a misfit.

Teachers issue a crucial invitation to learning when young learners feel an abiding sense of affirmation from teacher and peers in a class. When that sense of affirmation is lacking, learning is at risk.

Contribution

To make a difference in any sort of community, one must contribute. Many students come to school looking for a way to contribute to their world. They need to feel that:

- I make a difference in this place.
- I bring unique and valuable perspectives and abilities to this place.
- I help other students and the entire class to succeed.
- I am connected to others through mutual work on common goals.

Javier's new teacher understood the power of contribution to promote learning. Even when Javier's language skills were at their most tentative, she found someone to whom Javier's contribution was crucial. Because Javier knew someone else was counting on him, he was able to accept the inevitable frustrations that stem from acclimating to a new language and culture.

Twelve-year-old Toby awoke one Monday feeling ill. When Toby's mother realized that he wasn't feeling well, she suggested that he stay in bed. Toby's response surprised her: "I can't stay home, Mom," he said with conviction. "What would Mrs. Lind do if I weren't in class today? And how could my writing group get its work done?" This would be a remarkable story in any case. It's more potent perhaps because Toby has Down syndrome. In his mixed-ability English class, his role was clear and important to him. He made a difference there, and he needed to be there.

The child who can remain mute in class discussions for days, weeks, and months does not feel like a contributor. The student who is always "the taught" during group work—and never "the teacher"—does not feel like a contributor. By contrast, teachers invite students to learn when students feel that their presence makes a positive, tangible difference in the work of the class.

Purpose

Students come to school in search of purpose. They need to know that:

- I understand what we do here.
- I see significance in what we do.
- What we do reflects me and my world.
- The work we do makes a difference in the world.
- The work absorbs me.

At 4, David saw no purpose in most of his kindergarten “learning experiences.” But the computer was another story: The programs gave him access to things he cared about—ideas and activities that seemed important to him.

Ms. Larrick's 6th period students had a long history of seeing literature as unrelated to their lives. The language in their books seemed so unlike the language they spoke. They were uninterested in dissecting plot, setting, protagonist, antagonist, and conflict. Ms. Larrick changed all that when she asked them, “Have you ever felt like a victim?” They talked about what it meant to be a victim, whether people have to be victims, what people can change in their lives, and what they can do when they can't change circumstances. Hand-waving discussions ensued. Then she asked the students, “Want to read a book about a victim and see if your ideas hold up?” *Antigone* became their favorite book—at least until they discovered themselves in the next book.

For Javier, decoding words, writing, and spelling remain arduous. His work feels more purposeful to him when he reads and writes about the country he left behind and about other young people who learned to make a new life in a new place.

Teachers invite their students to learn when they demonstrate that student learning has purpose—when students discover meaning and relevance implicit in books, ideas, and tasks. Without meaning, schoolwork is purposeless for students.

Power

From infancy, the young seek increasing dominion over their world. Turning over in the crib, learning to open the refrigerator door, crossing the street, deciding what to wear to school, and spending the night at a friend's house are important milestones, in part because they signal growing independence and power. Teachers who purposefully assist young learners to develop a sense of power invite their students to learn. To feel powerful in the classroom, students need to believe that:

- What I learn here is useful to me now.
- I make choices that contribute to my success.
- I know what quality looks like and how to create quality work here.
- Dependable support for my journey exists in this classroom.

Jessica and Dane saw history as a parade of data to be memorized to satisfy adults—until this year. This year, the teacher showed them how to find themselves in the past and how to use history as a tool for thinking. As one student explained, “Other teachers told us *what* to think. This one is different because she showed us *how* to think and that we *can* think.”

Kenisha found AVID to be an important part of her life because the program empowered her to achieve academic success. Through AVID, she learned how to take notes, use her time wisely, select crucial courses, study with peers, prepare for exams, apply to college, and more. The program also placed her in the company of peers and teachers who overtly supported her journey as a student.

Bethany is also having a better year because she has found a sort of power in the classroom. This year, her teacher works with students to set learning goals for each topic and skills area. Some goals are common to the class; others indicate an individual's need for continued growth. Students keep records of their progress on the goals. Rubrics and work samples help students understand the hallmarks of quality work. For the first time, the route to success is not a mystery to Bethany. She feels in control of her fate as she participates in parent-teacher conferences, presenting to her mother both her goals and evidence of her growth during the marking period.

A teacher invites students to learn when the classroom is a place that consistently builds students' capacity to be at the helm of their fate. By contrast, when students feel powerless in the classroom, learning loses its appeal.

Challenge

Something deep inside humans seeks challenge despite fears. Students feel challenged in the classroom when they perceive that:

- The work here complements my ability.
- The work stretches me.
- I work hard in this classroom.
- When I work hard, I generally succeed.
- I am accountable for my own growth, and I contribute to the growth of others.
- I accomplish things here that I didn't believe were possible.

Josh did not feel challenged by the work in his class—he felt defeated. Rather than complementing his abilities, the work ran counter to his strengths. No matter how much effort he expended, he experienced little success—just the promise of more work. In his classroom, he didn't accomplish the impossible. Instead, he became more convinced that school was impossible for him.

Jana had been successful in past math classes. This year, she wasn't so sure of herself. The teacher abandoned math as solely algorithmic and instead challenged students to be math thinkers. At

first, the new approach was frightening to Jana. In the end, she found herself stretched. Not only was she successful, but she had a new sense of herself as a mathematician.

What constitutes a challenge for one student may feel like defeat to another. When teachers design routes to learning that push individual students into a bit of discomfort—and when they then support student success at that new level—they invite students to learn.

Issuing Invitations to Learn

Teachers extend learning invitations in many ways. Such invitations exist in the way that a teacher addresses students, in the learning environment, in classroom procedures, and in student work that provokes both engagement and understanding.

The message of such invitations may take many forms: I have respect for who you are and who you can become. I want to know you. I have time for you. I try to see things through your eyes. This classroom is ours, not mine. There is room for what you care about in what we learn. Your peers and I need you here as a partner in learning. I will help you understand yourself and your world through what we learn. What we do here today will open up all sorts of possibilities for you. You have essential roles here that help us all be more effective and efficient. I enjoy thinking about what we do here. Your success is central in this classroom. There is a clear roadmap to success here, and I will share it with you. When one route to learning doesn't work, we'll find another. I am your partner in growth. We are on a mission to learn. There is great support for you here but no room for excuses. I watch you and listen to you carefully. I make sure that I use what I learn to help you learn better. You're growing, but you're not finished growing. There is no finish line in learning.

In fact, what teachers actually say to students is less important to invitational learning than are students' collective experiences in the classroom. Excellent teachers may speak the invitations to learn, but students respond because the actions of those excellent teachers consistently convey invitation.

Do students care about learning? One of the most satisfying discoveries in the teacher's life is that when teaching is genuinely invitational, there exists no “off switch” to student engagement in learning.