

**THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS**  
**What teachers need to know about themselves and their students.**  
**by Dr. John M. Ramsay**

N. F. S. Grundtvig said that learning is most effective when it is person to person. I agree whole heartedly! However, much of our pedagogy still today has been inherited from the dark ages and even back to the time of the hunter-gatherers. Relationships between teachers and students need to be updated. Let's look more closely at Grundtvig's insight.

When we are born, we are unable to talk, to walk, nor to feed ourselves. We were dependent on giants to handle, move, and feed us. Gradually, the sounds we heard began to be attached to feelings and we also began the process of expressing ourselves—when hungry, uncomfortable, or feeling good. As our brains developed, some sounds, called words, brought us pleasure while others were related to angry noises, pain, or abandonment. Patterns which were formed during this training period continued as we become adults. Most of these patterns became automatic, that is, without our being aware of them. These patterns in both students and teachers are put on automatic pilot most of the time and we call them habits.

Have you ever tried to teach a child how to tie a shoelace? We adults “know that we know” how to tie a shoelace but it has become so automatic and we don't think about it. We find it difficult to teach the process without going through the motions more slowly and thinking about them. After conscious thought, we can reconstruct the process and teach our kids to tie their shoes. Isn't it fortunate that most of the time we can go on automatic pilot as we brush our teeth, put on our slacks, fold our hands, or eat corn on the cob—do you eat typewriter style or hit return with each bite? How about the way we teach?

Marlowe Erickson, a psychologist friend of mine, claims that when we become adults we are in the driver's seat when it comes to our actions and feelings: “due to circumstances beyond our control are put in control of our thoughts and feelings.” By the time we become adults we have developed a mind with which we can make our own choices even in regards to our automatic actions—like figuring out how to show a kid how to tie a shoelace. Erickson claims however that we cannot teach another person. All we can do is present a cafeteria of ideas to students from which they will select whatever they choose. Yes, we are all “put in control of our thought and feelings,” but only our own.

Students, who are beginning adults, are not used to driving their own car; for a decade or two they have had to rely on the giants to do the driving. But, now that they are as big as the giants, they can meet them as equals, and make up their own minds. The Danes have it right—there is one word for teach and learn and it is learn! Adults choose what to learn. They cannot be taught unless they choose to learn! Today's students will choose what they want to learn from their teachers. Our job as teachers is to invite students to want to learn what we have to share. That is a different approach from the one in which the students are fed by the giants. Now that they are adults, if we insist on feeding them it actually becomes forced feeding. In fact, the world is changing so fast that teachers often need to learn from their students; young people have a closer relationship to the changes and it is the only world they know.

Within a decade it is expected that teachers specializing in how to safely drive a car will be unemployed and automated cars will do the driving for us. The driving teacher must become a learner to survive in this new world. With their experience, however, the old driving teacher may be better equipped to figure out what the options are for living in the new world, but they also may be hampered and confined to the limits of the world of their own outdated childhood. This is why it is necessary for teachers change their style and to encourage students to

contribute to the cafeteria of what should be considered as useful for living as the world changes.

Grundtvig's point of view goes against much of what we picked up as children. Our educational system continues placing the responsibility for what we learn on the giants instead of making use of the remarkable and adaptable capabilities of human thought, especially the incredible potential of a youthful, open, and creative mind.

Erickson suggests that, "as adults, we are in charge of ourselves," but he recognizes that we make,

"most of our 'operating decisions' outside of awareness. Yet, when it comes to our thoughts, "nobody can affect me or you psychologically: each of us makes up (and experiences) our own internal reality, although we may not be aware of this. I usually point out that I cannot teach them, which is sometimes a surprise, although they usually quickly realize that they are there to help themselves. The reason I say I cannot teach anybody is because it clearly leaves the issue of **response ability** in the hands of the student. Another benefit of this position is that I cannot 'hurt' the student by what I say either. Although we have been programmed to not be responsible for our feelings (which was true in our childhood), there is a great advantage to being responsible. This advantage results from being in charge, being able to make a choice, and responding differently if we do not like how we feel."

Many people use the word *habit* because *patterns* do not have strength and morality like habits. *Pattern* is simply a more neutral term and it seems that people can change a pattern easily compared to the usual struggle involved in changing a habit, especially a "strong, bad" habit.

To give you some idea of how patterned our behavior is, Erickson shares some "house keeping" patterns that we all have:

"I would like to invite you to fold your hands. You will notice that one thumb ends up on top. If you assume that you had perfected this pattern by the age of five, then take your current age (say 36), subtract five years and you have the number of years (31) you have practiced your typical hand folding pattern. Now fold your hands the opposite way, interlacing your fingers the other way. What do you experience? Most people use words like awkward, weird, different, unfamiliar, etc. Why does this way feel so unfamiliar? Because you haven't done it in 31 years, ever since the initial trial and error of the early childhood days. Whether this is due to cerebral dominance or not is unimportant. What is important is that most people have a pattern that they are unaware that they had.

I would like to suggest that we have two regions in our mind, the aware part, that is relatively small, and the unaware part.

We have a multitude of these house keeping patterns, patterns that we know we are in charge of, but didn't know that we had. Some more examples could include the way we take off a sweatshirt, button a shirt, thread in a belt, put on our earrings, butter our toast, brush our teeth, step in the shower, towel off, etc. The point is that we operate on "automatic pilot" much of the time. We developed these patterns when we were young and they are all intact today unless we have changed our minds.

If we have all these patterns in the way we manage our selves physically, don't you think it is very likely that we have quite a few emotional patterns as well? Patterns that we developed early in life are still there unless we have changed them. I think this is the case. After being raised in an educational system where the debate model is king and where the grading is contingent on only one right answer, is it any wonder that we have adopted this style of thinking? When we hear somebody say something different, we do not see it as an interesting viewpoint, only that it is obviously wrong.

Words and the emotions and thoughts they are associated with are imbedded in the out of awareness, automatic pilot part of our minds which is convenient in day to day living. However, this aspect of human development can also be manipulated to our detriment. Consider cigarette advertisements: "Alive with pleasure;" or the names of cigarettes: Belair, Merit, True, Cavalier, Kool, Parliament, Luckies, etc. They are not called Sludge, Tar, Wheeze, or Cough. But, now that we have brought those words into our awareness we can decide what to do with them and can change our response pattern quickly and without great difficulty.

Being aware that you and I, students and teachers, all adults, are independent and each create our own experiences, requires a different pedagogical approach to the field of education. It begs for respect for each individual and a relationship of person to person.

Here are some ideas for implementing a new approach applied to state sponsored education for the masses:

1. Use the word  
mentor instead of teacher and  
mentoring instead of teaching to encourage mentors to see themselves as  
organizers, facilitators, and inspirers as we all make choices about the changing world we live  
in.
2. In a classroom, place the chairs in a circle with the mentor joining the circle as an visual  
equal—altho the mentor will organize the class, moderate discussion, provide stimulation as  
needed, and monitor whether each student benefits from the class.
3. In lecture halls, present a problem, offer possible solutions, open discussion with  
students as well as mentor responding.
4. In both classrooms and lecture halls, break up into groups of 3 to 5 students to deal  
with a subject, have reports from each group at the plenary. Rotational designs are often  
appropriate.
5. Move out of school buildings and into the real world:
  - a) field trips
  - b) service learning using a variety of mentors
  - c) individualized study ending with an oral presentation of the printed report

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There are as many variations as there are mentors. These ideas do not make much use of the possibilities arising by using digital media. I am not prepared to compare results of digital versus Grundtvig's person to person education.