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A Lesson From Quixote

by

Jon E. Travis

Negative messages seem to abound in the world of schools. Annual reports indicate that some student test scores continue to show no improvement whereas others are even beginning to slide. Discipline, as indicated by the number of guns and violent incidents at schools, is hopelessly doomed, and students appear to be out of control. Many teachers are labeled as ineffective, while a number of proficient educators suffer burn-out and leave the profession. Administrative impropriety is on the rise. The disparity between wealthy school districts and their poverty-stricken counterparts is increasing despite the efforts of some states. In short, the ills of our society, like any other aspect of our social order, have been infused on our schools.

Such a gloomy picture is dismal enough, even without the confirming attitudes of some educators who have come to accept the situation as reality. But what if we were not actually required to acquiesce to such a reality. What if we decided, as the good knight of La Mancha did, that people were not as bad as some might insist that they are (de Cervantes, 1605). Could we perhaps make a difference if we were determined to "tilt at such a windmill"?

Many of us in the disciplines of literature, languages, or theatre should be familiar with the alleged eccentric gentleman from La Mancha. One of Quixote's common misperceptions was to presume that those with whom he interacted were somehow different from the way others perceived them to be. For example, the innkeeper was recognized by Quixote as a virtuous knight who could bestow upon him the same honor of knighthood.

Clearly a lesson can be learned from all of Don Quixote's confusion over personalities. Most educators should already be familiar with the principle of the self-fulfilling prophecy, especially as it relates to students. If we speak and act as though we expect students to misbehave in class, they will generally rise to the occasion and not disappoint us. However, if we apply some of Quixote's logic and treat our students as eager learners, they may surprise us. Chickering and Gamson (1987) clearly point out this proposition as their sixth principle: communicating high expectations.

Granted, some students may not be so easily fooled, but the record books are full of athletic achievements by those whose coaches believed in their capability to succeed. Perhaps the most memorable moment of the adaptation of the Quixote tales for the stage occurs near the end of the play (Wasserman, Darion, & Leigh, 1968). We see dangerous criminals, who had appeared ready to threaten Cervantes' life when he was thrown into prison at the drama's opening, demonstrating that his story had moved them to exhibit real human concern for him as he is led away to the court of the Inquisition.

Early in my teaching career, I taught theatre to a wide range of high school students. Out of a desire both to avoid the inferior scripts promoted as high school fare and to offer my students a significant challenge, I initiated a program at one high school to use only college or adult-level dramatic works. Our first production, a two-week run of *The Lion in Winter*, was a surprising success, surprising that is to everyone except for the cast and myself. What followed, though, even surprised me. My students began to expect, even demand, similar challenges. Furthermore, they

eagerly pursued every challenge presented to them. That first year in Prescott ended with an unprecedented ten major productions.

Since then, I have been repeatedly reminded of the capability of students in whom I placed my confidence. One student, who had been among the exceptionally skilled performers that first year in Prescott, experienced a disappointing first year at a major university. Hearing of an opportunity for area students to audition for the London School of Drama, I encouraged her to make the effort. Her capabilities as a performer were undoubtedly a greater influence on the successful audition than was my belief in her potential. But my confidence certainly influenced her decision even to try the audition. Furthermore, performers, of necessity, have to believe in themselves. This self-confidence is much easier to develop when someone in authority has already demonstrated a similar conviction.

On another occasion, three students requested an opportunity to create an experimental performance for their final exam. By granting permission for this attempt, I was exhibiting my confidence in their ability to demonstrate an effort that was worthy of such an examination activity. On the day of their performance, the students made another request, to perform their piece outside. What convinced me most that these students had indeed accomplished their objective was the transfixed attention that their performance drew from non-theatre students who happened to pass by the make-shift stage.

This approach has naturally carried over to my current instruction of doctoral students. While we justifiably place more of the responsibility for learning on graduate students, the principle of making significant demands of them and believing in their capability to meet these demands should follow. As a part of the expectation that students will search for and acquire necessary applicable information, they frequently must gather data from unusual sources with unique methods. Perhaps most impressive about these students is their highly professional attitude in communicating with noted experts in the field.

What had occurred in each case was not unlike the individual result induced by Jaime Escalante when he convinced his students that they could learn calculus. Certainly, such a story is not unusual and the outcome not unexpected. Educational psychologists would be the first to remind us that students tend to respond favorably to those who place confidence in them. And each of us may be able to proudly cite at least one example of an effectively applied conviction that motivated a student to excel.

But one success story is not enough. The key for all educators is to adopt this kind of faith in students on a regular basis. In other words, we have to consistently and universally see our students in a better light than others tend to view them. Such a position is understandably not without risks. Given a certain degree of latitude, some students will grasp the opportunity to "test the system," as so many of them tend to do.

On a long-term substitute assignment, years after my Prescott experience, I once again tried what had become for me a routine procedure of expecting the best from students and providing them the flexibility to strive for success. To my disappointment, these students did not rise to the challenge, perhaps because no one had ever believed in them sufficiently, to the extent that they no longer believed in themselves. While I was momentarily disillusioned by the experience, I realized that I could not let one incident, even though it included entire classes, hamper my

resolve. After all, Quixote did not adjust his perceptions of others just because someone occasionally took advantage of him.

Consequently, like Quixote, we have to develop relatively thick skins to ward off such disappointments. But then, unlike the good knight, we do have variable techniques available to us. Even so, we may have to accept a conclusion that, realistically, we cannot change everyone's life. The responsibility of the profession, however, demands at least that we try. As educators, our most significant responsibility is to believe in our students. This is the number one reason they need us, and always will.

Of course, students are not the only group likely to respond to expectations of their individual abilities. For example, one should not be surprised to discover that teachers who are not trusted as professionals by their administrators will react accordingly. Likewise administrators who are stereotyped because of a single incident of dishonesty are more inclined to warrant suspicion. With an expectation to seek continuous development and improvement, on the other hand, educators are more likely to bring about the kind of meaningful change needed in our educational systems. Although he may appear to us unusually eccentric, Don Quixote of La Mancha can serve as a valuable role model for all educators.

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