



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brookfield, Stephen D. The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom. 1990. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 147-162.

Overcoming Resistance to Learning

Why people resist learning is a puzzlingly complex question, made the more so by some students who do quite well for a time and then suddenly seem to stubbornly resist doing what, to you as a teacher, seem like fairly simple operations. Nevertheless, some typical causes can be identified and some approaches can be suggested in response to make this problem seem less intractable. Even if you are at a loss to know how to deal with resistance, being aware of some of its causes (and realizing that your own actions may not be one of these) can help to decrease the demoralizing frustration you will probably feel when it is encountered.

Essentially, as most people realize, learning involves change. Since change is threatening, many people prefer to remain in situations that to outsiders seem wholly unsatisfactory, rather than to endure the psychological disruption represented by taking some kind of action. In all contexts of life we can see people for whom the threat of learning new behaviors or ideas is so unsettling that they remain in situations which will, in the long term, do them great harm. In marriages, people will put up with sustained psychological and physical assault rather than risk abandoning what is, at least, familiar. In the workplace, stagnant and oppressive organizational conditions persist simply because of the unquestioning acceptance of traditional organizational norms—of

the attitude of "that's how it's done around here." Politically, repressive regimes fear (quite correctly) that allowing the free debate of ideas critical to dominant ideologies will cause people to learn ways of thinking and acting that threaten the position of those in power.

As teachers, if we remember that learning represents change and that change is perceived by many people as highly threatening, then we have taken the first step towards understanding some of the causes of resistance to learning. As always, it is useful if we can draw upon our experiences as learners to think about those times we resisted learning something new, why this was so, and what helped us overcome this reluctance. For example, as I began working on this book, I also, at the age of forty, learned to drive. Despite the inconvenience my not being a driver caused me, I preferred to engage in intricate and increasingly desperate convolutions to avoid having to face this act of learning. Things mechanical have always seemed threatening to me, and the prospect of learning to control what I regarded as a sophisticated instrument of death as much as a means of transportation was so intimidating that I resisted this sneakily and determinedly.

Seeing almost everyone I knew doing this effortlessly did not, as one might imagine, ease my anxiety; rather, it increased it, since I was convinced that if I tried to learn, I would be revealed in all my shame and embarrassment as the one person in the world who showed a total inability to drive. Eventually, a combination of circumstances encouraged me to learn this skill. My wife had often said how much it would help her if, on some of our longer drives across the Midwest, I could take the wheel for an hour or so at regular intervals. I sympathized with this, safe in the knowledge that she would not insist that I learn to drive in the madness of Manhattan, where we live. Also, since we don't own a car in New York and rely almost wholly on public transportation, there was little opportunity to learn, even if my motivation had been stronger.

After being granted tenure at Columbia, I took the cus-

tomary sabbatical, and the chance to learn to drive arose. For several months of this sabbatical, we lived in a small hamlet in southern France, where most of this book was written. This environment provided ideal conditions for learning to drive. First, I could do this free from the risk of embarrassment at my failure, since friends and colleagues were three thousand miles away across the Atlantic. Second, the roads where we lived (a rural area two to three hours drive east of Avignon) were very quiet. There was little chance of any really heavy traffic. So I was in a situation where it would be hard not to succeed. Third, the expectation created for me was that I would learn to become comfortable handling the car and maneuvering on quiet country roads, no more. So realistic, achievable limits were set on what I was to try. Fourth, we leased an automatic model, so that the main impediment to driving over which I had previously always stumbled—changing gears—was removed. All I had to do was press on the accelerator and point the machine—just as I did in bumper cars as a child! Fifth, I had a teacher (my wife) who was clear, calm, and very supportive. She didn't push too fast, and she broke the activity into small, incremental chunks, gave clear instructions, praised frequently those things that were done well, and readily admitted that when she learned to drive she had the same fears and anxieties I was experiencing.

Reflecting on my experience of resisting learning and of what helped me overcome this has helped me to be more understanding of and sensitive to my own students' resistance to learning things (such as becoming critically reflective about their practice as educators) that are difficult and threatening. As you encounter resistance to your teaching, you might want to try to analyze some of your own episodes of resisting learning as a way of understanding your students' situation.

Understanding Resistance to Learning

The following are some of the chief reasons why people resist learning. When you encounter resistance in your classes, or

with individual students, you might want to ask yourself how much this is due to combinations of some of these factors.

Poor Self-Image as Learners. Many college students, especially those returning to college as adults, have educational histories comprised in part of systematic humiliation. They will have passed through classes in which they were told, directly or indirectly, that they were too dumb to learn. They may have picked up the impression that teachers felt they should leave education as soon as possible to leave space for those who showed an aptitude for learning.

Developing a self-image as a learner—regarding oneself as somebody who is able to acquire new skills, knowledge, and insights—is a crucial psychological underpinning to learning. It functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people see themselves as learners, if this is one way in which they define their being, then the prospect of new learning is not as traumatic for them.

Fear of the Unknown. Perhaps the single greatest cause of resistance to learning is fear of the unknown. The change required by learning something new is profoundly unsettling for many people who much prefer to cling to the stabilities of their existence. Routine, habit, and familiarity are strongly appealing as leitmotifs for many people's personal, professional, and political lives. For some, the conduct of life is a quest for certainty, for a system of beliefs and a set of values—even for a well-defined social structure—that they can adopt, and commit to, for life.

The psychological comfort and reassurance derived from commitment to such eternal verities is so strong that it can resist years of discrepancies, dissonances, and anomalies. As people witness events that seem to contradict their beliefs and values, they often seem to become even more committed to them. It is as if a perverse psychological law sometimes seems to apply in which the strength of commitment to beliefs and values is inversely correlated with the amount of evidence encountered that contradicts the truth of these. The human

capacity for denial knows no limits. Even for students who willingly embrace the change endemic to learning, there is often a sense of trepidation about the future and a grieving for lost certainties.

A Normal Rhythm of Learning. Some instances of resistance to learning are simply examples of the incremental fluctuation identified in Chapter Four as a typical rhythm of significant learning. As people learn something new, they often find that their initial embracing of new ideas, attitudes, or practices is followed by a yearning to return to the comfortable certainties of yesterday. This form of resistance is temporary; it is the second part of the “two steps forward, one step back” rhythm. But, although temporary, it is experienced just as deeply as other forms of resistance.

Lack of Clarity in Teachers' Instructions. If learning is suffused with ambiguity, if students are unsure what is expected of them and by what criteria their efforts are being judged, they will probably mistrust teachers and resist their instructions and entreaties. In critical incident reports, the perception of ambiguity—of being unsure what teachers want or expect and of suspecting that they hold secret agendas—is reported time and again as one of the most demoralizing factors for students.

Students' Personal Dislike of Teachers. Since learning is such an emotionally experienced phenomenon, a student's dislike of a teacher as a person can become so overwhelming that it interferes with all their interactions. Teachers' personalities are inevitably reflected in their educational actions. They may use humor inappropriately; make racist or sexist remarks; dismay some by their informality and offend others by their unapproachability; exhibit favoritism and discrimination; and appear arrogant, cynical, naive, or uncaring—all quite without realizing that this is happening.

Disjunction of Learning and Teaching Styles. Sometimes it is not the content that students resist but the style in which

teachers teach and in which they, as students, are asked to learn. Students who have been used to learning primarily through listening to lectures and reading independently will probably be confused and intimidated at the sudden prospect of participating in a role play. People who are irritated with group process, who see discussions as a waste of time and a distraction from the really important activities associated with independent study, will probably resist case studies, simulations, and debates. Teachers who rely on only one teaching method must always expect a hard core of resisters who are unsympathetic to or intimidated by the approach concerned.

Apparent Irrelevance of the Learning Activity. If the learning activities people are asked to undertake seem to have no connection to or meaning for their own interests and concerns, they may well resist them. College study, particularly for students who are returning after a period out in the work force, frequently demands a heavy price. If someone has dipped deep into their financial reserves, resigned from a secure job, undergone all kinds of convolutions to arrange child care or work coverage while they are learning, and faced resistance from unsympathetic spouses, friends, or colleagues, then they are going to be frustrated and annoyed if they think that they are being asked to perform exercises or undertake assignments that have no meaning for them.

Fear of Looking Foolish in Public. Many people (myself included) only want to do things that they know they can do well. They will only play games they know they can win, and they will only try something new and difficult if this can be done in private. Students' egos are fragile creations and, as the discussion of the impostor syndrome in Chapter Four showed, this fragility is as characteristic of those who appear confident and successful as it is of those whose experience of life has been oppressive. So students' resistance to a particular learning activity may simply reflect their feeling that it is occurring in an overly public forum rather than their dislike for the focus of the learning itself.

Danger of Committing Cultural Suicide. Participating in education is a highly valued activity in some subcultures, but in others it is extremely threatening. A student's decision to attend college may entail many social and psychological changes. One of these is the risk of students' being regarded with suspicion or mistrust in their home cultures and of eventually being excluded from these. These cultures may tolerate participation in education if it is felt that students will thereby be better equipped to promote the culture's values and activities. But if students are asked to contemplate too much that is new or to change in ways the culture sees as too radical, then they will be given the message that further participation calls into question their allegiance to the culture and will be dealt with summarily.

Faced with the psychologically devastating prospect of losing their cultural identities and supports, many students, not surprisingly, choose not to pay the price required by learning. I have seen this form of cultural control exercised by working-class cultures in which taking education seriously (that is, accepting the innate appeal of intellectual inquiry rather than viewing it solely as a means of making money) is seen by some as a betrayal of solid, unpretentious, working-class values. I have seen it exercised by religious fundamentalists for whom a member's consenting exposure to new ideas is evidence of blasphemy. I have also seen it in ethnic groups where participation in education past a certain culturally allowed point is taken to mean that learners have either joined the alien host culture or are insulting the values learned in childhood. So some resistance to learning may be the result of students sensing that if they go past a certain point they will be committing cultural suicide.

Level of Required Learning is Inappropriate. A teacher can easily misinterpret students' levels of learning readiness. Resistance to learning can arise if the tasks teachers require of students are pitched at too abstract or conceptually sophisticated a level. For teachers who are caught up in the passion of communicating the beauty of scientific reason-

ing, literary insight, or historical theories, it is easy to overestimate how far students have progressed. If teachers travel too fast and too far for students, and if they never check behind to see that students are keeping up with their pace, then they run a real risk of leaving them far behind. If this happens, and if students are asked to undertake tasks that are far too complex for them, it is not surprising if they respond with resistance.

Overcoming Resistance to Learning

In this section I propose a number of responses you might consider when you encounter sustained and deeply felt resistance to learning. Before discussing these, however, let me make the general point that the intensity and amount of resistance you encounter will probably be reduced considerably if you pay attention to some of the general principles of teaching outlined throughout this book. So if you make a deliberate attempt to create diversity in your teaching, to explore students' experience of learning, to balance challenge and support, and to see yourself, primarily, as a helper of learning rather than a classroom performer, then you are already teaching in a way that responds effectively to resistance.

Ask Yourself Whether the Resistance Is Justified. Don't immediately assume that because someone resists a learning activity they are being obtuse. Don't immediately think that all you need to do is to be a bit more skillful in justifying your actions or in designing the exercises. Try to make sure that the learning they're resisting is really in their own best interests and not being required simply because of institutional routine or because of your own private obsessions. Having asked yourself these awkward questions and having decided that the learning is something you feel is important for students to experience (even though they disagree), you will be in a much stronger psychological position to argue your case and to weather students' resistance. And if, after having answered these questions honestly, you decide that your insis-

tence on this learning isn't really justified, then you'll have saved yourself a lot of time, energy, and heartache.

Try to Sort Out the Causes of the Resistance. Since resistance is such a complex phenomenon, an important first step is for you to gain some sense of which combination of factors is causing resistance in a student or group of students. Before thinking about responses, you must have a clear idea of the causes, for otherwise you run the real risk of spending large amounts of time pursuing irrelevant solutions. Try to speak to resisters individually; ask class members to complete critical incidents on the highs and lows of classroom life; read their learning journals; and regularly invite criticism, interpretation, and evaluation of the educational processes they are experiencing. The nature and causes of the resistance you encounter will affect the responses you feel are appropriate.

Research Your Students' Backgrounds and Cultures. Find out about your students' backgrounds and histories—their values, expectations, cultural allegiances, and preferred learning styles. This will help you to avoid teaching in ways that confirm students' poor self-images. You will be less likely to rely on methods and approaches that are wholly unfamiliar to them or to use materials they find offensive or incomprehensible. You will be better placed to demonstrate for students the meaning and connectedness of the learning activities you are asking them to undertake. And you will be more aware of those lines that students feel they can't cross for fear of committing cultural suicide.

Involve Students in Educational Planning. Whenever you can, involve students in planning the general focus, specific content, educational methods, and evaluative procedures of the learning activity. The extent to which this is possible varies according to context, and sometimes external factors will mean that almost all of these features will have been prescribed beforehand. But if it can be done, involving students has several benefits: It removes some of their fear of the

unknown, makes students feel respected and valued, and increases the likelihood of your teaching having some meaning for them. All these factors help to reduce the learner resistance that might otherwise have arisen.

Conduct Regular Formative Evaluation Sessions. Take the time, deliberately and explicitly, to ask students what problems they see arising, what aspects of teaching they find ambiguous, and how, unwittingly, you might be arousing resistance. For example, I begin every one of my classes with an open-ended troubleshooting session in which I invite students to raise issues, make complaints, and ask questions. I anticipate spending 20 to 25 percent of the total class time on this, since I feel it is so important. Sometimes, of course, there is little to say and we can proceed with the class after a couple of minutes. But, despite the impatience exhibited by some students at what they clearly feel is an unproductive waste of time, an enormous amount of information has emerged from these sessions to make my teaching more critically responsive. Through giving students the chance to air their fears and express their confusion, you will be more likely to anticipate serious resistance.

Explain Your Intentions Clearly. Explain as clearly as you can why you are asking students to develop certain skills, explore areas of knowledge, and participate in exercises you have devised. If you use standardized evaluation forms, distribute these along with the instructions for the assignment so that students can see exactly how their efforts will be judged. Never assume that students consent to or approve of your actions. Because of the authority you have in students' eyes, it will often be difficult for them to challenge you directly about your intentions. So be ready to make these clear at the outset. Having a clearly developed critical rationale for practice as advocated in Chapter Two will help you explain and justify your intentions convincingly.

Justify Why You Think Learning Is Important. Some teachers are so personally convinced of the innate validity of their

activities that they forget that these need to be justified to students. Don't be too proud to say why you are convinced that it's important for people to learn something. Be ready to describe the benefits you believe learning brings in terms that contribute to students' well-being, insight, and capacity for survival rather than in terms that relate to your own concerns. Take students to situations outside the classroom where the benefits of the learning activity are clearly in evidence. Don't feel (as some do) that demonstrating the importance of learning smacks of grubby intellectual salesmanship.

Involve Former Resisters. In trying to convince students of the importance of a learning activity, you are always working against the fact that your own expressions of its importance will be met with some degree of skepticism. Students will say, "Of course you're going to tell us it's important that we learn this; it's in your own interest to say so—after all, that's how you earn your living." But the voices that will have far greater credibility than yours are those of former students who were themselves resistant to learning but who came to appreciate its value for them. Inviting to class former students who were initially skeptical of learning something, but who found that doing this came to be extremely important in their lives, is a very effective way of reducing resistance. A few words from these former students will have a much greater effect than any number of appeals you can make. So whenever people who were resistant to a learning activity contact you to tell you how much it helped them and how much it meant for them at a later time, take down their phone numbers and ask them if they would mind visiting your class sometime to say this to your current group of students.

Create Situations in Which Students Succeed. Think how you can break down learning activities into specific tasks and incremental chunks. When you have done this, try to find for each task or chunk at least one activity or requirement that even the most anxiety-ridden of your students can perform to some minimum standard of success. The activity need not be

profound or be regarded by you as of particular significance. Put your judgments about this aside and reflect on how important it will be for students who are paralyzed with fear or frozen with anxiety to be able to experience some form of success, however small. Nothing is more heartening or enhancing to learning than feeling that one is moving forward successfully. Creating regular exercises in which it is very hard for students not to succeed will go a long way toward molding their self-images as effective learners.

Accentuate the Positive. Whenever possible, acknowledge students' efforts, congratulate them on their progress, and stress what is good in their performance. Remember that what may seem like a very small incremental move forward to you may be a progression of enormous significance to the person involved. By building their self-confidence and developing in them a sense that they are making progress and moving forward, you will help lessen their fear of the unknown. Make sure that you precede all critical comments—both written and spoken—with some acknowledgment of other aspects of their efforts.

Encourage Peer Learning and Peer Teaching. Since many students find it intimidating to be required to perform in front of a teacher whom they perceive as a person of enormous expertise and authority, try and create some opportunities for more private learning through peer tutoring (Topping, 1988; Goodlad and Hirst, 1989). As we know, the support of a learning community of peers can make a crucial difference to whether or not people persist in learning. Parainage and learning partnerships are increasingly recognized as important alternatives to more common forms of small-group work. Many colleges have instituted buddy systems, whereby new students are paired with students who have been in a program for some time. The more experienced students guide the newer ones through the first traumatic stages of the program, offering advice, materials, and support. Asking students to work in pairs or triads, suggesting that learners take

turns in evaluating each other's efforts, and asking more experienced students to teach neophytes are all ways in which students' learning activities can be granted what to them is a welcome degree of privacy. Relieved from the stress of having their efforts scrutinized by the teacher, they may find that much of their resistance to learning has disappeared.

Don't Push Too Fast. Be realistic about what you can expect from people. Remember those times when you, as a learner, seemed stuck on a learning plateau that you thought you would never leave. Learning is such a complicated process, involving all kinds of fluctuations, rhythms, plateaus, and threats to our identities that teachers need to realize that they are in for the long haul. Sometimes students appear to resist activities that teachers see as flowing naturally from what has just been achieved. To students, however, arriving where they have arrived may have taken such energy and determination that there may be a real need for an interlude before traveling further. They may need time to work through the grieving process when old ways of thinking and doing are lost. They may need to return temporarily to familiar intellectual territory to develop the courage for the next learning effort. They may want more time than you are allowing for the reflective speculation and interpretation they find so important. They may simply be exhausted.

Attend to the Need to Build Trust. Because gaining people's trust is such an important part of learning, make sure that you are fair and honest. If practicable, show students that you are an advocate for them in dealing with other authority figures in the institution. Look for administrative and bureaucratic practices that are oppressive and that are needlessly creating resistance. Examine your own teaching behaviors for aspects that are oppressive, despite your own best intentions and your commitments to democratic classrooms. Be prepared to listen to criticisms of your actions, no matter how difficult they are for you to hear. In fact, the more difficult it is for you to hear criticism, the more students will

respect the emotional effort you make to do this. Make sure you avoid playing favorites. Above all else, make sure that your words and actions are congruent. Don't make promises you can't keep. Don't make commitments you can't fulfill. Better to make no promises or commitments at all than to damage your credibility by not meeting them.

Admit the Normality of Resistance. Talk to students about your own episodes of resisting learning and the times when you shied away from the unknown for fear of looking foolish in front of your peers. Give examples of former resisters you encountered and talk about the reasons these students felt the ways they did. You may strike a chord within some people and embolden them to speak publicly about why they feel so uncertain. Acknowledging that resistance exists and admitting to its normality might seem like an embarrassing thing for teachers to do. In the long run, however, it will make everybody feel much more relaxed if the situation is made public. Far better to do this than to expect, in effect, a massive suspension of belief by pretending that everything is fine when you feel that you're facing serious and sustained resistance.

Be Wary of Confrontational Obsession. It is easy to become obsessed with transforming someone's resistance to learning into enthusiasm. Converting someone to seeing why, in your view, they should learn something can easily become distorted into a self-imposed test of your professional competence. Some people will remain stubbornly resistant to learning no matter what you do and no matter how much time you spend trying to convince them. At some point you need to recognize this and cut your losses. There is no point in having your energies drained by your determination to force one person to learn if this means the learning needs of the rest of your students are neglected. So don't endanger your self-respect and your morale by mistakenly interpreting your conversion of a resister as the ultimate test of your professional ability.

Strike a Bargain with Total Resisters. If a hard core of resisters remain for whom all your efforts and overtures mean

nothing, then I would advise you to accept the situation. There are some things you can't do much about. When you get to this point, you might want to try striking a bargain with these resisters whereby you accept their right not to learn and they agree not to disrupt the learning of others. In such situations, I will sometimes have a private talk with the resister:

Look, I know you think this is a waste of time, and I know that no matter what I say you're not going to participate in good spirit in any activities we undertake. I could try and force you to learn but that, ultimately, would mean that I didn't respect your right to decide whether or what you will learn. So let's strike a bargain. I won't push you to go through what everyone else is going through. You can choose which exercises you want to be involved in and which you want to sit out. In return, I ask you to refrain from disrupting these exercises and preventing those who are interested in participating from trying them. I won't make you learn, and you won't stop others learning.

Such an offer usually surprises students. To me, however, it has several appealing features. It acknowledges and respects students' right not to learn. It prevents me from wasting any more time trying to convince total resisters to do what I ask. It keeps students in touch with the learning activity, albeit as observers. And there is always the chance that once the pressure is removed and they are allowed to act just as observers these students will find themselves becoming interested in the activities taking place.

Acknowledge Students' Right to Resist. Ultimately, it is a mistake to try and force people to learn. This does not mean that you should not explain, with all the force and conviction you can muster, why you think it's in the students' own best inter-

ests to learn something. But if all your reasoning means nothing, then you must grant people the right not to learn. To some teachers who work in particularly authoritarian settings, allowing someone the right to not learn is not an option. In a repressive organizational or political regime, your life and livelihood may be in danger if you refuse to force someone to learn. But doing this destroys completely the trust between students and teachers that is so essential to significant learning. The activity becomes indoctrination, not education.