

Existentialism: Practical Classroom Applications

by Gary Hunter

In the song "Flowers are Red," the late singer-songwriter Harry Chapin described a little boy whose first tentative efforts at creative expression were discouraged by his first-grade teacher. The teacher not only insisted upon conformity but also isolated the boy in a corner for refusing to conform. This so discouraged the little boy that when he moved to another school he insisted upon conforming, even though his new teacher openly encouraged personal creative expression.

When I heard Chapin's song for the first time, several questions came to mind in quick succession. Was Chapin exaggerating to make a point? One of my student teachers recently observed an experienced teacher impatiently scolding a little girl for coloring a cat orange. "All cats are black," the teacher said. The little girl replied timidly, "My cat is orange." "Cats are black," the teacher insisted, "so color yours black."

Would a teacher really send a little boy to the corner for following his instincts, when those instincts in no way interfered with the lives of his teacher and fellow students? Many of us have experienced or witnessed some form of rigid insistence on conformity in the classroom, no less dramatic than that described in Chapin's song.

Could a teacher, such as the one described in the song, actually discourage a child's enthusiasm for personal expression to such an extent that the next teacher would fail to rekindle it? If so, how long would the impact endure? Into adulthood? To mid-life? Can we rule out the possibility of a lifetime? We all know teachers who inspire their students to express themselves individually and creatively. We also know this inspiration can last a lifetime. It follows that teachers who discourage individual creative expression can discourage it for a lifetime.

I believe that teachers should include among their highest teaching objectives the cultivation of a classroom environment where children are encouraged to enthusiastically pursue the unique, the personal, and the creative, so that they will develop a strong sense of purpose and a distinctive identity- one that will endure for a lifetime. It is my belief that the cultivation of such a classroom environment, from kindergarten through grade twelve, should include the application of some very significant existential principles.

EXISTENTIALISM AND THE CLASSROOM

Existentialism is a philosophy based on the notion that man's existence is an internal, subjective experience (Karl and Harnalian 1963). It holds that beyond mere existence lies essence, which can be achieved by those who actively seek to discover purposefulness in their existence and to attribute personal meaning to it (Sartre 1947). They do this by making authentic, independent choices and by assuming responsibility for the consequences of those choices throughout their lives. However, essence does not automatically flow out of existence. There are two major obstacles to the pursuit and achievement of one's essence.

The first obstacle is unawareness. Unless individuals are aware that they have the freedom to actively seek to discover purposefulness in their existence, they may not do so. Certainly they are unlikely to do so if they are subjected in their formative years to teachers who demand conformity to rules for conformity's sake. Those teachers often secure seemingly responsible students, but at a cost. They deny students the freedom to make choices. If students are subjected, year in and year out, to automatic compliance with the rules of others, how can they become aware that they are free to make authentic, independent choices? Furthermore, how can they be considered truly responsible when they have been denied the opportunity to choose and to accept responsibility for those choices? The second obstacle to the pursuit and achievement of one's essence is fear. Fear resides in the realization that if we make authentic, independent choices we must assume, with no excuses, full responsibility for the consequences of those choices. To a large extent, it is the angst-inducing fear of accepting the burden of responsibility that makes us willing to forfeit or deny our freedom to choose.

Teachers should be aware of these two obstacles that impede their students' efforts to pursue and achieve essence and they should engage their students daily in efforts to overcome them. They can do this by recognizing, respecting and nurturing their students' subjective realities. Teachers who fail to recognize that reality is experienced subjectively will likely impose on their students an external reality, one contaminated by personal and societal biases. Furthermore, they will often deny what is in their students' best interests and discourage individual creative expression.

To illustrate, in J. D. Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield is fascinated with tombs and museums, so he submits an essay about Egyptian tombs to his history teacher, Old Spencer. After reading the essay aloud, Old Spencer ridicules Holden for his fascination with such an unusual subject and dismisses it as a waste of time. In doing so, the teacher imposes on Holden his own ideas about what should be fascinating in history. In the process he denies-and, more importantly, encourages Holden to deny- what is true and real to him personally. He also unwittingly encourages Holden to disregard his personal fascination-that is, his subjective reality- and to live in a world that is false and unreal to him personally. To deny another's subjective reality is to deny that person the opportunity to be an individual with an authentic, independent identity. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Holden experiences an identity crisis and ends up in a mental institution.

Another problem inevitably arises when teachers fail to recognize that reality is experienced subjectively: they misinterpret what their students are saying and doing. For example, Mr. Wilson notices that one of his students, Susan, daydreams in his classroom. If he is unaccustomed to appealing to his students' subjective realities, his perception of the situation may be, "Poor Susan has a concentration problem. How is she going to be successful in life, let alone in school?" In truth, Susan may well be bored; she may turn to adventurous daydreaming in order to escape the tedium of the classroom. Meanwhile, Mr. Wilson sees the problem as Susan's. His teacher-centered mindset will not allow him to consider the possibility that he is part of Susan's daydreaming problem because he may conduct a boring classroom. Susan's boredom is genuine; Mr. Wilson's interpretation is false.

Both Mr. Wilson and Old Spencer, through their attitudes and behaviors, fail to meet the needs of the students whose needs they were hired to meet. They and many other teachers fail their students because they fail to recognize their students' subjective realities.

EXISTENTIAL PRINCIPLES AND THE PURSUIT OF ESSENCE

Once teachers recognize that reality is experienced subjectively, they must then respect and nurture their students' subjective realities. They can do this by applying two existential principles in their classrooms. They can celebrate, rather than discourage, authenticity, and they can encourage their students to have what the existentialist calls "the courage to be" (Tillich 1952).

How does a teacher go about applying the first existential principle, celebrating the authentic? One way is to capture a teachable moment—a moment when the teacher turns the teaching over to a student. For example, if Old Spencer had been an existential teacher, his reaction to Holden's fascination with Egyptian tombs would have been entirely different. Instead of scolding Holden and dismissing his effort as a waste of time, Old Spencer would have encouraged Holden to expand his short essay and present it to the class. The presentation could then have been used as a springboard for further class discussion. By taking advantage of a teachable moment as a way of celebrating a student's interest in a peculiar, unusual, or authentic subject, the existential teacher provides the student with an esteem-building experience and encourages that student to pursue his or her essence.

Perhaps the most expedient way to celebrate the authentic is by the frequent use of three specific types of questions, each designed to elicit authentic, personal responses: imaginative-divergent, evaluative and hypothetical. An imaginative-divergent question is one that inspires an infinite number of responses, many of which will have personal meaning to the students: *What do you think of when you see or hear the word _____?* An evaluative question elicits students' opinions, which are often substantiated with authentic rationale: *What is your opinion about _____? Why?* A hypothetical question inspires students to make creative and original inferences: *Suppose _____. What if _____?*

Another way teachers can celebrate the authentic is by providing students with choices involving major individual projects. For example, teachers can have students compose their own stories, supply illustrations of their choice, place the completed products on display, and make them available to students and teachers throughout the school. These are just a few of the ways teachers can promote personal, creative expression by celebrating authenticity. In doing so, they demonstrate not only their tolerance of but also their enthusiasm for the unique, authentic interests of their students. Having been part of a process that celebrates and encourages individual growth and creativity, students would leave the classroom less judgmental and more tolerant of people whose tastes, attitudes, and opinions differ from their own. As a result, students would become more inquisitive, empathetic, and altruistic, while maintaining a healthy level of self-esteem.

How do teachers go about applying the second existential principle—encouraging students to have "the courage to be"? They can instill in their students the courage to choose freely and authentically and to face the full burden of responsibility for the

consequences of their choices, whether the consequences are positive or negative. Teachers can do this by providing students with opportunities to make meaningful choices and decisions in the classroom. For example, students could on occasion choose their own essay topics, determine some of their own assignments, set deadlines for research papers and projects, and make decisions about classroom rules of conduct.

Existential teachers carefully monitor the consequences of their students' choices to ensure that when those choices adversely affect others, the offending students recognize that they have infringed upon the rights of others, understand the impact of the infringement, and accept full responsibility for the consequences. If teachers are vigilant, students will discover for themselves, with minimal guidance, that their actions often adversely affect others and that, since they are fully free to choose, they are fully responsible for the consequences of those choices. The weight of responsibility will not discourage students from making choices in the future but will encourage them to first give full consideration to the impact of their choices on others. It follows that their choices would become increasingly altruistic.

In encouraging students to have "the courage to be," teachers are essentially providing them with opportunities to rehearse for life's main event: adulthood. By continually reminding students of their personal freedom and by encouraging them to courageously transcend the temptation to avoid and deny freedom, and thereby escape responsibility for consequences, teachers will help students to develop confidence in their decision-making abilities. The more confident they become, the more autonomous their decisions will be, and the less they will need to rely on the influence of others in making decisions. As a result, if students realize that the full achievement of their essences lies in an unconventional direction, they will have the courage to proceed in that direction.

How many times have we read or heard about successful writers, athletes, musicians, or artists who rejected attempts by parents, teachers, counselors, and peers to dictate and control their destinies by insisting that they pursue a more conventional line of work? What would the destinies of these successful people have been had they succumbed to these external influences?

In summary, by recognizing students' subjective realities, by celebrating the authentic, and by encouraging students to have "the courage to be" in the pursuit of their essences, teachers are providing students with the opportunity to be the best they can be.

AN APPLICATION OF THE EXISTENTIAL TEACHING MOMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

One of the most memorable events of my life occurred at one o'clock on November 22, 1963. Most people who were school age or older remember what they were doing at that precise time. I was in the eleventh grade, and I was sitting at my desk waiting for class to begin. Suddenly, as they filed into the classroom, I began to hear students speaking in hushed tones. Their voices were so soft that I was only able to catch fragments of what they were saying. The words I vividly recall were: president, shot, Kennedy, dying, dead. Momentarily, our teacher Mr. Morgan entered the classroom. A student promptly asked, "Is it true?" Mr. Morgan, with a pained expression, looked at the student and replied gravely, "I'm afraid so." Then, without hesitation, he began his lesson.

The subject was not mentioned again that afternoon. It was not until I arrived home after school that I received confirmation that President Kennedy had been shot and killed.

Many teachers in Mr. Morgan's position, perhaps stunned by the horror of the event and feeling the need to protect students from the harsh reality of it, might well have reacted in the same way. From the existential point of view, Mr. Morgan and other teachers who reacted as he did deprived many individuals of an opportunity to confront some very meaningful existential truths about life; namely, existence and mortality. Had he been an existential teacher, he would have recognized that within this crisis, however painful, lay an opportunity for an existential teaching moment. Rather than attempting to shelter the students from reality and truth, he could have engaged the students in a discussion about death, the brevity of life, and the need to live life with urgency and purposefulness. He might have pointed out the paradox that our mortality gives meaning and urgency to our lives. No doubt President Kennedy would have endorsed this message; certainly, it epitomized the way he lived.

This message was conveyed admirably in the film *Dead Poets Society*. The teacher, played by actor Robin Williams, took his students on a field trip to the school's trophy case. There he huddled his students around the case and asked them to view photographs of the school's early championship teams. He told his students to listen to what those former champions-long dead-had to say to them. And as they listened, they indeed heard in a faint ghostly whisper the words, "Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

In his existential wisdom, the teacher in *Dead Poets Society* recognized that there are important truths about life and that these truths should be dealt with candidly. Mr. Morgan communicated the opposite message. By not discussing President Kennedy's assassination, he suggested, perhaps unwittingly, that the appropriate response to traumatic events is avoidance. Although well intentioned, he deprived his students of an opportunity for an existential moment in the classroom. Meanwhile, the impact of an existential moment in front of a trophy case in *Dead Poets Society* would linger in the memories of those who shared it, as a consoling reminder of how death affirms life and should give life purpose and urgency. The more aware students are of this paradox, the more purposeful and earnest they will become, not only in their daily pursuits, but also in the pursuit of their essences.

EXISTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

If teachers continually encourage their students to have "the courage to be," to "seize the day," and to bear the burden of responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions, student behavior will become increasingly more responsible. When students choose to behave responsibly, they are motivated intrinsically. For example, had Old Spencer provided Holden with the option of giving a presentation on museums and Egyptian tombs, and had Holden elected to do so, his choice would have been made for purely intrinsic reasons-his interest in a subject he found personally meaningful, enjoyable, and real. The more students are provided with choices and responsibilities-and this happens often in

existential classrooms-the more intrinsically motivated they become and the less need there is to rely on extrinsic motivators. Consequently, student manipulation becomes less necessary.

Teachers who recognize how important it is to avoid discouraging their students' enthusiasms for personal and creative pursuits, as the teacher did in "Flowers are Red," should seriously consider the bold applications of these existential principles. This is not to suggest that the application of existential principles should be the be-all and end-all of a teacher's classroom operation but an integral part of it. Integrating these principles in the classroom daily does not require special training but simply an awareness of existential principles and a determination to apply them. Teachers who celebrate the authentic and who continually challenge and inspire their students to have "the courage to be" may well see their students leave school with a strong sense of identity, confident in their ability to make wise decisions, and with the courage to vigorously pursue their essences.

REFERENCES

Bergsgaard, A O. 1996. *The self in the shadows: The existential view and education*. Univ. of Manitoba.

Karl, F. R., and Harnalian, L. 1963. *The existential imagination*. Greenwich: Fawcett Publications.

Sartre, J. P. 1947. *Existentialism*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Tillich, P. 1952- *The courage to be*. New Haven: Vision Press.
The Educational Forum - Volume 57 - Winter 1998

Gary Hunter is Instructor of student teachers in the Department of Education at the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba. He also provides to business and government courses, workshops, and presentations in oral communication, instruction, and facilitative management.

