

Corridor Wit

Talking Back to Our Teachers

By Alfie Kohn

L'esprit de l'escalier (staircase wit) is a French expression for the devastating riposte, the perfect comeback, that occurs to you only after the party is over, on the way up to bed. But I, for one, spent a lot more time sitting in classrooms as a kid than chatting at soirees as an adult, and many of those hours consisted of listening to my teachers' vapid clichés and imperious demands. Of course I was too young to think of, and in any case too powerless to consider offering, the replies that these declarations deserved. But now? Care to join me for a session of l'esprit de couloir (corridor wit)?

I'm not talking about simple snark, even if it does afford a certain measure of satisfaction. In response to "Where do you think you're going, young man?", we might have said, "Well, I'm fairly sure I'm going to the bathroom. Why? Where do you think I'm going?" Or, to the teacher who barked, "Take your feet off that desk! Is that the way you treat your furniture at home?", we could have replied, "Heck, no! That's why I come to school."

But those are merely snappy answers to stupid questions that just happened to take place in a classroom. What interests me are the overused and underthought pronouncements that reflected truly reactionary views of education and children. The fact that they were often delivered in a tone of smug self-satisfaction just enhances the pleasure of imagining what our replies might have been. Oh, for a time machine...

I need all eyes on me, please!

Mrs. _____, I appreciate your honesty in admitting that your periodic requests to look at you are really about what you need. Obviously it isn't necessary to look at you in order to hear what you're saying. More important, neither looking nor listening is the same as learning. In fact, real learning is more likely to happen when we students are doing most of the talking. But, hey, if your need for attention is so pressing, I'd be glad to stare at you some more.

[to late-arriving student] How nice of you to join us!

Nice has nothing to do with it. I'm required by law to be here. Of course I realize you're being sarcastic — which, come to think of it, isn't a very "nice" way to treat people, is it?

You need to be making wiser choices in here.

Is it my imagination, or do all your examples of "wise choices" turn out to involve nothing more than mindless obedience? Is that really your idea of wisdom?

Eyes on your own paper! I want to see what you can do, not what your neighbor can do!

In other words, you want to see what happens when I'm deprived of the resources and social support that characterize most well-functioning real-world environments, rather than seeing how much more my "neighbors" and I could accomplish together? Why?

Would you like to share what you were saying to her with the rest of us?

I appreciate the invitation, but no: If I had meant to tell the whole class, I would have done so. Or are you saying you believe that private communication isn't legitimate?

I didn't give you that grade; you earned it!

Hmm. How do you figure? It wasn't my idea to view learning as something to be done in exchange for a grade instead of something worth doing for its own sake. And the exchange rate — how many hoops I have to jump through for a B versus an A — was also decided by you. But by pretending the results are solely a function of my effort, you can avoid taking responsibility for the game you created or for the way you teach. Worse, you've set things up so you can blame any kid to whom you give a bad grade since it'll appear to be all his fault. You know, it's ironic: A lot of us are less interested in learning — and therefore won't do as well — precisely because you've made it all about grades. Hey, I guess you could say you earned our lack of motivation!

[to student who asks for a pencil] A craftsman doesn't come to work without his tools.

True. But a craftsman has the opportunity to create something meaningful, as opposed to filling out worksheets or copying down what someone else tells him.

Did you bring enough for everyone?

Wait, are you saying that if I walked in here with a giant bag of candy or gum, you'd be OK with my passing it around to all the other kids? Come to think of it, are you going to start applying this principle to yourself: "No coffee for me unless I buy enough for the entire faculty"? And will your collectivist philosophy apply to learning and assessment, too, so that no one is regarded as successful in here until everyone understands a concept?

Why haven't you done your homework?

Gosh, I hardly know where to start! Maybe because you didn't even come up with the assignment yourself; you just photocopied it from a workbook, so I figured if you weren't willing to put time into it, why should I? Or because if I already knew how to do the homework, it would have been a waste of time, and if I didn't know how to do it, it probably wouldn't help? Because six hours a day of this kind of stuff is enough and I want my life to be about more than academics? (Don't you?) Because I want to hold on to my curiosity about the world for as long as I can, and your assignments are teaching me to detest learning? Is that enough, or should I go on?

Be on your best behavior today, boys and girls!

Really? Again? Isn't it a little unrealistic to expect people to do their "best" as often as you ask us to? And if you're suggesting that less-than-best is good enough for certain occasions, could you tell us which ones — and what percentage of our best is sufficient? Also, what exactly does "best behavior" mean? Are you asking us to be ethical people, or just to be docile and compliant?

Take everything off of your desks except a pencil.

Wait a minute. If you're giving us a test but forcing us to put away our books and notes, then you'd mostly be assessing rote recall. Surely you're more interested in knowing our capacity for thinking than how much stuff we've crammed into short-term memory, aren't you?

You're just not living up to your potential.

Potential for what? We all have the potential to do things that we either shouldn't do or have no compelling reason to do, right? I'm guessing that you, for example, haven't "lived up to your potential" for collecting model trains or making obscene phone calls. What you really seem to be saying is that I don't happen to share your priorities. So maybe we should talk a bit about the kinds of activities each of us finds worthwhile, and why. By the way, if your teaching really engaged us kids, I'll bet we'd dive in happily and want to get better at doing it, without any of your prompting or reprimands.

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