

“Your Hand’s Not Raised? Too Bad: I’m Calling on You Anyway”

By Alfie Kohn

Doctors in training call it “pimping.” A medical student or junior resident is abruptly put on the spot, sometimes during patient rounds, as an instructor fires off difficult questions about anatomy, diagnostic protocols, or surgical procedures.[1] The practice is defended in pretty much the same way that other forms of humiliation, bullying, hazing, or punishment are defended: Keeps ‘em on their toes! Shows ‘em I mean business! Toughens ‘em up for when other people abuse them later! And of course that old chestnut: I suffered through it; why shouldn’t they?[2]

Children in school are rarely questioned with such ferocity, but similar moral and pedagogical concerns arise — with particular urgency, in fact, precisely because they are younger: Should teachers call on students who haven’t indicated they want to talk and, in fact, have tacitly indicated they don’t want to talk?

I recently suggested on Twitter that this practice — “cold-calling” — is so fundamentally disrespectful of students that I’d be disinclined to take advice about anything from someone who endorsed it. Reactions to my tweet fell into three clusters. The first group basically agreed: “It’s a great way to shame a kid.” “Too many teachers actually believe it is a trait of a good teacher, that they can ‘make’ people ‘participate.’” “Some teachers torture my 14 yr old with this. I have no respect for them.” One writer likened it to “using grades as coercion,” adding that it was particularly obnoxious to call on (that is, call out) a student whom the teacher believed wasn’t paying attention.

The consensus among these folks is that the practice is repugnant because a teacher is basically saying, “It appears you’d rather not contribute to the discussion right now, but I don’t care about your preference and I’ll use my power to force you to contribute.” If this isn’t disrespectful, then that word has no meaning. Moreover, the harmful effects aren’t limited to that particular kid. As with “time out,” in which younger children who displease the teacher are forcibly isolated, everyone who watches this happen, thinking, “That could be me next time,” feels less safe.

I’m tempted to ask a cold-calling teacher, “How would you feel if an administrator (at a faculty meeting) or a speaker (at a workshop) did the same thing to you?” But that’s not really the right question because some teachers are sufficiently comfortable in the spotlight that they wouldn’t mind. The point is that lots of adults, and even more kids, do mind. Our obligation is to imagine the perspective of the specific person with whom we’re interacting, not our own likely reaction in their situation.

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But is it always objectionable to call on kids whose hands aren’t up? That was the challenge offered

by a second group of tweeters. One said, “Depends how it’s done. If the relationship is good, and it’s a gentle invitation to comment, that could be respectful, no?” Another asked: “How about we create a climate where children feel happy & confident to raise their hands instead?”

Fair enough: A smiling, “gentle invitation” (“Chris? I notice you haven’t spoken for awhile. Would you like to chime in here?”) — and periodic reassurances that anyone may choose to pass at any time — is completely different from a nonnegotiable demand that everyone must answer. And if the way one does it is relevant, so too is the reason: Some teachers just want to support reticent kids in speaking up, particularly when a thought seems to flicker across their faces. Others, by contrast, are using their position of power to create a classroom driven by fear: You’d better be prepared because you never know when I’m going to call on you!

No matter how awful the latter environment may be for students, it can always be rationalized in the name of “accountability” — the same word, ironically, that’s invoked by policy makers to impose their “do it my way or suffer” version of school reform on teachers. And when students are coerced into talking or listening, there’s a euphemism for that, too: “engagement.” Notice that both terms, at least as used here, reflect a behaviorist paradigm. The goal is to produce a certain observable behavior; the experience of the student — his or her inner life — is irrelevant.

The practice of mandating student responses as a control strategy is endorsed by people who promote classrooms that are militaristic in other ways, too. I’m thinking of an approach associated with “No Excuses” charter schools (mostly attended by low-income African-American and Latino students) that’s been aptly described as the “pedagogy of poverty”: memorizing facts, practicing skills, and obeying authority. “You’ll talk whenever I demand that you do so” — training children to perform on command like seals — is, after all, more consistent with a “bunch o’ facts” curriculum than with one rooted in inquiry and meaning.[3] (I’m not talking here about teachers keen to elicit participation in a thoughtful, open-ended discussion — more about which in a moment — but with those who call out short questions that have unambiguous right answers and demand that students spit out those answers in front of their peers.)

Observe one of these classrooms — there are plenty of stomach-turning examples available for inspection on YouTube — and you’ll see that pressuring kids to contribute when they’re not ready meshes quite well with other disturbing values and practices. When that’s not the case, though — when teachers are uncomfortable with a fact-based curriculum or the use of bribes and threats, yet think nothing of putting students on the spot — they ought to confront the inconsistency. They may be giving with one hand while taking away with the other.[4]

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The third group of respondents to my brief reflection dug deeper into the purpose of, and wondered about alternatives to, cold-calling. Several were troubled by the prospect of waiting for students to volunteer. One expressed concern that the raising-hands model means hearing from only “20% of kids in [what is supposed to be a] whole class discussion.” I certainly understand this objection. Obviously we want to create what another respondent called “equitable classroom practice.” We don’t want to exclude introverts who are reluctant to speak up and let a few students dominate every conversation. (Here we’re talking about participation in real discussions, not pimping kids to bark out correct responses.)

Still, I believe a student’s choice not to talk should be respected. The fact that there are problems with raising hands doesn’t entitle us to turn to the equally flawed option of cold-calling — or vice versa. There’s something deeply objectionable about saying “You have to talk when I say you should” just as there is about saying, in the words of another Twitter respondent, “You can talk only if I tell

you to.” These two stances are actually more complementary than opposed. And the primary reason to reject the latter isn’t that too few kids will raise their hands. It’s that the classroom remains entirely too teacher-centered. Just as it does with cold calling.

What we need to develop — with students, not just for them — is a model of discussion that encourages everyone to speak up when they’re ready without forcing anyone to do so, and that supports the community in becoming self-governing rather than giving one person in the room the sole authority to decide who talks when. Alongside the strong moral argument for abandoning raising hands and cold-calling, the process of fashioning a third alternative helps students to acquire an enormously useful social skill. Giving them the chance to do so is also a powerful signal of the teacher’s trust in them.

At this point, I invite you to put this essay aside for 14 minutes to watch [a remarkable video](#) of an elementary school classroom in Kentucky. In case you’re too busy (or the website is inaccessible), I’ll summarize it for you. The teacher starts the school year by asking her students to brainstorm features of the kind of classroom they want to have. When one student, perhaps recalling the voices of teachers in earlier grades, dutifully proposes “Raising hands instead of yelling out,” the teacher doesn’t just agree and happily check off that item on her mental list of Rules I Hoped They’d Suggest. Instead, she wonders out loud whether raising hands is really necessary. Might there be other ways to avoid having everyone talk at once, ways that don’t vest all the power in the teacher? But the students seem disconcerted by any scenario other than the one they’ve been carefully trained to accept over the years, so the teacher backs off — for awhile. Later in the year, she invites them to revisit the issue. At that point most of the kids feel ready to try out a more democratic model of discussion, and the video ends with evidence of how it works: An epilogue shows us the students discussing a story, politely taking turns. Rather than controlling the conversation, the teacher listens.

Ideally, moving beyond hand-raising or cold-calling is part of an ongoing project of creating a democratic, caring classroom community, one in which students are helped to feel a sense of belonging and given continuous opportunities to make decisions, individually and collectively. This larger project plays out in regular class meetings during which they’re invited to propose concrete ideas to make self-governing discussions run smoothly and fairly. For example, students might come up with strategies to encourage shy or soft-spoken kids who really do want to talk. They might brainstorm ways to make sure everyone feels as if they can offer opinions and questions without being laughed at. (The teacher also may approach certain students individually to make sure the reason they’re quiet isn’t because they fear being ridiculed and to ask whether they’d be open to gentle invitations to contribute.) Students can reflect on the benefit of having regular opportunities to talk in pairs and small groups rather than always as a whole class. As the cooperative learning mavens David and Roger Johnson put it, “No one gets left out of a pair.”

Bringing the kids in on this process is not only respectful and a good way to promote their social, moral, and intellectual development — it’s also quite sensible because it produces more good ideas than any individual, including the teacher, can come up with on his or her own. And as the year progresses, kids may start to join the teacher in extending those gentle invitations to a quiet peer: “Randy, were you going to say something just now?”

At the same time, teachers should be challenging themselves. A decision to avoid cold-calling and hand-raising isn’t just part of a larger effort to build democratic communities but also part of a larger project of improving pedagogy. Most discussions about cold-calling are focused on how to elicit students’ responses to a teacher’s questions. But take a step back: Why is the teacher asking most of the questions? Students’ willingness to participate, to say nothing of the quality of their learning, might be greatly enhanced if most of the questions (that shape the curriculum) were

theirs.[5] Likewise, teachers need to resist the temptation to grade students on their class participation, which makes it exceedingly difficult to encourage authentic discussions in which students are interested in the ideas. Grades poison everything they touch, undermining intrinsic motivation to learn and warping the whole classroom dynamic.

A self-governing conversation is a tall order for very young children and also for very large classes (which lend themselves to listening rather than learning). In such cases, adjustments and compromises may be necessary. But the general rule is that treating students with respect — which means we neither compel them to speak nor determine unilaterally who gets to do so — is ethically appropriate, educationally beneficial, and practically realistic . . . as long as we're willing to give up some control.

NOTES

1. For example, see <http://ow.ly/XyoSs> or <http://ow.ly/XyoHC>
2. This is a prominent fork in the road of life. Some people suffer through the indignity or even brutality of being mistreated as a newbie, only to turn around, once they've attained a little seniority, and abuse those who come along after them. Other people say, "Nobody should have to go through what I did. Now that I have some authority, I'll use it to denounce cruel traditions and work to change the system."
3. This approach to teaching generally involves a focus on raising test scores (rather than promoting critical thinking); a goal of eliciting mindless obedience (rather than offering opportunities for kids to make decisions); and a reliance on rewards and praise for conformity, on the one hand, and public humiliation for noncompliance, on the other. See my article "[Poor Teaching for Poor Children...in the Name of Reform.](#)" Education Week, April 27, 2011.
4. Other examples of this phenomenon: Many schools try to create a feeling of community and promote constructive conflict resolution but undercut these efforts by refusing to abandon punitive interventions like time-outs, detentions, and suspensions. Similarly, the benefits of avoiding punishment are negated by the continued use of rewards — "sugar-coated control," as one researcher calls them. And, while one hand may offer a thoughtful curriculum, the other takes it back by using tests (rather than more authentic assessments) to evaluate students' progress.
5. I discussed this issue in "[Who's Asking?](#)", Educational Leadership, September 2015, drawing on the work of Dennie Palmer Wolf, Eleanor Duckworth, and others.

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