

## **Dorothy Heathcote - Excellence in teaching**

### **From *Dorothy Heathcote – Collected Writings on Education & Drama***

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#### **Relating to people**

What do we mean when we say, 'That is an excellent teacher'?

For me, an excellent teacher is one who knows the difference between relating to things and relating to people. Both need great skill, but the greatest skill lies in how we relate to people.

If I am to aspire to excellence as a teacher, I must be able to see my pupils as they really are. I mustn't discourage them - I must accept them. This means adjusting myself to my pupils, and seeing things from another standpoint.

I must also preserve an interest in my students and, in this way, grasp something of their potential. I must see what they are in the process of becoming. When children come to us with labels - this is a slow learner, this is a non-reader - we tend to shut our minds to change: but the ability to preserve an interest in children prevents teachers from stereotyping them in all sorts of ways.

As an excellent teacher, I must not be afraid to move out of my centre, and meet the children where they are. The ability to go forward to meet people gives me the opportunity to vary my approach and my responses. If I do this, I shall not be afraid to try unfamiliar things, because I'm not afraid of being rejected. Rejection is not part of trying to meet someone. Even if some rejection must take place, let that be of the idea and not of the person. I think we - the teachers and the pupils often feel rejected in the school when it's really our ideas that are being rejected.

I must also have the ability to see the world through my students, and not my students through it. This ability can give a teacher a new perception, a renewal of energy and teaching style; there is a sort of regeneration when suddenly a class shows you a whole new way of looking at something.

As an example of this, I might describe what happened recently when I was working with some young men in a Borstal institution. I was in the tricky position of making the Borstal boys take the role of prison officers whilst their prison officers sat watching us. I hoped that the boys would treat my prisoner just as their prison officers had been treating them. So I became an official from the Bureau of American Indian Affairs, and I put them in charge of Ishi, the last surviving member of his tribe. Ishi really had been found earlier this century on a railway station, and the bureau had decreed that this man - ill, sick, forlorn, speaking tongues nobody had ever heard - was to be put in the local jail until such time as he should be made city-like, and civilized'. Of course, the boys defied all my desires to get Ishi put in the jail. They said, 'You're not putting him in jail. We'll build him a house.' And they built him one - without any windows. I protested at this, but they insisted, and I realized we were looking at the house from two different points of view: for them it gave privacy, and for me it was a prison. I'm still pondering why they did it. Perhaps it was something to do with the fact that I couldn't look in and peer at Ishi. The fact that he couldn't see

out either made no difference. It was what I might do to him that mattered. To understand this, I had to look at their house through their eyes, not through mine.

But, as a teacher who seeks excellence, I must also have the ability not to be lessened by my students, to withstand them, to use my own eyes sometimes, and be myself. -

One of the ways of avoiding being lessened is to refuse to give back what the pupils give you, especially if they are uncooperative. So often, it is easier to play tit-for-tat, and be lessened.

I must have the ability to withstand certain pressures. I must be able-' to say, 'I respect how it looks from your point of view but I'm not giving in, because I can explain why I want it my way.' It's often easier to let the children get away with it, because it's too tiring to keep battling on. But the real battle is for a higher quality of response. I feel this ability to withstand is to know something of the chastity of one's purposes.

The ability to resist is a little like the ability to withstand. While withstanding may be to hold the status quo, resisting is to demonstrate, 'No further! That's it!' I've had to spend a lot of energy in MY teaching to create circumstances in which I can resist without pain, either to me or to the class. All my strategies enable me to create a disciplined world and to find ways of using power without its being my power. Frequently I use the power of the subject to discipline a group. I say, 'It demands this of us' - not 'I demand - this of you.' By resisting people, you help them to find guidelines and boundaries which can begin to function for all of us. Sometimes these boundaries are painfully constraining, and sometimes these moments when one says, 'No further!' are very risky. There are times when I know a group of children could just laugh me out of the room because, from where they stand, I am an idiot in an idiotic system. But then it's necessary to stand there saying, 'Why do you laugh and tear your own work down?' when it would be so much simpler to laugh with them and get out of the room safely.

If I wish to be an excellent teacher, I must also have the ability to dominate the scene for my students when it is necessary, and in the guise of one thing, do another, so that the pupils can grow. This is where you take risks in order to gain, where you approach the work by guile, by the delicate use of lures, and use oblique approaches to attain your goals. I'll give you an example of how domination worked with delinquent boys. I once went to my class in a school, taking my three-month-old daughter with me. I walked in and, for some crazy reason, I expected the class to be doing Julius Caesar because that's what the timetable said. So I wheeled the pram gaily in, and was met by a line of black-browed, beady-eyed morons. There was anger all over that room! So of course I said, 'Oh, I thought we were doing Julius Caesar', and they glowered in return.

This was one day when I dominated - I was very tired at the end of it! I looked one of the boys in the eye and said, 'There are days like today. Why don't you have a pint on me? And I offered him one. The lad took it (thank God he did take it!) and I drew pints all round and dominated the situation. The clouds did not lift, but the pints were not thrown back in my face.

So then I had to find a way of showing that I valued what they had done in just letting me be in the room with them. I said, 'You think you've got troubles? Have you seen my brat? I'm not going to see her father again. You think you've got troubles? Not one of you signs that notice saying you don't want my pub to close. It's going to

shut next month. You've come in here and drunk my beer, but you'll let me lose my job, won't you?'

And they said, 'We didn't know it was going to shut. We didn't even know it was going to open.'

'Ah, well it is, and not one of you've signed the notice, have you?'

'Well, we would have signed it, if we'd seen it.'

'I've heard that before.'

And then I stopped and said, 'There must be somebody worse off than us. Somewhere in the world there must be somebody worse off than me and this brat, and you with all your troubles. Tell you what, come to the bar, and don't tell the fellow next to you what's up with you, come see if you can find out what's up with him.'

And the crowd of black gloom drifted over to the bar (the teacher's table), and I stood there pulling pints, sloshing them down, and groaning about my brat. And I asked if they had found out anything about each other, and I heard incredible things. 'I've had a row with the wife this morning,' and, 'I've drunk all me wages,' and so on. And so the moaning and groaning went on. (They should have been doing Julius Caesar but I didn't dare draw their attention to that fact, because the gloom would have come down again.)

I said, 'I wonder if anybody could come in here who was worse off than us?' And one lad thought a bit and said, 'Yes, a tramp could come in here; a tramp that's got nowt could come in here.'

'Do you want to be a tramp that's got nowt?'

And he said,--'AY.'

And he put on a sacking coat, and walked up to the counter that didn't exist, and I reached up and gave him a pint in one of the better glasses. He took the pint and had just begun to drink it, when I looked at one of the other lads and asked, 'Now what made him come in here,-, into this gloomy hole? I mean, we're all standing here like cheese at fourpence and yet he comes in here. There's nowt to cheer him up in here.'

And the tramp said something that was really to open all our eyes:'All the other pubs have music.'

An amazing new view - it was quiet in here! And at that point I said, 'Well, the reason it's quiet in here is because we're doing Julius Caesar. We are, you know! And what's more tomorrow one of these silly devils is going to fight at Philippi. And the bloody generals are arguing over eighty bloody drachmas. And it's you and me that's going to be fighting at Philippi.'

And at that point, we became drunken soldiers just before Philippi. And, from there, we got on to the way ordinary private soldiers carry the responsibility for the generals who never come into the front line.

You know, that's as good an introduction to Julius Caesar as I've ever found. It took about an hour, but I think it's a good example of dominating people.

As an excellent teacher, I must be able to bring power to my students and to draw on their power. This negotiation, this exchange of power is a realignment of relating. If children are damaged too much in school they won't let you exchange power they want you to keep it nobody likes school with her about. I can't do it the way she wants it done.' It's quite difficult, I find, to get children to take power, and then give you back a bit, and then keep on taking more. I really think it's a shame that we've set up our schools so that children don't feel they can take power.

But all this can be achieved only when we recognize that we must pay constant attention to others, and be slow to make judgements. This isn't just a matter of survival, but a matter of respect.

Paying attention starts when I begin working with a class. I notice how they walk in, how they look at each other. Do I see elements of self-neglect, or do they neglect each other? This boy is tired-looking, that girl looks as if she's had a bad knock. I can't judge whether I'm right, but I can pay attention and, in so doing, recognize a little of the conditions of people.

The ability to withhold judgement is often seen as ambivalence in a teacher. We all know a teacher who never makes up her mind whether some student is good or bad. Why can't she? She must know! And often a lack of rigour is the reason why such teachers fail to make judgements. They have no proper standards by which to measure people. But one can be desperately wrong if one moves too soon. I remember once working with a highly skilled colleague who told me that he was going to fail a student. I found myself thinking, 'Haven't you realized she's forty-eight and she's plain, and that's the reason you're going to fail her?' I imagined that he had missed a centre to her teaching that, to me, was sticking out like a sore thumb. She was carrying a burden, and I reckoned it was her plainness. We both went into the classroom to watch her teach, and she gave quite a scintillating teaching performance. My colleague was astonished, and so was I. Talking with her afterwards, I asked her if she had put on a special performance that day. She replied, 'Well, you see, today my mother was calm when I left for school.' She was able to teach that day because her mother had been calm. So much for my guesses about the burden she was carrying!

Being slow to make judgements allows me constantly to renew my view of each pupil and to update it. I think this is one of the hardest things we must train ourselves to do if we aspire to excellence in teaching. We should stop believing things other people tell us about children, stop taking things for granted, stop saying that because we once knew nasty jimmy Jones, and his eyes were close together as well, this lad's going to be the same. One of the most rejuvenating things is to give everyone a fresh start each morning. The ability to do this is part of the condition of innocence. I think innocence has a chance of bringing with it enormous gaiety and trust, so that you walk into the classroom clean every morning, however mucky you are at the end of the day.

## **Relating to self**

Before we can relate to people successfully, we must first come to terms with ourselves.

To keep my teaching in trim, I must first be able to look straight at myself, and take my own measure. I must be almost obsessed with myself. This isn't as selfish as it sounds because, if I know what I am, then I know what is needed to renew myself. Otherwise, I go into the classroom tired, and I'm not paid to go into a classroom tired. Some people seem born tired, and some people seem to become tired, but in the long run, nobody's going to make you tired except yourself.

The ability to be obsessed by ourselves seems to me to be a marvellous gift. We are constantly concerned and interested in ourselves 'How funny! I wonder why I feel like that today?'

I don't think this is a bad thing. It leads towards interest in the outcome of how we feel, and what we see ourselves to be. We can use this interest in the classroom to see ourselves through children's eyes. I remember that lovely story in Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*, where he says that he was furious with the teacher the first day he went to school because she told him to 'stand there for the present', and he never got the present!

Being obsessed with ourselves enables us to see what renews us, and so be able to renew ourselves, and to accept the palliatives we need. Some people need the palliative of a long gin at four o'clock. I think we have to learn which palliatives regenerate energy, and forgive ourselves, and use them with temperance. One palliative I require is just five minutes to cook in peace. I also need to see that I am prepared for my work. But I don't need the palliative of a long sleep - I can get up ever so early as long as I have a few minutes at the end of the day to take some sort of action in another direction: my palliative is to change action. Another of my palliatives is my sewing. I think if we took more heed, very consciously, of the kind of things that give us long holidays (I don't think it's long holidays that give us long holidays), we could experience a great gulf of rest. Just the lifting of the pressures then makes us ready for something else.

Then we have the energy to work at ourselves. This, to me, is very important. My mother used to say, 'Nay, I'd rather work out than rust out.' I believe the same.

I see working at myself as the ability to examine the journey of my life, to constantly review it, and to perceive where I'm at in it. I foresee my death and I look forward to it, not in a morbid sort of way, but by constantly recognizing my humanity. I seem to get a certain amount of restoration when I look at the many parts of me, and wonder what ancestor each came from. I find it infinitely exciting to look at children in this way too, even if one hasn't known their fathers and mothers, and to realize that they are the product of so many forerunners.

Teaching demands that we give ourselves fully to the task in hand." To do this means that we must be complete and completely self knowing. This demand is one of the gifts of teaching which isn't necessarily talked of by the unions. It is a repayment to a teacher which no one mentions. And being forced to concentrate on the task in hand means that we can often temporarily forget all the other things that are bothering us. There aren't a lot of jobs like that.

We need, too, to allow ourselves to be restless spirits - to be in the process of becoming. I don't mean darting about like a gadfly, trying first this innovation and then that. I'm talking about the spirit that says, 'I can see where they're at - I'll show them the next hill.' It's the restlessness that, while confirming what is understood, leads on to the next mystery. I find that very exciting.

But, in all this, we must have the ability to be ourselves and not a facade of ourselves. If we are ourselves, then we have the ability to accept the limitations of our situation. We don't have to agree to these limitations, but we can accept them until we can do something about them. This is why I'm a pain in the neck to people when I come to lecture for them. They say, 'What sort of a room would you like to use?' and I say, 'I don't mind. As long as it has a roof over it, it'll do.'  
'Would you like a blackboard?'

'Well, I must have a blackboard.' (All other limitations can disappear, as long as I've got something I can write on and rub out on!)

'How big a class would you like?'

'Well, I don't mind.'

'What age of class?'

'Well, I don't really mind.'

'What would you like to do with them?'

'I don't really mind.'

You see, if we don't ask for a special set-up, then we have to be ourselves for we have nothing else to draw on. Then we see what drives us, what kinds of teaching space and noise and discipline we can and cannot stand; and what our concerns in the classroom really are.

By being ourselves in this way we are able to affect others and to be affected by them.

On days when all my skills function happily, I am in a condition of excellence. I am all right with myself.

But is achieving excellence in teaching a realistic aim? It seems to me that the reality is in aspiration, and that aspiration to excellence is a reality. Excellence still exists, and it always did. But the conditions that promote excellence rarely exist, and they rarely have. So we have a choice whether, in conditions which often scarcely contribute to excellence, to choose to aspire to it. We can practise choosing; we can renew and review our choice. We make our choices on excellence daily, minute by minute, each choice dictating the next. You can't reach excellence for a whole day; you can only reach it minute by minute. And this is one of the excitements of teaching - the constant exhilaration of recognizing the choice we have made at any moment. When we stop choosing, things go radically wrong with us.

In this work, drama, what we are trying to do is to make ordinary experiences significant, and that's a hard thing. That is the excellence we strive for. To distort experience into significance means that we have to get children to pay attention, and they may not have the vocabulary for it. I don't mean spoken vocabulary - they may not have practised the ability to pay attention. They do practise it privately, because they pay attention to the things that concern their survival, such as the mood their parents are in, or what'll happen if they hit the cat, or read that book that they shouldn't, or go out with their mates when they're supposed to be doing their homework.

All these things make them pay attention. But there's something a bit odd about saying to children, 'I'll create this depicted world so that you can pay attention to it.' Children often don't have experiences to make that work. And so we need the skill of high-level negotiation to help the classes we work with pay attention when we try to distort matters into significance for them. To do this we have to be able to create significance, and we cannot do this if we teach casually. We can only create moments when children stumble upon an authentic experience if we teach with attention to detail and its relation to the whole. This is the root of excellence. We sold our young teachers down the river when we told them to be nice and easy with the kids, and casual and friendly. We sold our profession down the river. In trying to get rid of distance and formality, we got rid of significance.

If I could give young teachers anything, I would give them the ability to negotiate with significance. This, to me, is what high quality endeavour means.