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BARRIERS TO LEARNING

*Kate Swatta

[The following is a speech delivered by Kate Swatta to NMCTE (New Mexico Council of Teachers of English) on September 26, 1987.]

I would like to thank you for coming to my presentation. I want to talk about the problems of adolescent illiteracy. I am working at Alamo Navajo Community School, but this problem is pervasive throughout the nation. I believe that our problems are your problems as well.

My talk will consist of -

1. the barriers to learning;
2. the resistance we run into;
3. possible solutions;
4. the methods I use.

The biggest barriers to learning are the fear of being judged, and the fear of failure. The biggest barrier is not talent or motivation -- you may have all the motivation and talent in the world -- but, if fear is present, the individual is truly incapable and acts out to reduce that fear.

Fear of failure and fear of judgment are basically the same thing. The students are well aware of their academic shortcomings and as they progress up the grades their deficiencies just get larger. We are seeing high schoolers on grade levels no higher than the 5th grade.

They have coped with their fear by -

1. being absent frequently
2. by just not trying
3. by acting out when present
4. by doing what they want and *not what the teacher wants.*

* Chapter I teacher, Grades 7-12, Alamo Navajo Community School, Magdalena, New Mexico 87825.
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Very few assignments are completed - that way the student doesn't fail, it's not their fault, "they weren't there that day," or the teacher didn't explain what s/he wanted. It's the teacher's fault, not theirs; they don't fail - they simply have bad teachers.

But the time for blame is over. With 70 million illiterates we need to face reality. If the students finish an assignment, then they allow themselves to be judged. Too many times their work has been found lacking. They try so hard and still come out with a "D" or an "F". After several years the students just seem to stop trying. Many educators advocate "no grades", but in reality teachers are hampered by school officials who demand a grade for the report cards because the State demands accountability. So, we are caught. We must grade.

Grades can be circumvented, though. We do the assignments in class -- everyone has a chance to answer and they have a chance to change an answer. Everyone can make an "A" if they are paying attention. You may ask if this method is valid. I believe it is. I don't believe that a chance to change an answer is cheating. Rather, it is a learning situation. Frustration and fear are reduced. The incidence of cheating on tests and at other times diminishes because confidence is being built daily.

This is an aside, but -- cheating is the result of the student trying to please the teacher, and of a lack of confidence in his/her ability to perform as the student perceives the teacher wants him/her to perform. So, the student cheats as the result of his/her desire to do well and the fear and frustration of believing they cannot do well. This is a conflict. To relieve the student's bad feelings or conflict the student is "mad" at the teacher, or the student acts out. This barrier to learning must also be broken, and I feel doing the assignments in class help to tear down this barrier.

We are talking about vicious circles. We are lost. We are lost in these vicious circles. One failure leads to another failure. And we are faced with these fears -- the fear of judgment and the fear of failure. And complicating these fears are high absenteeism, an inadequate knowledge base on which to build a strong education, and suspicion of teacher motives.

High absenteeism. Any excuse is used to get out of school: pinon picking, hunting, going to Albuquerque -- anything is preferable to going to school and being judged.

Another excuse given is that education is valueless, so it's O.K. to miss class. But in today's society education is the only thing that MIGHT keep our society together. It will serve us better to ignore this excuse and work around and with high absenteeism.

To work with high absenteeism, I feel the work should be done in the classroom. This way the excuse of not knowing what to do is taken away from the student and missing a day has no advantage for them. Also, if the circle of fear can be broken then, I feel absenteeism will improve.

Assigning homework for missed work doesn't always work. First of all, the student might not be able to do it because of the missed class work, and it leaves the student open to being judged. To assure that missed work is done, I have a folder for each student with their work in it. They work in class at their own pace and on what they need to finish. I'm there so I can help and encourage them. They can do it right. The answers are worked out together. There is no need to fail or to cheat. The only requirements are to try and to pay attention.

Now, some teachers may be concerned that this method is not very valid, but I think it is just about as valid as holding a student responsible for his/her lack of education and then judging that lack with bad grades when s/he cannot perform.

Inadequate Knowledge Base - The majority of students are on or below 5th grade reading level. There is little knowledge foundation on which to build, but the major problem is with grouping. Ninth graders are placed with ninth graders. But some ninth graders are on a first grade level, while others are on a fifth grade level. It would be better to group them according to ability level but, as everyone knows, this is not acceptable with today's idea of mainstreaming. And ability grouping plays havoc with graduation requirements and the record keeping system.

The idea behind mainstreaming is that the faster student will help the slower student. But does this, in fact, work? We still have 70 million illiterates and bored students and lost students, and the downhill slide continues.

Last year we grouped according to level. I had 8th graders in with 10th graders and they did help each other. The older students took a special interest in the younger ones. But sometimes the roles were reversed and the younger ones helped the

older ones. We saw an improvement in the CTBS scores; so, for us, this grouping worked.

Frustration caused by fear mounts. The teacher can quit and walk away, but the student remains to face a new teacher; and the vicious circle goes on -- fear, judgment, absenteeism, poor grades, loss of important concepts. All these lead to student suspicions of teacher motives: "Why is this teacher here? What does s/he want from us? How long will s/he stay?"

Working in an arena of questioned motives is undesirable and can lead to resentment on both sides. Oftentimes, to reduce the resentment, anger and blame will take its place. The students hate the teachers and the teachers resent the students. Judgments are made on both sides. And you know learning is not going to take place in this type of atmosphere.

What can be done? On TV I heard an advertisement for a movie about schools. The principal says to consider the school a home away from prison. Is this supposed to be funny? Are we telling our students that schools are little more than a prison? I don't think that's the way to face educational problems. I would like to suggest two methods. One I call *equality*, and the other is the idea that *education is a privilege, not a right*. We must change our idea about education. We must make it a privilege to be there - make it worthwhile to be there.

Equality. There's a movement in Special Education called gentle teaching. As I understand it, basically the teacher bonds with the students as a mother bonds with her child. Then education can take place. In high school the student is too old to bond with, and that's the point -- they are adults and should be treated as such. With adulthood goes responsibility. The student is responsible for learning. It is a privilege to learn. The teacher is (as Brunner says) the facilitator.

The problem is changing the attitude of years of schooling that says the teacher is the boss -- the active person -- and the student is the passive recipient. I talk, talk, talk about what I expect, and I ask them to tell me what they expect. Like adults we discuss what we want and need, whether we are in a bad mood or a good mood. We try to work out the problems.

This naturally leads to education being a *privilege*. As adults we choose whom we want to spend time with. While we can't

choose who is in our classes, we can arrange circumstances so the classroom is a desirable place. If someone doesn't want to be in the room and is interfering with the workings of this small community (because that's what a classroom is), then that student should be sent away until s/he makes a commitment to learning. As adults, we commit to someone or something and make it work out as much as possible. So, too, with learning. Commit and make it work.

This is just a "nutshell". In practice a lot of mistakes are made, but a lot of progress is made too.

To help or facilitate learning I use a variety of methods in the program. The program is based on a tutorial situation. The student works on a project at his/her own pace. The program revolves around reading and writing. I make up a lot of the materials I use.

If you will open your packs I will start talking about the methods etc.

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