

CHALK TALK: “Row, row, row your boat”: Learning and teaching in the round

By MICHAEL SILVERSTONE

Published in print: Tuesday, December 19, 2017

If you’ve never done it, it’s very tricky to learn to sing a round. Even a song as simple as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” requires a child to remember the words, the pitch, the rhythm, and to somehow hear it inside and get their voices to sing it out with confidence into the air. For many adults, it would be a breakthrough to simply do that.



But there’s a second part of learning to sing a round that is equally important — to listen, to understand what is happening around you and find a way to precisely respond to that without losing track of your part while still being mindful of what you’re hearing.

In our class, we often sing during Morning Meeting. These meetings are where children are invited to practice greeting each other with kindness and invite the acknowledgement of another. They are developing a social awareness and a confident sense of self, simultaneously.

I’ve been teaching young children for 20 years. A lot has changed in the world and certainly in education during these decades.

One thing that has not changed, though, is that a surprising number of 7-year-olds will blurt out random thoughts exactly at the moment I’m trying to get the class interested in a lesson I think they could use. And just as common are the children who, for example, don’t want to read when it’s time to read, yet are book hungry and appealingly reluctant to put the book down when it’s time to do something else.

I was that kind of student as well, allergic to being directed routinely for the convenience of adults. The feisty hospital patients who look for a second opinion and complain when something is unacceptable to them are the ones that tend to survive.

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

I've always thought that questioning students who aren't only interested in getting along with the teacher — despite my own superficial preferences they be otherwise — are more apt to have original perspectives, intellectual independence and self-reliance in changing circumstances.

And it's partly because I was that kind of kid, that it became important to me to become a teacher that could serve as an ally of children's sense of self-direction. It was important to me that students have teachers who weren't simply content to put up the brick wall of, "because I said so."

At our best, teachers give students opportunities to discover what they are sincerely and passionately interested in, not because they were told they should be interested, but because they are. And what is also required is that we insist that they persist sometimes, and expand their awareness beyond their immediate impulses to include what their effects are on those around them.

Music can be a model of what it feels like when the voice within joins skillfully with the community. It promotes a sense of well-being. Because it is rhythmic and communal, it creates a shared framework that individuals can feel aware of while also maintaining an awareness of their own spirit. They can feel the support and reassuring guidance of being part of some intelligent endeavor that is larger than the self.

There are moments in the school day that give glimpses of something beautiful that inspire and suggest what we might all be there for. The musical round being a living metaphor of what it is like to be contributing to a community, while remaining connected to our own sources of inspiration rowing our individual boats, but also together, gently down the stream, merrily.

Michael Silverstone is a teacher consultant with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project and is co-author (with Debbie Zacarian) of "In It Together: How Student, Family, and Community Partnerships Advance Engagement and Achievement in Diverse Classrooms." (Corwin Press). He teaches lower elementary (Ages 6-9) at Newton Montessori School.