Chapter 4  What Students Value in Teachers

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In this chapter I want to explore the characteristics of helpful teachers that students say they particularly appreciate. In students’ eyes an important component of successful learning is perceiving the teacher as both an ally and an authority. Students want to know their teachers stand for something and have something useful and important to offer, but they also want to be able to trust and rely on them. When describing teachers who have made a difference in their lives, or who are recalled as memorable and significant, students rarely talk the language of effectiveness. Instead they say they trust a particular teacher to be straight with them, or that a teacher really helped them ‘get’ something important.

A teacher is perceived as being effective because she combines the element of having something important to say or demonstrate with the element of being open and honest with students. Students do not measure a teacher’s effectiveness solely in terms of a particular command of technique. Rather students want to feel confident they are learning something significant and that as they are doing so they are being treated as adults. Given the diverse nature of contemporary college classrooms it is a mistake, in my view, to think we can generate the seven (or any other number) habits of effective teachers. Racial identity, learning style, personality, cultural formation, age, class location, gender, previous experience with the subject, readiness to learn, organizational values – all these factors and more render bland generalizations about effective teaching naïve and inaccurate.

Does this mean we are left with such a bewildering complexity of student identities, histories and preferences that we simply throw up our hands and give up any hope of ever developing some broad guidelines to inform our teaching? Not necessarily. After reviewing thousands of critical incident questionnaires completed by students in different disciplines and geographic locations who represent a considerable diversity in terms of the factors identified above, it is clear that two general clusters of preferred teacher characteristics emerge. Both clusters are subject to multiple interpretations, and recognized in multiple ways, but both have enough internal validity to be considered as useful guides to practice. These two clusters are credibility and authenticity.

Students define credibility as the perception that the teacher has something important to offer and that whatever this ‘something’ is (skills, knowledge, insight, wisdom, information) learning it will benefit the student considerably. Credible teachers are seen as teachers who are worth sticking around because students might learn something valuable from them. They are seen as possessing a breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, sophistication of understanding and length of experience that far exceeds the student’s own. Authenticity, on the other hand, is defined as the perception that the
teacher is being open and honest in her attempts to help students learn. Authentic teachers do not go behind students’ backs, keep agendas private, or double-cross learners by dropping a new evaluative criterion or assignment into a course halfway through the semester. An authentic teacher is one that students trust to be honest and helpful. She is seen as a flesh and blood human being with passions, enthusiasms, frailties and emotions, not as someone who hides behind a collection of learned role behaviors appropriate to the title ‘professor’. From a student’s viewpoint both credibility and authenticity need to be recognized in a teacher if that person is to be seen as an important enhancer of learning – as an authoritative ally in other words.

Interestingly, it appears that an optimal learning environment is one where both these characteristics are kept in a state of congenial tension. A classroom where teacher credibility is clearly present but authenticity somewhat absent is one where students usually feel their time has been reasonably well spent (because necessary skills or knowledge have been learned) but also one that has been experienced as cold, unwelcoming, intimidating or even threatening. Without authenticity the teacher is seen as potentially a loose cannon, liable to make major changes of direction without prior warning. Students often report a touch of arrogance or coldness about such a teacher that inhibits their learning. This creates a distance between teacher and learner that makes it hard for learners to ask for assistance, raise questions, seek clarification, and so on.

On the other hand, a classroom that is strong on teacher authenticity but weak on credibility is seen as a pleasant enough locale but not a place where much of consequence happens. Students often speak of such classrooms as locations to pick up easy grades and the teachers in charge as ‘soft touches’. Authentic teachers are personally liked and often consulted concerning all manner of student problems. Students who feel they have been misunderstood or victimized by more hard-nosed teachers often turn to teachers they perceive as allies. The authentic teacher is seen as someone who will represent the student to the uncompromising teacher and convince unsympathetic colleagues that the student concerned has been misunderstood and is in fact a diligent learner. But being an advocate for a particular student is seen as something quite different thing from being an important learning resource. Students say that they like teachers they view only as authentic but they don’t usually stress how they learned something very important from them.

Personally, I find this analysis very disturbing. I have always placed a high premium on authenticity believing, in Palmer’s (1997) terms, that we teach who we are. By inclination and formation I believe the presence or absence of my own authenticity in students’ eyes is a crucial variable in whether or not they are learning. Authenticity is something I have always stressed as a component of teaching for critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987). As someone who self-identifies as a teacher of critical thinking I need my students to trust (as far as this is possible) that they are in safe hands when they risk that intellectual and political journey; in other words, that they are guided by someone authentic. My mistake has been to assume that it is enough for me to be open and honest with students, or for me to model my own engagement in critical thinking before asking it of them. These things are certainly important and necessary. But what is
equally important is that in my modeling of critical thinking I should demonstrate a facility with the process.

If I try to model a critical analysis of my own assumptions in front of students and they have no idea that’s what I’m trying to do, or if I model this in an incompetent or unconvincing way, then my authenticity counts for little. What is crucial is that I model this engagement well, that students pick up the sense that I know what I’m doing, that in teaching critical thinking I’ve been around the block a few times so to speak. So while it is true that trust is derived partly from the sense that I’m being honest and open with students about my modeling of critical thinking, it is just as importantly derived from the sense that I can demonstrate some expertise in this area.

Common Indicators of Credibility

I have said that when teachers display credibility students perceive it as beneficial to stick around them. What is it that such teachers do that convinces students this is the case? How is a teacher’s credibility recognized? Four important and very specific indicators are commonly mentioned in this regard; expertise, experience, rationale, and conviction.

Expertise
Expertise is recognized in a teacher being able to demonstrate a high level of command of the skills or knowledge she is seeking to communicate to students. It is not enough just to possess these; what is crucial is that they are publicly displayed and recognized by students. Students say it is reassuring to know that the person in charge of their learning clearly knows, and can do, a lot. They stress how important it is for them to be able to see the teacher displaying a facility with the subject being taught that qualifies her to be regarded as an expert. The specific demonstration of this expertise obviously varies according to the nature of the subject. Expertise in teaching auto-maintenance will be demonstrated differently from expertise in analytic philosophy. But whatever the subject students apparently need to have confidence that teachers know what they’re doing.

How is such expertise displayed? Partly it comes from the student witnessing a relatively unconscious display of a high level command of content or skill to the extent that the teacher appears almost to be unaware of this. When demonstrating a clear command of a subject appears to come easily and quickly to a teacher, this is usually construed as a solid indicator of expertise. Of course, student opinion is not necessarily a reliable judge of this since novices can be dazzled by a superficial glibness that masks an underlying incompetence. Just because a group of new students pick up the sense that a teacher knows what she’s talking about does not necessarily mean that person actually is as talented as she appears. To neophytes even a rudimentary but flawed grasp of content can appear impressive.

Students also mention two more reliable indicators of expertise. The first concerns how teachers deal with questions. Teachers who welcome questions are seen as confident enough in their own abilities to open themselves up to being challenged. Of course, being open to questions in not in and of itself a sign of credibility. Teachers can make
any number of munificent declarations about how they love to take questions and welcome challenges but if their response to these is stumbling incoherence or clear avoidance this actively destroys credibility. Where questions are concerned credibility comes from being able to respond clearly, quickly and knowledgeably to requests for clarification or further information that seem to come out of the blue. Although it personally scares me to read students’ comments to this effect, I have to acknowledge that a large measure of my credibility (if I have any) comes from my ability to answer questions as I have described.

An ability to deal with unexpected classroom events is a second indicator of expertise that students often mention. Questions are certainly one category of unexpected event. Students love it when they see teachers momentarily pause, clearly caught out by an unanticipated or complex question. As indicated above, a facility with responding to these quickly builds credibility. But other unexpected events frequently happen in teaching and the response to these is crucial. Sometimes the audio-visual equipment fails and the power point presentation is reduced to a frozen screen that repeated clicking of the mouse fails to dislodge. Alternatively, one of your partners in a team-taught course does something that clearly has not been planned for and that students can see has taken you by surprise. Maybe in the middle of a skill demonstration you make a mistake a novice would make. Perhaps in a lecture you attempt an impromptu analogy that ties you in knots and you have to find a way out. Or, in a discussion, a student starts off on a rant or tangent that the majority of group members can see is clearly uninformed and you have to find some way to make a convincing connection between that student’s interjection and the ideas the discussion is focused on.

How teachers respond to such unexpected events can make the crucial difference between students perceiving them either as highly competent or as occupying their role under false pretenses. Indeed, these events are so important to a teacher’s developing credibility that it is almost tempting for teachers to stage these and then to respond in ways that appear superbly spontaneous but that have actually been carefully rehearsed beforehand! This might work once (though I wouldn’t advocate it) but people will soon see through this. However, a capacity to respond capably to unexpected events does underscore the importance of developing the kind of practical, clinical reasoning outlined in chapter (1) in which, faced with unanticipated situations, the processes of scanning, appraisal and action are compressed into a relatively short period of time.

Experience
A second indicator of teacher credibility often mentioned by students is the perception that the teacher has considerable experience in the field being taught (if it is an example of vocational teaching) or in the activity of teaching itself. Regarding this latter item students recognize pedagogic experience when the teacher not only knows the subject back to front but also is able to draw on a substantial history as the course instructor so that it allows her to teach it in a way that clearly helps students learn. In students’ eyes having a backlog of experience helps a teacher make good decisions about learning activities. Students say they appreciate it when the teacher explains that her decisions are grounded in her previous experiences teaching the subject. They interpret the creation of
interesting assignments, well-paced classroom activities, different teaching methods and the use of appropriate evaluative criteria as linked to the number of times the teacher has taught that particular course. Referring to earlier strategies that did, or did not, work in previous courses, or providing plenty of appropriate examples, metaphors or analogies that have proved in the past to help students understand complex ideas, are also important indicators of valuable teaching experience to students. The point is that students recognize this experience only if the teacher talks out loud her reasoning process as she makes classroom decisions, uses particular examples or introduces new activities. This underscores the importance (discussed below) of making explicit to learners one’s rationale for teaching decisions.

The problem with students viewing teaching experience as an important indicator of credibility is that every course we teach is at some point taught for the first time, so at various points in our career we will find ourselves in the role of novice where a particular course is concerned. If you already have teaching experience under your belt this is not such a problem since you can refer to the way teaching decisions made in other courses inform your decisions in the new course. But if it is your first time teaching the lack of experience can be a serious mark against your credibility.

Sometimes there is nothing else you can do but suffer through this situation, endure the skepticism of students, and by learning from each of the courses you teach gain enough experience so that your credibility is strengthened. However, another alternative is possible. If, for the first few class meetings of a new course, you are paired with a senior faculty member whose longevity of experience or status brings with it considerable credibility, and if that colleague is seen by students publicly to defer to you and to follow your decisions enthusiastically, then your credibility is considerably enhanced. This is why I advocate that for the first few classes of a new faculty member’s career she be accompanied in the classroom by an experienced colleague who makes it clear she is not there to supervise, but rather to learn from the novice instructor.

Creating this dynamic is particularly important for faculty who do not possess White privilege. Faculty of color and junior women faculty have a much tougher time establishing credibility than do White males. This reflects a broadly held (though often unarticulated) ideological assumption that if scholars of color, or women, are faculty members they are there only because of affirmative action requirements. White males like myself, however, tend to enjoy a considerably longer experiential probationary period when people are liable to give them the benefit of the doubt and to write off early mistakes as a necessary part of learning on the job. One of the useful contributions senior White males can make, therefore, is to show up in the classrooms of junior faculty and to make it very plain to students exactly how much they are deferring to, learning from, and being stimulated by, the teaching of junior faculty of color and junior women faculty.

**Rationale**

The indicator of ‘rationale’ refers to teachers’ ability to talk out loud the reasons for their classroom decisions, course design and evaluative criteria. Students say that it inspires confidence when they see that teachers clearly have a plan, a set of reasons, informing
their actions. Speaking out loud about why you are introducing a particular classroom activity, changing learning modalities, choosing certain readings, demonstrating skills in a particular way, putting students in certain groups, or moving into a mini-lecture – all these conversations with yourself demonstrate to students that you are a thoughtful teacher. Knowing that they are in the hands of such a teacher builds students’ confidence. No-one likes to think that the person leading them in an activity is making it up as she goes along with no forethought, reasoning or previous experience. This is particularly the case when the teacher is asking students to engage in a particularly risky learning activity, as would be the case with learning critical thinking.

So an important element in building credibility is to make explicit the implicit assumptions about teaching and learning that guide a teacher’s actions. We need to create a window into our heads so students can see the reasoning behind our decisions. When students can see our thought processes they are often reassured to realize that our decisions are not mindless but grounded in previous experience and researched assumptions. I would venture that it is almost impossible to do this activity of talking your practice out loud too much. In hundreds of Critical Incident Questionnaires collected over the years students’ appreciation of this behavior is an amazingly consistent theme. Comments are made concerning how learners really appreciate knowing why the teacher is doing what she is doing. They say that not only does this help them learn whatever is being taught, but that it also gives them the sense that they are in the hands of a trusted guide. To know why doctors wish us to take particular medications is an important element in our trusting that the doctor has our best interests at heart and that she knows what she is doing. To know the reasons why an auto-mechanic is suggesting that a certain part needs to be replaced is crucial to our trusting that we are not being conned. The same holds true for teachers. If students are to have confidence in our abilities they need to know, and trust, that there is a rationale behind our actions and choices.

One helpful aid to communicating our rationale, by the way, is the Critical Incident Questionnaire. If students are unclear about why we are doing something this uncertainty will be recorded on the CIQ. When our students express puzzlement over the way the class is organized, the reporting back and discussion session regarding that week’s CIQ data allows us to explain, or re-explain, why we organized things the way we did. This is another way we can talk out loud our rationale for practice in a way that responds directly to student concerns.

Conviction
Conviction is the sense students pick up from us that we consider it vitally important that they ‘get’ whatever it is we are trying to teach them. It is communicated in a variety of ways, many of which are relatively low key. There is a tendency sometimes to think of holding a conviction as something that is recognized by the ferocity with which an idea is advanced. But conviction is not the same as charismatic passion, it is not to be confused with evangelical fervor. A teacher does not necessarily show conviction by making ardent, theatrical declarations in a lecture or seminar of how powerful or transformative it will be to learn a particular skill or grasp a particular idea. Rather, conviction is
recognized by students when teachers make it plain that they feel the subject matter, content or skills being taught are so crucial that they want to explore every way they can to make sure students have learned them properly.

The most common indicator of teacher conviction mentioned by students is the receipt of individual feedback or attention. When a teacher takes the time to write detailed comments on a student’s paper, particularly concerning a misunderstanding or misapplication of an idea, the student knows immediately that the teacher places great importance on the student’s understanding it correctly. Similarly, when a teacher catches a student in the hall after class to have a quick follow up conversation – perhaps because a question the student asked in class has led the teacher to check whether or not the student truly understood what she was saying – then a conviction concerning the importance of correct understanding is communicated. In a graduate program I worked in at Columbia University Teachers College (in New York City) one of the program policies was that all essays would be regarded as first drafts and returned to students for further work. Much of the second, third or (on occasions) fourth draft work was focused on students rewriting certain parts of their papers until it was clear that they had learned a particular theoretical position and were able to communicate it accurately to others.

Unfortunately, when dealing with large class sizes this level of individual feedback is hard to sustain. One way round this difficulty is to spend part of class time talking about your responses to students’ work that draws on individual assignments or comments to underscore your commitment to ensuring they understand concepts or information correctly. For example, when commenting on CIQ responses that document individual students’ difficulties with particular learning tasks you have the chance to reiterate why these tasks are so important and how they might be tackled. Again, starting a new week’s class by doing a meta-analysis of common difficulties apparent in last week’s homework assignment allows you to emphasize just how important it is to understand certain things correctly. Debriefing one-minute papers or muddiest point papers also provides an opportunity to hone in on particularly problematic aspects of the course, repeat how important it is that students grasp difficult knowledge, concepts and skills, and demonstrate your conviction about this by revisiting and reviewing those items that students are having a hard time understanding.

A Final Comment on Credibility

Being made aware of the importance of credibility nearly twenty years ago made me quickly stop my sincere, but misconstrued, attempts at self-deprecation with which I used to begin all my classes. Apparently, judged by CIQ responses, when students are new to a subject matter or new to a teacher it does not build confidence for them to hear the instructor say that students have as much to contribute to the class as does the teacher, or that all in the classroom (teachers as much as learners) are equal co-learners. Philosophically, I believe this to be true; but consistent CIQ evidence has forced me to tone down such declarations at the outset of a course if I know that the learners involved are novices in the field or if this is the first course they have taken with me. I have often displayed a tendency to attempt to dignify students’ experiences by belittling my own.
Saying to students “look, my own experiences have no more innate validity than yours – you’ll teach me as much as I teach you” does not necessarily signify that you are recognizing and affirming students’ experiences. In fact the opposite might be true. Such protestations ring false from teachers who are demonstrably more knowledgeable, skilled and experienced than their learners. Also, if students do actually believe what such teachers say then they may well conclude that they should go to the registrar’s office and register quickly to take the class from a different instructor who knows what they’re doing and has something valuable to offer them!

When learners have grasped the fundamental concepts of a subject area and can appreciate the criteria of good and bad skill performance, and when they have come to trust in a teacher’s basic credibility, then her declarations that learners have valuable knowledge and experience that she can learn from are much more likely to have the effect she intends. But until students believe you have expertise and experience, are teaching according to a thought through rationale, and can see how important it is to you that they learn the knowledge and skills you deem central to the subject, then saying that your voice has no more merit in the class than anyone else’s will be perceived as dishonest, false and disingenuous.

Common Indicators of Authenticity

Students recognize that teachers are authentic when those teachers are perceived to be allies in learning who are trustworthy, open and honest in their dealings with students. They are viewed as allies in learning because they clearly have the students’ interests at heart and wish to see them succeed. In Grimmet and Nuefeld’s (1994) words, authentic teachers strive to do “what is good and important for learners in any given context and set of circumstances” (p. 4) and are perceived this way by learners. This is echoed by the teachers interviewed by Cranton and Carusetta (2004) in their study of authenticity who spoke about the importance of being helpful to learners more than any other factor. However, students see authenticity as more than just being helpful. It is also being viewed as trustworthy. Colloquially students often say that such teachers ‘walk the talk’, ‘practice what they preach’, have no ‘hidden agendas’ and that with such teachers ‘what you see is what you get.’ Cranton (2001) views this dimension of authenticity as “the expression of one’s genuine Self in the community and society” (p. vii). In Palmer’s (1997) terms, this is teaching who you are. It is interesting that none of these formulations necessarily imply that students personally like such teachers (though they often do). The most important thing is that such teachers can be trusted. How is such trust developed? Four specific indicators are typically mentioned: congruence, full disclosure, responsiveness, and personhood.

Congruence

The congruence here is congruence between words and actions, between what you say you will do and what you actually do. This congruence is paramount. Nothing destroys students’ trust in teachers more quickly than seeing teachers espouse one set of principles or commitments (for example, to democracy, active, participatory learning, critical thinking, or responsiveness to students’ concerns) and then behave in ways that
contradict these. Students usually come to know pretty quickly when they are being manipulated. You may be able to get away with breaking a promise to them once but that’s pretty much it.

Students commonly mention the different ways that teachers break the four commitments mentioned above as ones indicating how the teacher is acting in bad faith. Spuriously democratic teachers tell students that the curriculum, methods and evaluative criteria are up for genuine negotiation and in large measure are in students’ hands. As the course proceeds, however, it becomes clear that the democratically negotiated curricula to be studied, methods to be used, and evaluative criteria to be applied just happen to match the teacher’s own preferences. Falsely participatory teachers tell students that they don’t want to lecture too much, that they value students’ contributions and that they will use a mixture of teaching approaches (role plays, case studies, simulations, small group discussions, peer-learning triads) that require students’ active participation. They then proceed to lecture most of the time (each week protesting that this is a temporary necessity because the class is falling behind), not allow time for questions or not really answer those questions that are raised, and prematurely close case studies or small group discussions because of pressures of time.

Teachers who are counterfeit critical thinkers say they welcome a questioning of all viewpoints and assertions, but then bristle when this is applied to the teacher’s own ideas. Such teachers also make it clear that certain viewpoints (often those the teacher dislikes) are out of bounds. Practicing phony responsiveness happens when teachers collect CIQ’s and then either edit out inconveniently critical comments or refuse to negotiate around any concerns students raise. In all these instances students quickly conclude that your word is worthless, that any promise you make cannot be taken seriously, and that you are not to be trusted. They may still think they can learn something from you but they will not experience that happening in a congenial environment.

The problem is that sometimes we do not realize how incongruent our words and actions appear to students. We may genuinely believe we are living out commitments we made earlier in the course and, in the absence of vocal student criticisms, be completely unaware of how much we’re shooting ourselves in the foot. But, realistically speaking, few students will have the nerve to call you out on your lack of authenticity. Mostly they’ll decide it’s simpler not to risk offending you and safer to keep their head down and not make a fuss. So we may be entirely unaware of the impression we’re creating.

How can teachers avoid unwittingly falling foul of the ‘do as I say not as I do’ trap? Two responses suggest themselves. The first is to use the CIQ data to check for perceived inconsistencies in your words and actions. My experience is that these are mentioned widely as soon as they are perceived to occur. I have sometimes made off the cuff statements that were expressions of mild personal preference only to discover subsequently that these were taken by students as iron-clad declarations of classroom policy. As soon as I am seen to be contradicting any promises I have made students bring this to my attention using a route in which their anonymity is guaranteed - the CIQ. I can then address this apparent inconsistency in class. The second response is to be explicit
about your commitments and convictions in the course syllabus and then find some way of assessing once or twice a semester as to how consistently you are living these out. For example every now and again one of the muddiest point papers, or one-minute papers, might be devoted to this theme.

**Full Disclosure**

This refers to the teacher’s regularly making public the criteria, expectations, agendas and assumptions that guide her practice. Students know and expect us to have such agendas and are usually skeptical of statements to the contrary. After all, if we don’t have criteria, expectations, agendas and assumptions, what do we stand for and why do we bother to show up for work? In Myles Horton’s words “There’s no such thing as being a coordinator or facilitator, as if you don’t know anything. What the hell are you around for, if you don’t know anything. Just get out of the way and let somebody have the space that knows something, believes something” (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 154). Unless you make your expectations, purposes and criteria explicit you will be perceived as holding these close to your chest in a secretive way and therefore not to be trusted. The fear students have is that you have these expectations anyway and they will reveal themselves at some point in the course in a way that is likely to trip students up, catch them out and cause them problems.

It is interesting that even if students dislike teachers’ expectations and agendas knowing clearly what these are because the teacher consistently makes them explicit builds trust in students’ eyes. Students would much prefer to know what you stand for – even if they disagree with or dislike this – than to like you personally but be in the dark as to what it is you’re expecting. So an important part of skillful teaching is to find ways to communicate regularly your criteria, assumptions and purposes and then to keep checking in to make sure students understand these. At a minimum your syllabus should contain a summary of your expectations and assumptions as well as an unequivocal statement of the criteria you are applying to judge students’ work. This should then be underscored in two ways; first by your speaking to these at the first class meeting and second by the first homework assignment or class quiz being a points bearing test on the syllabus. Nothing will drive home to students the importance of paying attention to the expectations you set out in the syllabus more powerfully than having the first meaningful assignment be a test of their knowledge of the syllabus.

**Responsiveness**

Responsiveness is the dimension of authenticity stressed earlier by Grimmet and Neufeld (1994) that focuses on demonstrating clearly to students that you teach to help them learn in the way that is likely to be most helpful to them. Such clear student-centeredness is recognized in two ways. One is the teacher’s constant attempt to show that she wants to know how and what students are learning, what inhibitors and enhancers to learning are present in her teaching, and what concerns students have about the course. The other is her public discussion with learners of how this knowledge affects her own teaching, including the extent to which some elements of the course can be negotiated. As I have already observed in chapter (3) responsiveness is not the same as capitulation, as always bowing to majority wishes. But it does involve teachers taking those majority wishes.
seriously enough to be ready to discuss with students why they cannot always be met, and to be ready to negotiate how particular learning tasks might be accomplished. In my own case I will not negotiate the teaching of critical thinking, that’s why I’m in the classroom. But I will negotiate how students demonstrate such thinking if the assignments I have set are dissonant with their learning styles, personalities or cultural formation.

Adopting some of the classroom assessment techniques discussed in Chapter (3) is one important way to demonstrate responsiveness. In my own teaching the CIQ has been crucial in this regard. Each week it provides a running commentary on how students are experiencing their learning and my teaching using words and examples that spring from students’ own experiences. In class, or on line, I can talk out loud my reactions to these publicly disseminated student comments, say how they’ve challenged or confirmed my assumptions about the best ways to teach the class, discuss any discrepancies that seem to be emerging between what I expect of learners and what they think I expect of them, and generally show that I take their opinions seriously enough to solicit them in the first place and then respond publicly to them.

**Personhood**

Personhood is the perception students have that their teachers are flesh and blood human beings with lives and identities outside the classroom. Students recognize personhood in teachers when those teachers move out from behind their formal identities and role descriptions to allow aspects of themselves to be revealed in the classroom. Instead of being thought of as relatively faceless institutional functionaries, teachers are now seen as people moved by enthusiasms or dislikes. This is not to say, though, that teachers should indiscriminately turn their classrooms into zones of personal confession. Coming in and talking about how your partner doesn’t really understand you, or disclosing highly personal details of your private life or anxieties, hardly creates an atmosphere in which students feel they can focus on learning. Personhood is more appropriately evident when teachers use autobiographical examples to illustrate concepts and theories they are trying to explain, when they talk about ways they apply specific skills and insights taught in the classroom to their work outside, and when they share stories of how they dealt with the same fears and struggles that their students are currently facing as they struggle with what to them is new learning.

When I first learned of the importance of personhood to students I was reluctant to follow its tenets (I am English, after all). But because its presence seems to support students learning, I have tried to pay attention to this dynamic, particularly when teaching difficult material. One of my teaching preoccupations has been to introduce students to the body of work broadly known as critical social theory (Brookfield, 2005). My main concerns are to explain some of its central concepts in ways that are accessible but not overly simplistic, and to show how these concepts (such as alienation, hegemony, or commodification) might illuminate students’ lives. As I do this I draw explicitly on how these ideas help me understand better what I have personally witnessed in workplace relationships and teaching practices over the years. I show how dominant ideology shapes my decisions as a teacher, how I unwittingly engage in self-surveillance and self-censorship, how hegemony causes me to conclude that I’ve only been a good teacher on
those days when I come home completely exhausted, how repressive tolerance manifests itself in my attempts to open out a discussion or broaden the curriculum, or how automaton conformity frames my response to new practices or ideas. I am using autobiographical examples but only to help students understand core concepts in the course – not to tell entertaining stories for the sake of storytelling.

I also talk frequently about my own struggles engaging with this tradition. I talk about how much time it takes me to read its texts, how I study the same sentence over and over again and still have no idea what it means, and how I frequently feel like an idiot compared to colleagues who seem very comfortable with Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault or Marcuse. Students consistently tell me what a shocking, though very welcome, revelation this is. They automatically assume (as I probably would in their place) that as the designated professor for the course I have got critical theory ‘down’. Interestingly, this admission does not seem to weaken my credibility, or if it does that perception is not recorded on anonymous weekly student evaluations. Instead, students seem relieved that someone who has studied this work for some time, and who has credibility in their eyes, still feels like a novice. Again, my interest is that this autobiographical disclosure be done in the cause of supporting student learning, and that such disclosure increases my sense of personhood in learners’ eyes.

A Final Thought

Although it is reasonable for us to strive to be credible and authentic in equal measure it is unreasonable for us to expect ourselves ever to attain some sort of perfect balance between these two features. In stressing credibility we will likely reassure some students with our expertise, experience, rationale and conviction and intimidate others who find these qualities initially overwhelming. In stressing authenticity we will probably decrease the anxieties of students who are fearful of teachers’ arbitrary exercise of authority but raise concerns amongst those who feel they are not going to learn anything worthwhile. So, while it is important to pay attention to these two clusters of characteristics you have to realize that you will never be a perfect embodiment of them for all the students with whom you deal. Using various classroom research instruments such as those discussed in the previous chapter will help you chart your course in this regard, and stop you from veering too wildly in one direction or the other. As with so many matters in my own teaching, it is the Critical Incident Questionnaire that I depend on to provide me with the information I need to check out the degree to which students see me as embodying aspects of these two characteristics. Without regular anonymous data from students it is extremely difficult to judge how far they see these two important elements as present in your teaching.