Teaching and learning are two different processes. Sometimes this fact gets overlooked in today’s high-pressured educational environment. If you had a chance to look at January’s newsletter, you saw that I was expressing my concerns about the impact the pressure to raise test scores has had on teacher-student relationships. I am concerned that teacher’s are so “under the gun” to “cover the curriculum” that they are becoming more and more stressed when test results do not demonstrate their hard work. If anything the tests results point to the fact that many students are totally disengaged in the learning process. Teaching and learning are very different. Teaching is conveying information. Learning requires some kind of engagement of the student in the process of receiving the information.

I am reminded of the time I ask my accountant to explain to me why my tax bill was so much higher than it had been the year before because I was sure that my paycheck hadn’t gotten any higher. He responded by saying “we have already been over this Joyce. I explained it to you then.” I then explained to him that he was simply going to have to go back over it again because I still did not understand. His attitude reflects some of what I have seen many dedicated and well-meaning educators do on my visits to schools all over the country when they express their frustration that their students do not seem to be learning. Some seem to feel like saying “what do you mean you don’t know this, I taught it therefore you must have learned it.” They are so focused on teaching, especially teaching for the next of many standardized tests, they cannot believe that their students aren’t learning.

The learning process is an interactive exchange. It requires an even exchange between those who are teaching and those who are suppose to be learning. My accountant thought that he had taught me the intricacies of taxation codes. He seemed offended that I had the nerve not to learn what he had taught. I must confess, I feel somewhat inadequate in the area of finances, taxes etc. It is not my long suit but I am smart enough to know I must understand what is happening financially or I will be out of business quite quickly. There is however, a big difference between knowing that I need to know something and actually understanding new concepts and information. His comments hit me right in my insecurities and sort of hurt my feelings. Consequently, I shared my feelings with a couple friends. Their responses were unanimous---get another accountant. I was shocked. They explained that I was paying him, not just to crunch numbers; computer programs will do that for no monthly charge. I was paying him a substantial fee to make sure I understood the numbers. They said that it was his job to explain the numbers until I understood. In their judgment his impatience was unacceptable.

Yet, his response to my request for further explanation reflects the frustration of some educators who are so pressed to cover the curriculum that they get angry when the students don’t learn. Like my accountant who understands numbers inside and out, most
teachers did not have trouble learning anything they are teaching. We sometimes forget what it feels like to have to struggle to learn something, especially something that doesn’t seem to have anything to do with our life. You teach your hearts out. Then the test scores come back and you are devastated when the results do not reflect their genuine efforts. The lawmakers and high level administrators who make the policies requiring these tests have forgotten to ask the critical questions “Are they (the students) getting it?”, “Does what they are supposed to be learning seem to connect for them or to relate to their lives?”. The emphasis on testing takes away from the emphasis on learning. Send us your suggestions on how you deal with this aspect of teaching. We’ll publish some of your thoughts in a future newsletter.

I can’t emphasize enough how important the person-to-person connection is to the learning process. Times are very different for children today and many parents are too busy or seemingly unconcerned to support their children’s learning process. Without that parental support, teachers are sometimes pressed into the role of the only adult in a child’s life that cares what happens if the child does not learn.

Making a strong positive personal connection with particularly difficult, highly unmotivated, students is absolutely essential to success (more on how to make good connections with difficult students in the March newsletter). You will save a great deal of personal energy by learning strategies for putting more emphasis on the teaching process itself, and a little less on what we are teaching or the fact that many parents aren’t helping their children learn.

The following are suggestions may help you stay focused on the difference between teaching and learning. They can help prevent the frustration and subsequent fatigue that comes when you’ve taught your heart out and the results do not reflect your efforts.

Keeping the Focus on the Learning Process

Get to know your students personally in some small way.

Find out (integrate it into a lesson) what they really care about.

Tell them why you care about what you are teaching.

Tell them that learning will make them feel smart even if they have to learn something that seems irrelevant to their lives. Everyone wants to feel smart.

Check in with them often in the course of a lesson. Ask them: Are you with me? Tell me what I just said. Does this make sense? What don’t you get? How can you use this information?

Remind them that working to learn is necessary for everyone. Some have to work harder than others to learn certain things but everyone has to work.

Give them an opportunity to teach what they have learned.

Praise even the smallest progress.

Cheer them on.
Acknowledge their feelings. They do not have to like learning. It may be genuinely boring or confusing to them. That’s OK. Tell them, “You don’t have to like it.” “You do have to do it.” And you can.

Ask them to make you proud.

Ask them to help you get “a good grade” by proving that you taught them. Some of the most unmotivated students will learn just to help you out when they wouldn’t do it for themselves.

Keep moving. Walk around. Make constant eye contact.

Try to make it fun.

Take care of yourself. Your personal energy is finite. Don’t spend it on things you can’t control and be sure to renew it daily by spending some time doing the things you love.

Remind yourself that you are doing the hardest and most important work on the planet. Pat yourself on the back.