

What is the Most Important Thing We Can Teach Our Students? The Language of Power

As an idealistic fourth-year high school science teacher, I do not find it challenging to write about my teaching goals with the optimism of a recent graduate. However, this year's question stumped me: how could I possibly narrow my understanding of the *most important* thing I teach my students?

I wondered how much my teaching context influenced my own response. After all, I'm not a kindergarten teacher, so the need to teach my students how to share or let me know when they need to use the restroom is a less central – yet still crucial (!?) – learning goal. I'm not a foreign language teacher, so helping my students understand the value of cultural competency is rarely a standard for the day.

As I narrowed my thoughts, I encountered a question that I imagine makes many science teachers squirm: is my subject even the most important thing I teach? My students' feedback has indicated that their impressions of what they are learning is much less about *what* they have learned, and much more about how they felt as they learned; it doesn't get much more touchy-feely than that.

Even my science content loses importance when I think about what is most important to teach. The truth is that *what* I teach my students is not one concept – Khan Academy, Wikipedia, or any number of reputable online sources can do justice to about any topic my students are interested. While this is perhaps a dangerous proposition, I believe what I teach students as a high school science teacher is immeasurably more important.

The most important thing I teach my students is the language of power.

In my classroom the language of power is, yes, language. It is academic language, the bricks and mortar of English for those who don't speak it in our standardized form¹. But it is beyond the spoken word as well. The language of power is skillful

communication, both verbal and nonverbal. It involves understanding reputable sources and how to present information in a convincing, convicting, and context-appropriate fashion. Crucial within my own subject, it is understanding that debate exists, that uncertainty exists, that uncharted territory exists, and that – regardless of their status and background – my students have the tools to enter into these dialogues.

And what a word: power. This, similarly, is a dangerous proposition for many, particularly in the context of our national dialogue about race, use of force, and power. But the truth is that teaching power and the language of power in schools has never *not* been a dangerous proposition. What does it mean to teach students how to access power, and, perhaps through using the language of power, to overthrow that power? It is inherently revolutionary. Progressive educational theorists have long held this practically Marxist position. Paulo Freire argued that education that truly liberates, “consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information.”² I am hard-pressed to find a more eloquent way explain how teaching my content is not at all about teaching information.

And while I don’t see what I do on a daily basis as a part of arming the revolution, I do believe that this purpose of my teaching is precisely why it is so dangerous when children are denied access to an excellent education. When students are denied access to an excellent education at all grade levels – either explicitly or by circumstance – because of their gender, socioeconomic status, or geographic residence, they no longer have access to the language of power.

This is why education is the path to upward mobility, the route to better health outcomes, the vehicle of social change we so deeply want to believe it is: because it gives students access to the language of power. It is the reason why we have decided the right to a free education in the United States cannot be denied, and it is certainly behind the reasons we wrestle so mightily over what should and shouldn’t be taught in public schools. As an educator, Freire reminds me that I have a duty not to be neutral when it comes to the need for my students to have access to this dialogue.³

Yet, the class I teach has a title. It is not “Power and Language,” nor is it “Language and its Discontents.” I teach biology, and there is a reason for it. I find biology perhaps the most welcome venue for teaching this language of power. The majority of my students enter biology thinking they will leave with a backpack’s

worth of new terminology, of notes on biological processes, of graphs and diagrams and charts.

However, I hope they leave with something entirely different: a satchel full of tools for learning about life. I hope they leave my class with an understanding of how crucial it is that they attend to the impact they have on the natural world around them. I hope they leave my class with the tools they need to collect data, to synthesize and interpret it, and ultimately, to determine how they can proceed based on logical reasoning. I hope they leave with an understanding that science is one way of looking at the world, and while not the only way, one that is hugely important. In my classroom, these are the languages in which they need to become fluent in order to be successful.

These learnings are scientific tools and skills, yes, but at their core, I believe they are more. These tools are the grammar of rational thought and analysis, currency in academia and governance. I would like to know that my students can answer a multiple choice question about osmosis, or even interpret a graph of water potential. But even more, I'd like to believe that they know how to transfer their use of this language of critical evaluation and reasoning outside the walls of our classroom to do more beyond it - as researchers, physicians, and as educated citizens.

If this learning is so important to me, then I hold the success stories most dear. Success stories like the first generation college-bound Latina student who was accepted to a top university as a pre-medical student following her work in AP Biology. Like the freshmen whose mother was diagnosed with cancer during our school year, who could speak to her mother's treatment options. Successes such as watching my selectively-mute junior with a rare genetic disorder describe how she wanted to share about her condition with the class. These are not successes purely of science learning, but of students learning how they can use the science they have learned to engage in the language of power. These small successes help me remain an idealist, though perhaps hopelessly so.

But I'm also a realist when it comes to evaluating how I'm doing, and, to the degree that I can, how we are doing as a community of science teachers. We can have successes on the levels of individual students, and as a classroom teacher, that's all that matters to me. But as a citizen, and as someone who desires equity in education, I also believe we have a long way to go in teaching this language of

power.

First, to what degree do we recognize that this is what we are doing? To what degree do we understand our jobs as teachers to be more than the filling up of an empty backpack? And to what degree do our teaching methods reflect this goal?

Second, how do we use this understanding to influence the way we advocate for our students and for their education? Do we see our students as limited by their educational tracks, backgrounds, and academic history? Or do we assume that all who are willing to put in the effort are worthy of challenging curricula?

Finally, as teachers of biology, how explicit are we with our students about what we are doing: teaching them this language through the context of the world around them? If we asked our students what the most important thing is they have learned, I hope their responses would be beyond Punnett Squares, Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium, and hydrophobic interactions.

I hope they know that when we teach them biology, we teach them how to become fluent in the language they will use their lives long, the language that empowers them to engage in the dialogue of governance, the language that is as much non-verbal as it is verbal; that they will know we have taught them the language of power.