

Learning to Teach, Teaching to Learn

by Mary Catherine Bateson

Adults are being taught by their children in a time of breathtaking change. High-tech gear is obvious, but there are subtler shifts, too. When my daughter was ten, she took me to a video arcade to learn Pacman. More recently, her son (age three) introduced me to a prehistoric creature I had never heard of called *Platybelodon* (dinosaurs are a bit like technologies and diseases; they keep discovering new ones). Meanwhile, I need a teenager to adjust my Wi-Fi and show me how to edit digital photos.

But in addition to teaching their parents how to deal with new technologies, kids today also are teaching them profound ethical lessons about protecting the natural world and respecting themselves and others. Here are some of the examples I have heard from schoolchildren that go beyond technology or popular culture: A girl: "I taught my mom to recycle." A boy: "I taught my dad to enjoy rap." A boy: "I taught my mom to be independent." A girl: "I taught my dad not to interrupt me." A boy: "I taught my dad not to make cracks about gays."

It used to be that older people knew more than young people did. In a relatively stable culture, this was the basis of their authority. So when Junior argued, parents could say, "I know better because I've lived longer." That doesn't necessarily follow these days.

The relationship between who learns and who teaches has been fairly constant in human cultures for millennia; you looked to the previous generation to learn how to live. Of course parents and teachers still do a huge amount of teaching, from life skills to grammar, but today children increasingly are teaching their elders, as well. To thrive under conditions of accelerating change, you have to be learning all the time.

A whole series of relationships are becoming two-way streets: The boss has to listen to the employee, the manufacturer has to listen to the customer, the professor has to listen to the student, and the political leader who doesn't listen is likely to be out of a job. Change means that the nature of authority also is changing all over the world.

At the same time, more and more young people are growing up in homes where their parents are used to adapting to change and used to being helped by their children in that process. This was always true of immigrants, who have sometimes needed lessons in riding escalators, and often, in dealing with bureaucracy through multiple-choice automatic phone systems. More and more corporate leaders are realizing the necessity of agility and innovation, so there are people at the top who value their own capacity to learn and to listen rather than assuming they are there to lay down the law.

The truth is that parents don't know all the answers, and now are less likely to pretend they do. So when their sons and daughter become adults, they will assume that they can learn from their children, as well. The transition I'm talking about takes a couple of generations and is moving unevenly through society, but it is already well under way. I think we are now, in this country, beginning to have a college population whose parents already understood that they didn't know all the answers and were curious and ready to learn from their children, so that the kids grew up in a kind of dialogue. That's not to say that it's true of everybody, but there's a shift in ethos.

I can see this process working itself out in my colleagues and students. I rarely encounter a student now who doesn't take for granted that it's appropriate to question authority. The

ethos on campus is that classrooms should be more interactive. There should be more discussion; there should be more room for divergent opinions.

Not surprisingly, there is a backlash, where people are trying to stop this pattern and reestablish traditional hierarchical models of authority. One of the elements that underlies fundamentalism around the globe is the insistence that the only valid knowledge is the knowledge that the older generation still controls. A lot of what's happening in American schools through high-stakes testing has the effect of limiting the attention to time-tested certainties rather than encouraging questioning. New technologies, foreign customs, changing moral standards – all of these are disturbing to those whose hold on authority rests on learning that is not constantly renewed.

At the same time, young people also may resist learning. Those who have grown up with dogmatism are likely to become dogmatic about new ideas as well as old ones, true believers of either the right or the left. The intoxication of new certainties can lead to arrogance, whether in the form of political correctness or born-again dogmatism.

If we as a society adopt values related to change and adaptability, listening and responsiveness, we're going to need to look for the constants that underlie them. Listening and learning carry with them a respect for other people – my conviction that you may tell me something worth knowing. That applies to the Parisian or the Laotian who moves into the building next door, the Sufi or the Seventh-day Adventist down the street, or a grandchild in kindergarten. If I see myself as a lifelong learner, I need to be able to listen respectfully to all of the above.

The slogan I use is, "You are not what you know but what you are willing to learn." Willingness to learn demands respect for others across difference. Puzzling and even disturbing ideas are invitations to curiosity, and the greater the difference the more there may be to be learned. The world is a rain forest of variety full of promise that is at risk of being lost. If one teenager could give his father an appreciation of rap, another may be interestingly articulate about body piercing and baggy clothes. I have argued that the willingness to learn is a form of spirituality. It is a stance of humility, because there is so much to be learned.

Even as parents are learning from their children, they also need to teach them to listen with respect and to be curious – but the best way to do that is by setting a good example. So when my daughter said to me, "Stop using the VCR as your pet example, it's totally old," I figured it might be time to face up to an iPod.

This and additional essays can be found on the author's blog at www.marycatherinebateson.com.