

Being a Focusing Schoolteacher – The Role of the Implicit at School

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Introduction

I was taught to write the main part of a paper first and to write the introduction at the very end when everything else is done. I was taught this is the right way to make sure the introduction really leads to the main part. Everything needs to be planned carefully in advance before the actual process of writing starts.

Now I am a teacher myself working with students and here I am – writing a paper and starting with the introduction. I have an unclear sense of what I want to say and I trust the things that want to be said will emerge in the process of writing. THEY will lead to the main part and they ARE emerging already.

In the world of Focusing it sounds so obvious to say that the implicit, the unclear, the felt-but-not-yet-known needs to be cherished and to be given space. I know that. I also know what it sounds like to say the same thing in the world of schools. It sounds weird. And yet this is one of the problems. This is what is missing. What is already there wanting to come out is not heard. It is not seen and it is not given space to develop.

In this paper I want to write about what it means for me to be a Focusing schoolteacher – a person who is an ordinary teacher at a secondary school and also a person who has found Focusing. I want to write about what it means to cherish the implicit, about the things that have become easier for me and about those that have become more difficult. This is a personal account of my struggles and my successes. It is not meant as a guide for other people on how to do things.

Before I start I want to explain what I mean by ‘the implicit’ and why this concept is so important.

The implicit

Carl Rogers, the father of client-centered therapy, believes that human beings are driven by what he calls ‘the actualizing tendency’: ‘This is the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism’ (Rogers 1959: 196). Rogers discovered this tendency by working with his clients. When clients were offered a relationship characterized by genuineness/ congruence, by unconditional positive regard, and by empathy of the therapist, they would grow and make steps toward more psychological health. Rogers discovered that these conditions facilitate growth in all types of relationship – also in the relationship between teachers and students. In his extremely inspiring book *Freedom to Learn – A View of What Education Might Become* he writes: ‘We came upon such findings first in the field of psychotherapy, but increasingly there is evidence which shows that these findings apply in the classroom as well’ (Rogers 1969: 106). So Rogers found out that there is something ‘inherent’ in the organism that develops in a life-enhancing way if the circumstances are right.

What Rogers calls ‘the actualizing tendency’ Eugene Gendlin calls ‘the life-forward direction’ (Gendlin 1996: 259). He writes:

Every experience and event contains implicit further movement. To find it one must sense its unclear edge. Every experience can be carried forward. Given a little help one can sense an “edge” in the experience more intricate than one’s words or concepts can convey. One must attend to such sensed edges because steps of change come at those edges. (Gendlin 1996: 15; italics in original)

If one stays at the unclear edge of an experience, a ‘felt sense’ can form. Gendlin defines ‘felt sense’ as ‘the wholistic, implicit bodily sense of a complex situation’ (Gendlin 1996: 58). In order to understand how the body can have a sense of the situation it is in it is helpful to look at what Gendlin means by ‘body’.

Gendlin sees the human body as an ongoing process with its environment. Body and environment imply and affect one another: ‘Human bodies live immediately and directly in each situation’ (Gendlin 1996: 181). When something happens in the environment, it will affect the body and the body checks whether this

meets its implying – whether it meets what is needed right now or not. If it does, the body takes its own next step. It does what it was meant to do. If its implying is not met, what is implied, what was meant to happen, stays as it is continuing to look for the right conditions to develop:

Every living body organizes, implies, and – if it can – enacts the next step of its own living process. If it cannot enact the next step, the implying of it continues. This may be painfully experienced over and over again in a way similar to pangs of hunger, in the sense that it implies feeding without it happening. (Gendlin 1996: 215)

In other words, my body is connected in many ways with what is going on around me. My body and the environment interact with one another. That is why there is a lot of information in my bodily experience about the situation I am in and about what needs to be done. However, this information is not always immediately accessible. Part of what is going on in me is processed without me being aware of it. When I attend to the unclear edge of my experience and let a felt sense form, I can gain access to that information.

At the same time I am part of the environment of other people. They have an inner knowing of the right next step too. What I do and what kind of relationship I have with them – as Rogers points out – can greatly facilitate or hinder their implicit development.

What are the implications of this view of the human body for my work as a teacher?

Teaching

I am lucky, because many of the things I must teach according to the curriculum I actually enjoy teaching and my students enjoy learning them. In grade 8 we are talking about ‘California’ at the moment. In grade 12 we are discussing ‘climate change’ and we have watched Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. All of this works fine. I feel that these things are worth being taught and the students feel it is worth knowing about them. Their inner wanting to know more about this world is met and they grow and develop by dealing with these issues.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Sometimes I am forced to teach things the students do not want to know about. When that happens, I can feel a ‘bump’ in my body. Something isn’t right. And when I attend to that feeling, when I take it seriously without pushing it away, when I give it some time, I get its message – what I am doing isn’t right for the students. It doesn’t help them; they can feel it and because my body is part of the same situation I can feel it too.

What many teachers do when they feel that ‘bump’ is to complain about the students and to call them lazy or stupid. I call that the ‘stupid student theory’ and I confess that I used to share it too.

When I am open to my own implicit knowing, to my own truth, the whole situation changes. I can testify that it makes a huge difference how I explain the ‘bump’ to myself. If I understand that what I am teaching doesn’t meet the inner implying of my students and if I don’t share the ‘stupid student theory’, if I share Gendlin’s philosophy of the human body instead, I relate to the students in a new way. I might still have to teach the same things, but the spirit in which I do so is very different. It is a spirit of understanding and not one of blaming and shaming.

What I try to communicate to the students is that we are going through this together. I am on their side. I acknowledge that the contents of my classes are not very interesting. It is this kind of acknowledging that makes all the difference. Gendlin writes: ‘People can stand not getting what they need. The worst effect happens when people cannot permit themselves to feel their needs’ (Gendlin 1996: 266). I can give that permission – to myself and to the students. It is extremely liberating to be allowed not to like the things one is forced to learn.

I actually save a lot of energy when I stop putting my students under pressure to agree that the contents of my classes are important and interesting (although they aren’t to them) and I can use that energy to find new ways to deal with the same contents, ways that are acceptable – maybe even enjoyable – to the students. The way a topic is presented and the forms of communication in the classroom are often more important than the topic itself. Boring content can be dealt with in an interesting way.

Evaluating and grading

I really hate evaluating the work of my students. This is one of the most painful aspects of my job, because I know from my own experience how harmful evaluations and grades can be – no matter whether they are good or bad.

Bad grades make the students feel bad about themselves. Many teachers hold that bad grades encourage the students to make a bigger effort next time. The truth is that often that doesn't work and the students are so discouraged that they give up completely. What remains is a sense of failure.

Good grades might make the students feel good about themselves for a little while but can do a lot of harm in the long run. My own story is a good example of that: Toward the end of my school career I was a good student. At that time I was always feeling the danger of 'falling out of favor'. There was always a lurking fear of getting bad grades.

It wasn't always like that. I remember that when I was about fifteen I didn't care very much about my grades as long as I didn't fail. It all started when I actually got good ones. I sort of became dependent on the positive feedback from my teachers. Of course that had to do with my personality and the fragile 'self' I had at that time and the 'good' grades made that worse.

What good grades and bad grades have in common is that the place of evaluation is outside the students. They learn to discount their own sense of how they are doing and to trust what others say. This is what makes evaluations from outside so damaging. What I want to do is to strengthen their trust in their own inner evaluation process.

So how do I deal with this as a teacher? I have to evaluate the students' work and give grades whether I want to or not. The truth is that I do have an opinion about the progress a student is making when I sense inside myself. That opinion usually has a felt sense quality to it and I am willing to let it be there, to explore it, and to share parts of it or all of it as my personal view. When I emphasize that this is my view, there is room for theirs too. I realize of course that they might value my view more than their own, so I try to find positive things to say too.

Unfortunately, I sometimes have to fill out evaluation sheets when I grade exams and give points for the extent to which a student has fulfilled the requirements. That feels completely wrong to me! It feels completely unnatural to me to judge whether a student has understood the message of a sonnet by Shakespeare on a scale from zero to five. The problem with that approach is that it is meant to be objective. It does not give the students room to have their own sense of their accomplishments.

What makes this less harmful is that I feel that my ‘positive regard’ for a student does not depend on how well he or she is doing at school. I guess that all my own inner work has enabled me to like most students – no matter whether they have good or bad grades. (When a student does something that I really can’t stand, like beating somebody up, I try to see this behavior as ‘something in him or her’ that hasn’t had the right conditions to develop. It is not the whole person. It is just one aspect of him or her. That usually helps.)

I feel that my own teachers must have done that differently. Positive regard for good students, negative regard for bad ones. Maybe that is why I was always so afraid of getting bad grades. It is hard to see yourself in a positive light at that age when grown-ups see you negatively.

To sum it up, positive regard is more important in the relationship between teachers and students than grades. And it is the relationship that facilitates growth as Rogers found out. Bad grades given in the context of a good and encouraging relationship in which the students are valued no matter how well they are doing are less damaging than good grades given in a context full of judgment and criticism.

As I said above, I still need to acknowledge that evaluating is one of the hardest parts of my job. I need to recognize that it does do damage even if I have the best of intentions. Focusing has helped me to see that and to take over responsibility for what I do and for the grades I give. When I return an exam and I see that a student starts crying – as it often happens – I don’t ignore it. I go to the student, speak to him or her, listen, and keep company. That used to be different. I used to think: ‘Well, it’s their own fault if they don’t learn.’

As a teacher who has found Focusing and an internal source of evaluation you lose that nice secure place called ‘objectivity’. You can no longer hide behind outside

requirements that the students are supposed to fulfill. In that respect Focusing and Gendlin's view of the implicit have made my job more difficult.

Facilitating personal development

According to the official guidelines for teachers here in Germany it is part of our job to facilitate the personal development of our students. The problem is that most teachers don't have a clue what 'personal development' means and how to facilitate it. This is something we don't learn anything about during our teacher training.

There seems to be a very naive notion that holds that students must absorb certain knowledge and certain values in order to be a 'person'. And it is our curriculum that tells us what this knowledge is and what these values are. It is our job to make the students absorb everything they are supposed to absorb and if they don't, we fail. (In the long run, failing might make us sick. Luckily, there is the 'stupid student theory'.)

Gendlin's view provides a very different model. According to Gendlin, development of the person means that what is implied in the body can live forward (see above). As Rogers showed us, certain interpersonal conditions must be given in order for that development to occur. The developing person must be in relationships with people who have positive regard and empathy for them and who are genuine/congruent.

These three conditions go together and cannot be separated. Positive regard doesn't work if it is not understood empathically what the positive regard aims at. And in order to feel empathy it is necessary to be able to feel and accept the experience in question *in oneself*. It is necessary to be able to symbolize it in one's own awareness. This is what congruence means and this is crucial.

In other words, if I want to facilitate my students' growth, I must have positive regard for them, I must see them and their experience in a positive light, I must understand what is going on in them. And I am only capable of doing that if I know and accept what is and has been going on in me.

How do I do that? Well, I feel that all my own inner work, returning to my own implicit knowing either with my Focusing partners or alone has really increased my

empathy for myself and for others. Most of the time I see myself and others positively and when I don't, this is a good issue for my next Focusing session.

So what do I do exactly to facilitate the personal development of my students? There are far too many things to be listed here, but I want to point out one general thing that I do: I try to see things from their point of view. This doesn't seem like very much, but it is the most powerful tool that I have.

Counseling

The way I do counseling is very similar to what I have described above. At the moment I am one of the two counselors for grade 12, for 111 students altogether. Very often they come and tell me about their problems. Sometimes the problem is that they don't have information they need and if I have the information, I just give it to them or I tell them where to find it or I try to find it myself.

Sometimes the problem does not have to do with lack of information. Maybe it is a personal problem or a problem at school or a conflict with someone else. I try to see those problems as 'something implicit inside' that wants to live forward and I do my very best to provide the conditions for that something to emerge. In most cases that means that I listen to them and that I say back what I understand. In some cases a different approach is required (see below).

Solving conflicts

Some problems the students have are due to interpersonal conflicts. There are four types of conflict that I frequently have to deal with: a) conflicts among students; b) conflicts between students and one of my colleagues; c) conflicts between a student and me; d) conflicts between students and their parents.

In all four cases the first two steps are the same. I need to be what Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin call Self-in-Presence. I need to be able to sense what is going on in me and to create an inner space for it without identifying with anything that comes up. I cannot help to resolve a conflict if I am identified with one of my own emotional states, ideas etc. It is not helpful to be partial, but when I feel that I am, I

acknowledge that to myself. The second step is reflective listening. Very often that does the trick and no further steps are required.

However, if the conflict is not resolved after me listening to the person who has come to me, I suggest that everyone involved sit together. I have learned techniques of mediation that are very useful to facilitate this kind of discussion. (This shows that Focusing sometimes isn't enough. Sometimes it can be and should be combined with other methods.) When we sit together, I make sure that everyone can speak without being interrupted. Everyone needs to be able to put into words what they think and feel. What is implicit in them needs to come forward. And I listen from Self-in-Presence.

In a way this is similar to working with the inner relationship. The people involved in the conflict are like inner parts speaking to me (as Self-in-Presence). There are some differences though. The aim is that at the end they speak to one another, so I encourage them to tell each other what they have heard and understood. At the very end I usually invite them to say what they expect of one another in the future.

This procedure usually works fine when only students are involved. It is more complicated when a colleague has to do with the conflict, because colleagues are often not willing to say what is going on for them in front of students. (Recently I facilitated a discussion between a group of students and a colleague which was really frustrating, because my colleague was repeating the 'stupid student theory' all the time without saying what it felt like for her.)

Conflicts between students and me are usually easy to resolve as well if I notice that there is a conflict. If I do, we talk and I listen. I don't look away. If I don't notice the conflict and a student comes to me, I feel flattered, because it means that the student trusts that I will be able to sort things out.

Conflicts between students and parents are often very hard to deal with. In extreme cases they might even require the intervention of outside authorities. I have to accept that I as a teacher cannot do very much about deep family problems. Sometimes the best I can do is to relate to the students in a way that they don't have at home from their parents – like being warm and understanding. Of course I cannot replace their parents, but I can show them that adults are not all the same. It is really

tough sometimes not to be able to do more and it takes all my Self-in-Presence, especially in cases of extreme negligence. In those cases we usually seek help from outside.

The contribution Focusing can make to techniques of mediation is that it helps me to notice and to acknowledge when I am biased and to move back into Self-in-Presence. When I am biased, I cannot help to resolve a conflict. People would notice that I am taking sides and that would prevent them from saying what they need to say.

Teaching Focusing

I teach Focusing to other teachers at my school too. This sometimes proves difficult though, because time is limited. There are nine colleagues at the moment (out of 120) who are doing the Focusing training and it seems to be impossible to find times that suit everyone, so I teach them in groups of two, three and four. All of this happens in our free time. Unfortunately, the school administration does not give us any extra time and time seems to be the crucial factor. It is too early to say what role Focusing will play at my school in the long run.

So far I haven't taught Focusing to students, but I can sense that this is one of my next steps. I don't think I will ever teach them Focusing the way I teach my colleagues. It feels more promising to me to integrate little Focusing steps into what I teach anyway, for example sensing, describing, and acknowledging. What comes up, for instance, when I read a certain poem, story, or novel? It might be interesting to pursue that instead of analyzing and interpreting the text in the usual way.

Next school year I will take over a course for students who will be trained to intervene in cases of bullying. They learn how to step in when students are terrorized by their peers. I am planning to teach them reflective listening as well in order to support the victims and there might be other helpful Focusing steps too. All of this needs to develop and I feel that there is a whole new world to be discovered.

Taking care of myself

Teachers have a tough job. Most of the day, we are confronted with difficult situations. We have too much work, too many conflicts, and too little time. We never get any positive feedback. It just never happens that someone comes along and says 'Well done'. The worst for me is that we are exposed to noise all day long. There is hardly ever any silence. That is why so many teachers are suffering from stress, burning out, becoming sick.

Focusing has taught me that I must look after myself first. I can hear people (maybe even colleagues) say 'How selfish!' when they read this. Students should come first and teachers second! I don't agree! Looking after myself is a prerequisite for this job. It does not necessarily mean that I fulfill all my needs the moment they come up. It just means that I take some time to sense them, to create a space for them, to let them be there – and to fulfill some of them when I can. If I don't see and hear my own needs and if I don't take them seriously, I cannot give other people what they need. I would burn out too.

The truth is that students benefit from teachers who have learned to take care of themselves. Teachers who have learned to do that have more energy for others and they demonstrate what it means to be able to cope with life. That is more powerful than everything we can teach!

Conclusion

Being a Focusing schoolteacher has been very beneficial to me. I feel that a lot of things go more smoothly. My relationships with colleagues and students have improved and I feel more centered.

However, a word needs to be said about how successful I am in the areas described above. Often my students don't learn anything although I do my very best, often my evaluations hurt them, often their personalities don't develop, conflicts don't get resolved etc. I have to acknowledge that there are factors at work that are not under my control. I also have to acknowledge my own limitations as a person. Sometimes things are happening so fast that I just don't find the time to pause and to

sense into my own implicit knowing. Sometimes I need to take care of myself and don't have time for others. What has made all the difference for me is that *I hold the intention* to do things the way I have described above.

Looking back it feels like this paper has written itself. And yes, I did go back to add, rewrite, and edit things. However, what wanted to be said has emerged on its own and I sense there are still some 'edges' that need to be explored. There is more...

If you would like to discuss with me anything I have said, I would be happy to hear from you. Please write to: arnokatz@focusing.me

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