Fostering "Peaceful Warriors" in the Classroom

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In 1980, Dan Millman wrote *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, a book that altered many people's lives, as well as the way they viewed themselves and reality. Russell (2000) claims that "Over twenty years later…it still is relevant…and it still has the power to change lives and our viewpoint of reality." But can it change the way our students think about education and learning? Yes it can because the lessons that are taught in *Peaceful Warrior* are lessons that our students need to apply to their own education and learning.

From the title of this book and recent global events, one might conclude that it is about teaching peace awareness. In actuality, however, it is about a personal journey inward. Norton (2002) states: "*Way of the Peaceful Warrior*…opens its doors to all types of people by telling a story…The author's transformation continues by daily encounters and a life and death struggle where he must make clear choices about his life and how to live consciously in it." Our students must also make "clear choices" about their learning. For example, are they going to take *responsibility* and become *active* learners or are they going to sit back and expect their professors to spoon feed them nuggets of information to be regurgitated on a test or in an essay?

Why teach this book?

According to Webster (2003): "Motivation is undoubtedly an extremely important factor in language acquisition." Unfortunately, Japanese students are often unmotivated not only in their English classes, but in *all* of their classes. Happily, I have found great success in increasing my students' motivation to learn, in *all* of their classes, through teaching this book. We can teach our students much more than English through *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. First, Axlerod states: "there is so much illusion in the world, one must become really good at distinguishing illusion from truth." Hence, students should not just accept what their teacher says as fact; they should *investigate* the truth themselves. Second, students should be able to *distinguish* between knowledge, ideas and concepts versus the use of them. "Success in life is not only about stuffing our heads with more information and knowledge, but using what we learn in the real world to better our lives" (Axelrod, 1997). The same applies in the classroom: sitting in class and taking notes is *gathering* information, it is not learning. Students must actively decide how to use this information to better their lives.

While a student at the University of California, Dan Millman first meets his mentor, whom he nicknames Socrates, at an all-night gas station. Socrates continually tests Dan and according to Gibson (1998): "Slowly…Dan begins to understand his problems, and attacks them head on." Our students come to class with a variety of problems, both personal and academic. I am not suggesting that we as teachers ask our students to deal with their personal problems in class. Rather, I am suggesting we teach them to approach learning "head on" and become more responsible for their education.

Gurian (1993) explains: "The archetypal warrior is that part of ourselves that protects emotional boundaries and asserts our needs in the world…First a mentor initiates it, as a drill sergeant is the first initiator of the young soldier. But then someone must further initiate it, giving it a cause, a mission — as a general gives the soldier his mission." In an educational setting, the student is the "warrior" and the teacher is the "mentor." But more importantly, the person who gives the warrior its "cause" must be the student herself: she must *want* to study and thereby become a more autonomous student. According to Usuki (1999): "…an essential element of learners' autonomy is their conscious ability to direct themselves." And that is exactly what this book teaches our students: how to take responsibility for their own learning.

Wake up!

Hudson (2000) states: "…eventually, Millman stops resisting the lessons" taught by Socrates "and begins to try on a whole new ideology — one that values being *conscious* over being smart, and strength in *spirit* over strength in body." For our students, the key point here is being "conscious over being smart." That is, they must become *aware* of what they are studying and learning, not merely memorizing facts or going through the motions to fulfill the requirements of a course.

Socrates tells Dan: "We are all fools together…It's just that few people know it; others don't" (p. 9). If we use this as a starting point with our students, we can say that we are *all* learners together in this classroom. Therefore, let us accept that there is much to learn and make this our "purpose" or "cause."

When Dan complains: "I can't waste my time here any longer. I need to get some sleep," angrily, Socrates retorts: "How do you know you haven't been asleep your whole life? How do you know you're not asleep right now?" If our students can gain nothing else from reading this book, it's this: WAKE UP! What is the point of enrolling in college and taking classes if you are going to sleep through them?

Martin Luther King once said: "If a person sweeps a street for a living, he should sweep them as Michelangelo painted, as Beethoven composed, as Shakespeare wrote" (Millman, 1992, p. xiii). In other words, students must take pride in what they are doing as students. They need to be the best students they can possibly be, no matter which course they are taking. Even if it is a required course taught at 9:00am on Monday mornings!

Socrates tells Dan: "The world out there…is a school…Life is the only real teacher. It offers many experiences…But the lessons of experience are hidden. I can help you learn from experience to see the world clearly…" (p. 14). The parallel here is easy to draw: teachers need to help our students find "clarity" (i.e., a relation between what they are studying and their own experience). Our students, like Dan, have "been taught to gather

information from outside yourself, from books, magazines, and experts…Sometimes the information is premium and sometimes it's low octane" (p. 14). How can we make the knowledge we pass on useful to our students?

The answer lies in making what we teach *meaningful* to them because according to Socrates: "You hold many facts and opinions, yet you know very little of yourself. Before you can learn, you'll have to empty your tank" (p. 15). I am not suggesting that as educators we ask our students to forget what they have already learned, nor am I suggesting that what we teach is "useless knowledge." But we should question our materials before teaching and ask ourselves if we are imparting useful knowledge. The responsibility lies with our students in how they apply this knowledge to their lives. Like Dan, our students "understand many things but have realized practically nothing…Understanding…comes only from direct experience" (p. 15). We can foster "direct experience" in the classroom by encouraging *active* learning; but again, to become an active learner is the responsibility of the student.

Where are you?

An important question Socrates asks Dan is: "Where *are* you?" (p. 17). If we ask our students this question, we will get a range of answers from: "We are in class" all the way to "We are in the universe." But the question, "Where is the universe?" cannot be answered for as Socrates explains: "You cannot answer it, and you never will. There is no knowing about it…Life is a mystery…My ignorance is based on this understanding. Your understanding is based on ignorance" (p. 17-18). Since our goal is to make our students become more active learners, we can simply ask them to think about: "Where are you in this class? *Why* are you here? What are you learning? How are you learning?"

Socrates advises Dan to: "Use whatever knowledge you have but see its limitations…Life…requires intense feeling and constant energy. Life demands right action if knowledge is to come alive" (p. 19). Here we have to be careful about the word "spirit" and the issue of "spirituality" in the classroom. Millman (2002) states on his homepage: "One of the most common beliefs about 'spiritual life' is that it requires fixing one's insides —only having positive thoughts and good feelings. In contrast, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* focuses on behavior, on kind and courageous action…I'm here to teach, to share, and to remind people of what they already know but might have forgotten, not to impress the impressionable. It is not my purpose to convince others of my views, only to express them with clarity."

Spirituality aside, being an *active* learner requires intense feeling and constant energy; in short, it requires motivation. And like life, being an active learner "demands right action if knowledge is to come alive." For students, "right action" involves recognizing the importance of their education and the active role, which they must play in gaining a useful education. This realization must come from within; it cannot be forced. Like Dan, our students often know but they do not act. Therefore, they must be encouraged to actively participate in the class because it is an important and worthwhile endeavor. In addition, they must take pride in their work. Too often, students do the bare minimum to get by; their goal is simply a passing grade so that they can earn enough credits to graduate. *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* shows us that this is not enough. We have a much bigger responsibility as learners. This book can inspire learners so that "ordinary knowledge [will] no longer satisfies [them] (p. 35).

Some educators might question the message Millman is giving students, for after meeting Socrates and becoming somewhat "enlightened," Millman loses interest in his schoolwork. Obviously, this is not what we want our students to do: "tune out" instead of "tune in" to what they're studying. So what is the answer? The teacher must choose what she teaches carefully and teach it with the same passion for learning that we are trying to instill in our students.

Change your future

In Book One, Chapter One, Socrates takes Millman on a very "metaphysical" journey to a gymnastics meet, which is a journey Socrates claims "is real — more real than the waking dreams of your usual life. Pay attention!" (p. 40). The purpose of Dan's journey with Socrates was to "clear" his mind of all the thoughts that clutter it and prevent him from being aware. The key point here is Socrates' demand to "Pay attention!" That is the message we want our students to remember and apply as active learners in our classes: PAY ATTENTION! Because it is only by becoming aware that one truly starts to learn.

In a dream state, Dan experiences an entire lifetime, one that ends quite sadly alone and bitter. Dan asks Socrates "Is that what my life is going to be like? Because if it is, I see no point in living it." Socrates replies: "Just as there are different interpretations of the past and many ways to change the present, there are any number of possible futures…you can make choices and change your present circumstances. You can alter your future" (p. 47). This is another important message to impart on our students: there are different ways to interpret things and they have the power to change their present circumstances as students and alter their future. In other words, it is never too late to become a better student, a more active learner. But the student must evaluate herself as a learner and ask herself: "Am I satisfied with what I'm learning?" "Am I satisfied with how I'm learning?" "How can I get the most from this class/semester/year/time in college?"

Socrates repeatedly reminds Dan "Your *mind* is your predicament. It wants to be free of change…free of the obligations of life…But change is a law, and no amount of pretending will alter that reality" (p. 51). This message can be applied to our students' role as active learners in the classroom. First, they should welcome and accept change because with change comes learning. Second, they should welcome and accept their obligation to meet the requirements *and more* of the course they are taking. Repeatedly encourage them to do more than what is asked of them or assigned. If they are assigned reading from a specific text, they should complete this and find more texts related to the subject. In a sense, our students need to become hungry for knowledge instead of cramming facts into their heads.

Are you any smarter?

Another interesting topic to discuss with students is the difference between one's mind and brain. Socrates tells Dan: "The brain and mind are not the same. The brain is real; the mind isn't…. 'Mind' is an illusory reflection of cerebral fidgeting. It comprises all the random, uncontrolled thoughts that bubble into awareness from the subconscious. Consciousness is not mind; awareness is not mind; attention is not mind. Mind is an obstruction, an aggravation…To really get it, you must observe yourself to see what I mean…all your emotions [are] knee-jerk responses to thoughts you can't control…You think too much!" (p. 52-53). How does this apply to students in the classroom? They need to become aware of all

the "mental noise" that clutters their mind and obstructs clear learning. One way to approach this is to suggest that they start keeping a small notebook in which they write down all of their thoughts during the day which are related to their classes and the subjects they are studying. In this way, they can start to recognize when their mind is wandering and focus better on the subject at hand.

Socrates asks: "Well, Dan, are you any smarter than you were on Saturday?" (p. 57). What a wonderful question to ask our students at the beginning of each class! "Are you any smarter than the last time we met? What have you learned in a week's time?" These kinds of questions might seem too personal or embarrassing, but they are worth any discomfort because they make our students think about their role as active learners in our classes.

In Chapter 3, "Cutting Free," Socrates teaches Dan the importance of meditation. I am not proposing using class time so that our students can meditate. Nonetheless, as peaceful warriors in the classroom, they can use their mind as their "sword" to find the "substance" of what they are learning. In other words, instead of blindly listening to the teacher and taking notes, or reading a book that was assigned, they can learn to focus on what's important and meaningful to them, always asking themselves: "How can I apply this knowledge to my daily life?"

How do I become more aware?

In another "metaphysical" journey, Dan realizes "that awareness is how the human being experiences the light of consciousness…I learned the meaning of attention — it is the intentional channeling of awareness" (p. 78). Of course, we cannot expect nor ask our students to have such an epiphany, but we can ask them to become more aware of what they are studying and learning, can't we? I believe the key point here is "intentional awareness" — a peaceful warrior who is actively learning and aware of what they are learning.

After Dan has his vision of his place and purpose in the universe (and hopefully our students by now have a vision of their place and purpose in our class), he asks Socrates: "How do I open myself to this light of awareness?" I think this is an important question for our students to ask: "How do I become more aware?" Socrates answers his question with a question: "What do you do when you want to see?" Dan replies: "Well, I look!" (p. 80). This is exactly what we want our students to do: LOOK! It's all part of becoming more aware as a student. This is very important because as Socrates tells Dan: "Words mean little unless you realize the truth of it yourself" (p. 82). In the same light, knowledge means little unless our students realize the truth of it themselves. Socrates continually asks Dan, "Are you paying attention?" We should often ask our students the same question, but more importantly, they need to learn to ask themselves this question.

In Book Two, "The Warriors Training," Socrates tells Dan: "The realm of the warrior is guarded by something like a gate. It is well hidden, like a monastery in the mountains. Many knock, but few enter…The gate exists inside you, and you alone must find it…Now it's time you became fully responsible for your own behavior. To find the gate…you pave the way with your own work" (p. 100-101). Behind this gate lies spiritual enlightenment for Dan Millman. For our students, behind this "gate" lies educational enlightenment—that is, the full realization of being a peaceful warrior who is an active learner in and outside of the classroom. We can guide our students to

this gate, but to actually reach it and pass through successfully, they must take responsibility for their own learning. They can no longer rely on the teacher to provide all the answers for next week's test. In fact, for the peaceful warrior student, the test is only important in that it represents a grade; it does not represent true learning and ultimately knowledge.

Conclusion

In the process of becoming a "peaceful warrior" in the classroom, the student, like Dan in Book Two, must "rewire old habits of acting, of thinking, of dreaming, and of seeing the world" (p. 104). In other words, our students must *change* their "bad" learning habits. They must come to class with a renewed sense of wonder, with an urgency to learn and to use what they learn so that it becomes knowledge. Some will be more successful than others, but the effort is worth it—our students will come away with more than they started; they will become better students, even if it is in a small way.

Way of the Peaceful Warrior teaches students that every moment counts, including their time spent in the classroom. The lesson we want our students to learn is this: "There are no ordinary moments" (p. 138). Therefore, by reading and discussing the book, our students will become better, more active learners.

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