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Teacher's View: The Human Touch

By MARILYN JONES

When I began teaching in 1970, my colleagues and I composed our tests on ditto-masters which left purple ink stains all over our hands. Occasionally we would watch a 16mm movie. I recorded my students' scores by hand in my red gradebook and painstakingly averaged these numbers at the end of the term. Today, in many high schools, teaching is now a technical marvel of computer labs, digital cameras, DVD players and laptops. Teachers e-mail parents, post messages for students on online bulletin boards, and take attendance with a flick of a mouse.

Even though we are now living in the digital age, the basic and most important element of education—the human connection—has not changed. The most wired students still need that one-on-one, teacher-student relationship to learn and to succeed. Teenagers need instruction in English, math or history, but they also want personal advice and encouragement. Kids talk with me about their families, their weekend plans, their favorite TV shows and their relationship problems. In my English and journalism classes, we talk about Shakespeare and persuasive essays, but we also discuss college basketball, the war in Iraq and career choices. Students show me pictures of the prom, their rebuilt cars, their family vacations, and their newborn baby brothers. This personal connection is the vital link between teacher and student that no amount of technology can improve upon or replace.

A few years ago I had a student in sophomore English who was struggling with my class and with school in general. Although he was a humorous young man who liked to joke around, I knew his family life was far from ideal. Whenever I approached him about missing homework or low test grades, he always had the same reply: "It doesn't matter because I'm quittin' school anyway." Even though he always said this in a half-teasing way, I knew he needed to hear my protests and my "value of a high school education" lecture. He needed to hear this speech from me because I understood his family problems and he knew that I believed in him. After he left my class (which he barely passed), he struggled through the next two years of school. But, he did finally graduate because we kept telling him to hang in there. We'd cared about him finishing school.

Recently, I saw this former student working at a local Italian restaurant. I told him again how proud I was of him. He said that he was hoping to go back to school to become a certified electrician. I encouraged him to get that training.

There is a lot of discussion about how to fix education. Technology can certainly play a role. Students and teachers at my school are thrilled that our building is undergoing a multimillion dollar renovation to include state-of-the-art technology in all classrooms. Kids will be captivated by multimedia geography presentations and interactive math labs. But the old fundamentals will still apply. Students rely on compassionate teachers to guide, to tutor, to listen, to laugh and to cry with them. Teachers provide the most important link in the educational process—the human one.

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