

Mindful of a Mantra

Steven Van Zoost

So there I was in my first week of teaching, putting my management skills to the test, when the mantra came to me. I was in the process of organizing the classroom library, creating 250 portfolio folders, making puppets for French class dramatizations, posting daily quotes on the bulletin board, and feeding Sushi — our classroom fish. Undeniably, these tasks demanded a great deal of my time. I recall one moment from that week when I was signing out a novel to a student from our classroom library when I was simultaneously needed at the door. The Grade 8 student offered to finish, printing her name on the sign-out sheet for the novel in her hands.

At the end of the day, as I looked at her neatly printed name and a smiley-face, I was inspired to re-vamp the sign-out sheet. My time would only be needed to read and initial the sheet after the student completed the form that now included additional information such as the genre and author of the novel and the student's rationale for choosing that particular book. When the book was returned the student would finish the sheet by giving the book a ranking out of ten and a one-sentence reason why someone else might like the book. That was the moment when the mantra came to me: *don't do anything that the students can do.*

I must admit that at first my attraction to the mantra was purely pragmatic. Suddenly I had much more time: the students' portfolios were up-to-date; the quotes were changed daily on the bulletin board; students were so

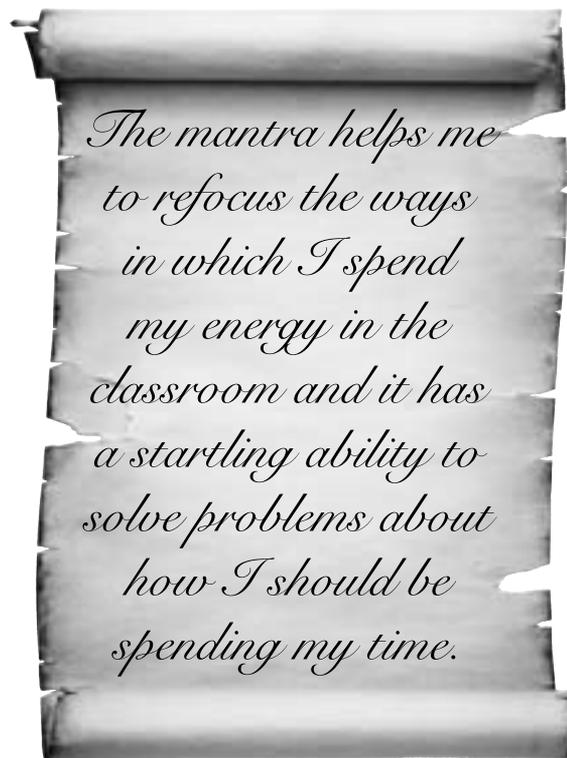
enthusiastic about making the puppets that it became a lunch time activity; and David, who was always at school before me no matter how early I arrived, eagerly volunteered to care for Sushi.

As it turned out students were equally interested in solving classroom management concerns. They helped

to determine the class bathroom routines, how to run a classroom meeting, and how students should interact in their classroom conversations. I found ways for students to help record anecdotal notes about my conversations with students in class; when I met with students to discuss their work, students made summary notes about our conversation that I would then review and initial. When it was time to communicate with parents about what had been going on in our classroom students wrote a class newsletter. I kept thinking *don't do anything that the students can do* and the mantra taught me that students can do plenty.

Then I felt a shift in my attraction to the mantra. The mantra began to appeal to me not only for its pragmatic charm, but also for its pedagogical possibilities.

The mantra led me to design ways for students to document their classroom conversations when I could not listen to all of the students at once; I was surprised by how this simple level of student involvement impacted their learning experiences. For example, in the past several years students in my classroom have documented their small group discussions digitally (using the free software *Audacity*) and revisited these conversations for



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further reflection. Because the mantra endorsed this direction, I learned that students' involvement in classroom record keeping increases their self-awareness as learners and their sense of responsibility for their school work; as well, it clarifies their understanding of what is expected of them in school.

It is not hard to imagine how my mantra accompanied me on my journey of increased student involvement in my classroom assessment practices. Students can make decisions about how they can best demonstrate their achievement of specific outcomes. After all, students can co-construct assessment criteria and tools, design assessment events, and assist in record keeping and reporting to parents. And through it all, I keep thinking: *don't do anything that the students can do.*

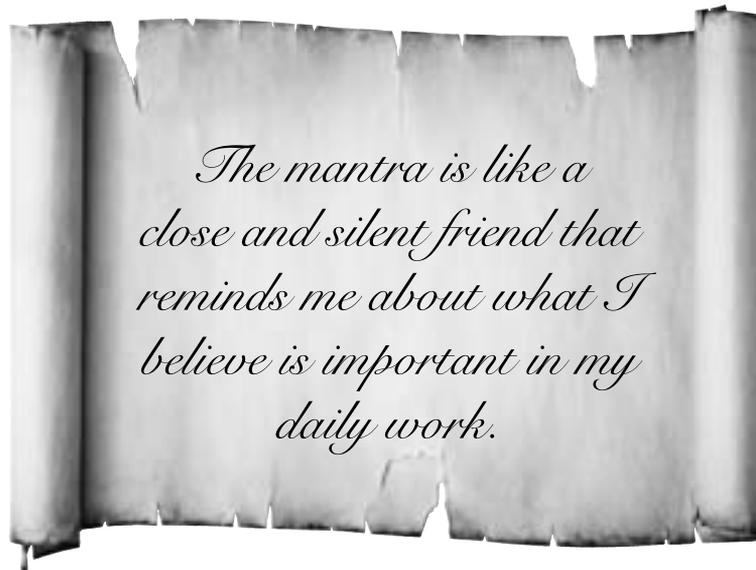
It should be noted that this mantra has had a tendency to wander. I've noticed the mantra strolling from the classroom and into other parts of the school. Recently, to educate the school community about *International Human Rights Day*, students (rather than exclusively teachers) created an awareness video to play for the entire school. The school's administration might have been following the mantra's lead; students, not teachers or administrators, organized an assembly about what students in our school are doing to promote human rights locally, nationally, and internationally. Sometimes I'm not sure who the mantra provokes more — me or the students.

I want to be clear that the mantra does not absolve the teacher of responsibilities or diminish the role of the teacher in the classroom. Students can't do everything. Teachers have professional responsibilities that students cannot assume, such as making professional judgments about grading practices. The teacher's role also involves modeling adult behaviours and ethical decision-making — something that cannot be assumed to be automatically instilled in young people.

The mantra helps me to refocus the ways in which I spend my energy in the classroom and it has a startling ability to solve problems about how I should be spending my time.

The mantra has been steadfast and continues to accompany me in my career. Over the years I have gotten used to the mantra's constancy and I frequently turn to its

guidance during my curriculum planning. *Don't do anything that the students can do* has allowed me to keep students' involvement in my classroom at the forefront of my mind. The mantra is like a close and silent friend that reminds me about what I believe is important in my daily work. I have been conscious to invite several such mantras into my classroom to help me keep focus and to learn about the craft of teaching. I hope you keep such company too.



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