



PERMISSION TO PROCESS

By Wilson McCaskill

Confusion is an emotionally uncomfortable experience. It sets off an alarm bell that tells us we are facing imminent failure or risk. This alarm is hard to avoid and depending on our personal characteristics and the situation, the emotional discomfort we experience can range from mild to severe.

There are many ways we deal with emotional discomfort and some ways are more effective than others. When it comes to the confusion created by a challenge that requires us to absorb, understand and use information, our first tendency is to try and slow things down. We will ask for instructions to be repeated, for more time before commencing, for the chance to go slowly, for the opportunity to watch others first, and various other requests as a means to buy time and placate our agitated emotions.

These are all effective and justifiable strategies and will, in many instances work well to keep us engaged and participatory.

Educators who have attended a *Play Is The Way*® workshop will remember their own experiences in the activity called “Knotted Arms.” In this activity, participants work in pairs and are asked to follow the calls and grab parts of their partner’s arms, left wrist, right shoulder, right elbow, etc. Done at this basic level the activity is already confusing but when the parts of the arm are swapped, the activity becomes very challenging. It gets so confusing and uncomfortable that the entire group displays the common behaviour of repeating every instruction I deliver in a long drawn out voice, followed by pointing to all the parts in quick succession. Once they have achieved sufficient clarity to risk an attempt, they make a decision and grab what they hope will be the right part. Invariably it isn’t, which results in a burst of comforting laughter followed by another hopeful attempt

Processing is a very effective soothing skill and the more confusing something is, the more time we want to process the information before we act. For most of us, if given enough time to work through something, we will eventually feel comfortable enough to make a decision. Conversely, if we are given lots to process and little time in which to do so, we feel more stress, pressure, anxiety and discomfort simply because the chances of making mistakes or failing have increased significantly. The more important it becomes not to fail or to appear incompetent or inadequate, the more anxiety and emotional discomfort we will experience.

So, why might people not use the opportunity to slow things down and process information fully if they were given the opportunity to do so; or why would they not squeeze as much processing time out of a situation as they possibly could?

Well, in the classroom, the answer is likely to be because those people are boys. Not all boys; but certainly far too many. And the reason is, status; or rather the constant battle to attain, establish and maintain status.



In boy culture, nothing elevates status more than being seen as gifted or naturally talented. If a boy has natural ability; that is, he can do something very well or at the very least, significantly better than his peers, he needs to do little more than demonstrate that ability for his position in the pecking order to rise. If his talent lies in an area deemed to be decidedly masculine, such as sport or activities requiring strength or speed and he can be funny, then his popularity and status are almost assured.

If his peer group and the class culture is to honour more intellectual capabilities then a natural ability or talent, demonstrated frequently, in one or more subject areas will also raise his status; though this is not as assured as having talents in things deemed more masculine than English, music and art. If, by chance, a boy is blessed with talent in both intellectual and physical capabilities and you add to that a natural ability to be attractive to the opposite sex (even if they don't interest him – yet) then he has the full package and his status will not only be stratospheric, it will extend well past the borders of his own peer group.

For those boys who do have natural ability, the need for processing time is markedly less than those with decidedly less talent in the task at hand; although it must be said that at some point, for their talent to be fully realised, they will have to confront challenges that require significant struggle and processing time. Having little processing time does not impact adversely on outcomes for these talented boys. However, the outcomes for boys with no particular ability or talent in a task, are directly linked to the amount of processing time they are given, take or ask for.

And herein lies the problem. Being seen by the peer group as requiring more processing time to achieve success is an obvious signal of struggling, thereby lacking talent or natural ability. The more time you require the more inadequate and insignificant you are. Worse still, if you have the courage to take more time or to ask for more time and you still get *it* wrong or fail at *it*, you really are stupid and inadequate, and your status and significance will crash.

Far too many boys are trapped in the belief that status and significance are only achievable if they can do something with considerable speed and little effort. It is as if they live their lives in accordance with the following formula.

$$\text{SUCCESS / STATUS} = \text{GREAT SPEED} + \text{LITTLE EFFORT}$$

By this formula, the less the speed and the more the effort, the lower the status and significance, irrespective of whether or not success was achieved. By the harsh dictates of this formula it is not success that is important. What really matters is how quickly and easily that success was achieved. There are no accolades for persistent effort because that simply indicates a lack of natural talent. It indicates that you are not blessed with giftedness; that you have not been singled out by nature, the Gods, a supernatural power, luck or whatever else selects the chosen few to stand as superior to other human beings.



Girls, in large part, seem to be free of this restrictive and damaging belief. For them processing leads to collaboration and the intimacy and connectedness of discussion and debate. Exposing one's confusion and revealing a need for more processing time is a request for help, support and comfort. It signals the opportunity for others to gather around you and share common concerns as well as ways of surviving the upcoming challenge.

I'm not saying that this true for all girls and I do think the gender difference in this area is narrowing, with more girls living by the demands of the boy's formula; but sharing and collaboration are certainly an obvious and prevalent coping strategy for girls in many classrooms.

As damaging as this formula is, it can be undone. The first step is to acknowledge how tempted we are to be impressed with natural ability (something a child has little control over) and how quickly we are to accolade it and how willing we are to give those who possess talent a feeling of specialness and superiority. It is as if we don't want them to see themselves as mere mortals. We want them to be inspired and motivated by their gifts and in being so, go on to excel beyond anything we ourselves could have possibly achieved, given we were never blessed in a similar manner. We have convinced ourselves that if we can make our children believe they are really special, they will go on to do very special things.

As I see it, boys seem almost hard wired to believe this fabrication and have absorbed it to such a degree that they become complicit in perpetuating it. Once we have trained them to believe this (from a very young age), they go on to train us in keeping up the myth. The myth becomes a part of boy culture and is perpetuated between themselves and promoted and propelled by the adults they interact with, especially teachers, parents and coaches.

Hungry for status and significance and believing that without it they are less likeable and less safe, they are driven to avoid anything that requires obvious effort: anything that might reveal their lack of ability. As progress in any one area of endeavour so often requires the tenacity and resilience to fully exploit one's ability, (and the less natural ability the more *character* will be needed to develop it) this belief puts boys at considerable risk.

Here is what they do to train us into maintaining the myth that easy successes are everything. Let me create a scenario around Jack who is 6 years old. You will see, I'm sure, that this scenario will shine a light on the behaviour of older boys with similar intentions.

SCENARIO.

Having painted a picture of a dinosaur, Jack wants to show it to his teacher. He has no particular opinion of the painting himself but is aware that others are still busily painting. He walks towards his teacher and just before reaching her he moves quickly or does a little jump into her personal space and ends up standing right in front of her with his body full of energy and his face beaming. His little jump created a tiny moment



of surprise in his teacher and her energy went up just as Jack exclaimed, "Look at my dinosaur."

In a microsecond and with no conscious effort, the teacher has identified Jack's own enthusiasm for his work and the energy with which he conveyed that enthusiasm. Without realising, she is about to respond by doing what I call, "topping."

"Oh wow!" says the teacher in a voice even more energetic and excited than Jack's. "What an incredible dinosaur!"

Working off Jack's elated response to her initial enthusiasm, and again without realising she is "topping" him, she continues. "You have done such a good job. What a little champion you are." To keep him working and to encourage him back to his table she tempts him with the proposition that should he comply he will please her even more. "I would love to see where your dinosaur lives and maybe you could show me what he eats as well. What do you think?" Jack agrees and heads back to his table followed by the words, "Good on you. I can't wait to see what you paint."

Now, I could write at length on the problems with this interaction from the disempowering, unwarranted, non-specific, excessive praise point-of-view but this article is not about that; although, had this teacher been more informed about praise and its use, she would have avoided contributing to Jack's increasing resistance to the use of processing time and effort.

By topping Jack she made him feel special and significant and raised his status. The sensations triggered by this raising of status are powerful and her public response has, in Jack's eyes, confirmed to everyone in the class that he is brimming with talent. Having achieved this sensation so easily, Jack has become wary of anything that might lower his status within the class and diminish that sensation. And his belief is that nothing will do that more quickly than being seen as finding some thing difficult and taking too long over it.

To guide boys out of this pattern of behaviour we have to monitor and regulate our own response to those moments when we assess or comment on their work and/or achievements. The following sequence will help, and if employed, will slowly shift boys from the misguided need to prove their natural ability and return them to a place where processing can be utilised as a soothing skill and effort can become a fulfilling and rewarding experience.

In this place, learning and all the mistakes and failure that accompany it, will not be something to be avoided but rather embraced for the deep and lasting pleasure of simply knowing that you are indeed learning; that you



are moving forward, getting somewhere, even if you appear to be doing so more slowly than you would like or than those around you.

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When a child approaches you for a reaction to their achievement, you need to be ready with an appropriate reply. If you don't have one at the ready you will find that when a child surprises you, by jumping enthusiastically into your personal space, you will have topped his opening remark before you can stop yourself.

I find the two remarks, "Thank you for telling me" when a students tell me about something they have done or "Thanking you for showing me" when they show me what they have done, holds up well in most situations.

Let's continue with the Jack scenario. The teacher needs to be conscious of the level of Jack's energy when he meets her, so that she can ensure her reply does not carry more energy than his opening remark. Lets say, on a scale of 1 to 10, Jack is on a scale of 7. The teacher needs to reply no higher than seven and preferably a touch under that.

Jack (on a scale of 7): Ms Jones, look at my dinosaur!

*Ms Jones (on a scale of 5): **Thank you for showing me**, Jack.*

In this first exchange, more important than what she said is the energy with which she said it.

The good thing about learning not to respond with superlatives is that the energy behind your words is much easier to control. Superlatives, by their nature, carry an overcharge of energy and they are hard to deliver with anything other than exuberance; often unbridled.

With the acknowledgement out of the way and managed well, it is time for the teacher to move to step 2.

2. PROCESSING QUESTIONS

This is the, "Tell me more?" part of the sequence and this step can actually start with that as the question. The teacher's objective here is to get Jack to share the nuts and bolts of how he arrived at the picture of his dinosaur and reasons for what is in the picture. The teacher simply asks all those who, what, where, when, why and how questions that surround learning. While asking these questions with keen interest, the teacher needs to keep her eye on Jack's reactions to identify the moment he starts to become slightly disengaged or bored by the process.

For some boys this does not take long. After all, they came to you for an emotional payoff and you aren't delivering. Don't be surprised if they look at you with eyes that say, "I'm over this. Can we just move on, please!"



Jack's eyes say just that and the teacher responds by driving on with added interest and asking two or three more questions.

Driving on is the only way you have of showing genuine interest in the *process* of their achievement and not just the achievement itself. It is the only way you have of saying there is significance in the journey and that they have significance because they took the journey. Divert from the questions the instant they want you to and you subconsciously confirm that, like them, you are only interested in the outcome and the ease with which he achieved it.

After asking two or three more questions it is time to move onto step 3.

3. SELF-EVALUATION

This step gives Jack the chance to make his own evaluation. In doing so, he hears his own thoughts and is free to be as excited as his own evaluation allows him to be.

Some students will over value and some under value what they have done. Further questions can help students come to an accurate and realistic evaluation.

By this time, Jack realises that his teacher is far more interested in the process than the success and more excited about the journey than the destination. She is starting to make process and effort the means to significance and slowly removing the idea that speed and little effort guarantees higher status.

When this idea has been accepted and absorbed by boys, they will start to embrace processing and not see effort, applied over time, as an indication of little natural ability. Imagine how much more boys, with this awareness, can bring to learning and imagine what will happen to their anxiety levels when they abandon the formula:

$$\text{SUCCESS / STATUS} = \text{GREAT SPEED} + \text{LITTLE EFFORT}$$

4. CELEBRATION

Now is the teacher's opportunity to celebrate Jack's achievement to the level she believes is warranted.

At this moment in the process, I would still recommend that the teacher doesn't just throw superlatives around and that she refrain from creating a thin, artificially induced feel good.

Having run through the earlier steps the teacher will find that she does not have to go overboard because Jack has already created his own feel good from an accurate assessment of his work, and her insightful interest in what it took to get it done.

What Jack will be feeling and thinking will be deeper, more meaningful and longer lasting than some unwarranted explosion of emotion from his status being



elevated, and his need for that elevated status, reinforced by the reflexive responses of his teacher that he so effectively triggered.

You will see, from this stepping sequence that if celebration is necessary it should be done at the end of the interaction and not at the beginning, as is usually done. THIS NOT A RULE, NEVER TO BE BROKEN; it is a guideline and there will be many occasions when celebration, as the first and only step, is entirely appropriate.

A student telling you his team has won the Grand Final and he played his part in that achievement, likely deserves an immediate explosion of excitement and energy. Going through the steps of acknowledgement, processing questions and self-evaluation prior to celebrating, would likely reveal you as heartless, thoughtless or perhaps even mad.

When to use this stepping sequence is a decision for you to make. As a general guideline you should use it when a boy is asking you to assess classwork he has completed quickly and easily; work the boy sees as a means to elevate his status and signal his innate ability, giftedness and/or superiority.

You might discover that some girls are advantaged by this approach. There is certainly no harm in using this approach with girls in general and if nothing else it will give you additional practise in its use.