

Lasallian Professional Development

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this issue

21st Century Strategies to help you grasp the idea of GENTLENESS and how this applies today in your own classes.

The origins of the 12 Virtues...

In 1785, just before the French Revolution, Brother Agathon, who was the fifth Superior General of the De La Salle Brothers, wrote a document called 'The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher'. The list of virtues is like sage advice that a teacher might receive from an experienced Year Level Dean or similar.

The 12 Virtues combines two important pieces of work of St. John Baptist De La Salle's. The spiritual vision of his Meditations and the practical pedagogy of his Conduct of Christian Schools.

The 12 Virtues help answer the fundamental question for teachers in Lasallian schools: *"If I am to touch the hearts of my students and teach them in the best possible way, what practices should I follow and what vision should I have for them?"*

Br Agathon reminds the teacher - if you have a problem in your class, look to your own behaviour first.

12 Virtues and 12 months of 2013. Each month, I aim to provide you with useful, modern strategies, that will allow you to bring De La Salle's ideas right into your own classrooms. I kindly acknowledge Br. Jeffery Calligan for his work on this material and real insight. Enjoy learning about gentleness!

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The 12 Virtues of a Good Teacher - GENTLENESS

Gentleness

Firmness and authority is tempered with kindness and courtesy such that the teacher is always approachable.

Do you have the GENTLENESS that Jennie shows below?

Gentleness



Jennie remembers when a Year 9 boy said to her, "Many teachers aren't very patient". There are teachers who sometimes "punish them unjustly (because they do not) take time to reflect before acting or speaking." Jennie takes time to ask herself whether she is causing the problem. Her love and compassion are always bigger than the young person's anger and pain.

GENTLENESS

A virtue that inspires us with goodness, sensitivity and tenderness.



Strategy 4-6: Confidence Builders

Purpose: To provide reassurance for students who are anxious about learning.

Description: Before asking students to engage in lessons, making a reassuring statement, such as "We'll go over this again, so don't worry if you don't grasp it right now."

Like Cushioning Questions¹, Confidence Builders relieve student anxieties. Confidence Builders are usually brief statements and can be injected into teaching whenever we sense apprehension about new or challenging material. No dialogue is expected. We simply make a statement that tells students we understand the pressures they may feel while learning. Some examples:

- * We'll go over this several times, so you can relax and know you'll learn it eventually.
- * Don't worry about making mistakes while you're learning this. We all make mistakes sometimes.
- * Because this is important to learn, we'll make sure you get all the help you'll need. So don't worry if you seem to be having trouble at first.
- * Today, we'll be working with some new material. I might call upon you to try something you've never done before. Remember, it takes courage to risk, and often we learn more by doing so.
- * I know that some of you already know this material. But some of us do not – which is natural. We all learn some things faster, some things slower. So do not feel superior if you already know this, and do not feel inferior if you did not yet learn it. We will all learn it eventually.

Other reassuring statements that increase active learning:

- You can do it.
- This is a smart group.
- You are an intelligent human being.

...understand
how singularly
admirable is this
virtue of
Gentleness,
since it has
Humility as its
companion, and
because when it
is patient, it is, in
truth, the
perfection of
love...

– Brother Agathon

¹ Strategy 4-2: Cushioning Questions **Purpose:** To cushion student anxiety about learning and to expand student willingness to participate fully. **Description:** Before asking students to demonstrate how much they learned, reinforcing basic truths about learning by asking such questions as "Is it OK if someone gives us a wrong answer today? Why?" Posting a Truth Sign that says it's all right to make mistakes doesn't guarantee that students will not feel anxious about making a mistake. Many students need a long time to accept that making mistakes while learning is fully acceptable. Posting Truth Signs is a wise step first in the process of reducing learning anxieties and increasing learner confidence. However, a steady offering of reminders and support is almost always necessary. Pilon (1966) calls her strategy for doing this "cushioning."

- I know you will remember this class as bringing out your very best.
- Remember that it's OK to make mistakes.
- I admire your risk taking.
- I trust you.
- You can do it in your own way, according to your own time clock.
- You handled that intelligently.

Strategy 4-7: Encouragement

Purpose: To support students who are low achievers or have a poor self-image.

Description: Offering verbal encouragement to students to struggle academically or personally or both.

Encouragement can be a powerful tool. A few well-placed comments to struggling students can mean the difference between them giving up and persisting. We don't want inflated compliments or empty praise here, simply honest, direct words that communicate the message "I want you to succeed, and I know you can do it." Some examples:

- ▶ Don't give up.
- ▶ Keep trying. I know you'll get it eventually.
- ▶ You've come a long way – don't stop now!
- ▶ Great effort! Keep it up!
- ▶ You're showing a lot of dedication to this work. Good for you!
- ▶ I'm here for you if you need help.
- ▶ I believe in you.
- ▶ Believe in yourself. You can do it.

Alison (2002-203) reports that such encouraging comments are especially valuable for members of minority groups who experience discrimination, which would include special education students.

One teacher in our field tests attempted to make this strategy more personal to students by asking them to each create a list of actions and comments they would find personally encouraging and to keep that list handy, referring to it when they felt in need of a boost.

Strategy 4-10: Ability Salute

Purpose: To acknowledge effort, regardless of how much was accomplished.

Description: Telling groups we appreciate how much effort they are putting into learning.

We might try making one of these statements the next time we finish a lesson that seemed particularly difficult for students:

- ▶ I salute your ability to work hard. No one could ask for more.
- ▶ I appreciate how much effort you all put into this.

- This is a group that gives its best! Congratulations!
- You all played hard at this game of learning. In my book, that makes you all winners.
- No group I've had gave as much as you did.
- You gave it your all, and I appreciate that.
- That was not easy. When I was your age, I probably would not have done nearly as well.
- I'm sending a note to the principal about the special work you all did on this project.
- You all really rose to this challenge.

The Ability Salute lets students know we recognize their efforts, no matter how much they accomplished. It is not meant for individual praise, although it also can be used that way. It is rather meant to give encouragement to all students, especially those whose efforts do not usually meet individual praise and who therefore may be most in need of praise. When weak students feel they are full members of a strong group, they tend to internalize that strength.



G E N T L E N E S S

"It is a general principle that love wins love; a teacher should, above and before all, cultivate the feelings of a father toward his students and look upon himself as holding the place of those who entrust them to him. He should borrow from the parents the sentiments of tenderness and goodness that are natural for them. He does this by showing Gentleness; it inspires him, with regard to students, with affection, tenderness, goodwill, and winning and persuasive manners. It removes from his commands whatever might be abrupt and austere, and it blunts their sting. Thus it makes the children happy and attaches them to the teacher; and if they are reasonable, will they not always willingly yield to his insinuations and his Gentleness rather than to constraint and force?"

-Brother Agathon, TWELVE VIRTUES OF A GOOD TEACHER