

# Fostering “Peaceful Warriors” in the Classroom

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In 1980, Dan Millman wrote *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* that became a classic. This book altered many people’s lives, as well as the way they viewed themselves and reality. Russell (2000) claims that: “Over twenty years later, the book still has the same impact; it is still as relevant to the lives of today, 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?

After the events of September 11, 2001, it became quite apparent to me that the world needs a better way of handling conflict resolution, and that we all must find the path to peace or we face destruction. And this path to peace is reflected in this novel because it shows us a better way to live: the “code” of the peaceful warrior, so to speak. And the lessons that are taught in *Peaceful Warrior* are lessons that our students need to apply to their own education and learning because I am often faced with student apathy about the very reason they should be attending university: to *learn*.

Norton (2002) states: “*Way of the Peaceful Warrior* is not a book written by some literary genius; it is not meant to be that type of book. It does not scare off the reader by preaching spirituality. Instead, it opens its doors to all types of people by telling a story. This is a novel about a world class athlete who is transformed after breaking his leg in a motorcycle accident. The journey changes Dan both physically and spiritually and takes him through internal battles of light and darkness in order to align his energy and deal with his emotions. 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 lives and “how to live it consciously.” 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?

We can teach our students much more than English through *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. First, “there is so much illusion in the world, one must become really good at distinguishing illusion from truth. Students should not just accept what their teacher says as

fact, they should *investigate* for the truth themselves. Second, students should be able to *distinguish* between knowledge, ideas and concepts versus the use of them. Today's society is on information overload. 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. We already know more than we can use in 10 lifetimes. For example, everyone who is overweight knows what to do to lose weight. It's not the knowing that loses the weight, it's the doing" (Axelrod, 1997). The same applies in the classroom: sitting and listening to the teacher and taking notes is *gathering* information, it is not learning. Students must *actively* decide how to use this information to better their lives.

According to Gibson (1998): "Socrates makes Dan a student in the tradition of the Samurai of ancient Japan, testing him morally, mentally, and physically. He takes elements from Aikido and Ninja training to teach Dan that the way of the warrior is action, spontaneity, and peace. Slowly, as the story progresses, Dan begins to understand his problems, and attacks them head on. In the end, he is transformed, though not in the way he originally expected." 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. I am suggesting, however, that they approach learning "head on" and seek and appreciate the "spontaneity" of learning.

I must emphasize the "peaceful" aspect of being a "classroom warrior." Gurian (1993) explains: "The archetypal warrior is that part of ourselves that protects emotional boundaries and asserts our needs in the world. Where exactly it should stand to protect our boundaries depends on where a person of authority tells it to stand. 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 learn.

During his junior year at the University of California, Dan Millman first stumbled upon his mentor, Socrates, at an all-night gas station. At the time, Millman hoped to become a world-champion gymnast. "To survive the lessons ahead, you're going to need far more energy than ever before," Socrates warned him that night. "You'll have to cleanse your body of tension, free your mind of stagnant beliefs, and open your heart to loving-kindness" (Millman, 2000, p. 21) From there, the unpredictable Socrates proceeded to teach Millman the "way of the peaceful warrior."

Hudson (2000) states: "At first, Socrates shatters every preconceived notion that Millman has about academics, athletics, and achievement. But eventually, Millman stops resisting the lessons, 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.

Let us look, then, at how *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* can possibly foster "peaceful warriors" in the classroom. When Dan first meets Socrates at the all-night gas station, Socrates tells him: "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." Don't come to class because you *have to*; come to class because you *want to* learn.

Our students often come to class very tired, for one reason or another, and unfortunately, some even choose to sleep during class. When Dan first meets Socrates, he is already a pretty confident guy who doesn't have time for Socrates' methods of teaching "the way." He even 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?" (pp. 10-11). 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 on Monday mornings at 9:00am.

Socrates makes a poignant point to Dan that I think should be repeated to each and every student we meet in each and every class:

The world out there...is a school Dan. Life is the only real teacher. It offers many experiences, and if experience alone brought wisdom and fulfillment, then elderly people would all be happy, enlightened masters. But the lessons of experience are hidden. I can help you learn from experience to see the world clearly, and clarity is something you desperately need right now. You know this is true, but your mind rebels; you haven't yet turned knowledge into wisdom (p. 14).

Shouldn't that be our jobs as teachers--to help our students find "clarity" in what they are studying and encourage them to turn their "knowledge into wisdom"? Our students have much in common with the Dan Millman that Socrates is trying to teach. Socrates tells Dan:

Like most people, you've been taught to gather information from outside yourself, from books, magazines, experts...Like this car, you open up and let the

facts pour in. Sometimes the information is premium and sometimes it's low octane. You buy your knowledge at current market rates, much like you buy gasoline" (p. 14).

This is not to say that gathering information is not important; it is. But what are our students *doing* with their knowledge? Furthermore, how can we make the knowledge we pass on *useful* to them?

I think the answer lies in making what we teach *meaningful* to them because our students, like Dan, "are overflowing with preconceptions, full of useless knowledge. You [they] hold many facts and opinions, yet you [they] know very little of yourself [themselves]. 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 is the one-dimensional comprehension of the intellect. It leads to knowledge. Realization is three-dimensional -- a simultaneous comprehension of head, heart, and instinct. It comes only from direct experience" (p. 15). I believe that 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.

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," "We are at school," "We are in Tokyo," "We are in Japan," "We are on the earth," "We are in the solar system, third planet from the sun," "We are in the universe." But the last 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. You are ignorant of where the universe is, and thus, where you are. In fact, you have no knowledge of where anything is or what anything is or how it came to be. Life is a mystery...My ignorance is based on this understanding. Your understanding is based on ignorance" (pp. 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. Knowledge alone does not suffice; it has no heart. No amount of knowledge will nourish or sustain your spirit; it can never bring you ultimate happiness or peace. Life requires more than knowledge; it 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." Millman does not want to be a cult leader or a guru, for he claims: "I believe it is my simple, ordinary humanity that helps me to build bridges. I'm here to teach, to share, to remind people of that 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. As a former athlete and coach, I prefer practical outcomes to abstract philosophy. Albert Einstein advised, 'Make everything as simple as possible, but no simpler.' Simplicity isn't easy; it's quite a challenge to bring metaphysical abstractions down to earth."

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 don't 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.

Responsibility is a key issue that our students need to consider. They must take responsibility for their education instead of expecting it to be handed to them as long as they come to class and do their homework. Only when they become "fully responsible" for their education can they become fully active learners. Unfortunately, we cannot perform magic like Socrates and relieve our students of their "lifelong illusion of knowledge." But our students *can* be inspired by this book so that "ordinary knowledge [will] no longer satisfy [them]" (p. 35).

At this point in the book, some educators might question the message Millman is giving students, for after meeting Socrates and becoming somewhat "enlightened," Millman loses interest in his school work: "The next day was full of classes and full of professors babbling words that had no meaning or relevance for me...I stopped taking notes. I was too busy taking in the colors and textures of the room, feeling the energies of the people around me. The sounds of my professor's voices were far more interesting than the concepts they conveyed" (pp. 35-36). 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.

In Book One, Chapter One, Socrates takes Millman on a very “metaphysical” journey to a gymnastics meet, a journey which Socrates claims “is real—more real than the waking dreams of your usual life. Pay attention!” (p. 40). Again, I must emphasize that in teaching *Peaceful Warrior*, we are not asking our students to go on the *same* metaphysical journey; however, they can experience it through Dan’s eyes. 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. However, 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 before such changes can occur, 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 that “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). Again, 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.

Another interesting topic to discuss with students is the difference between one’s mind and brain. Socrates tells Dan:

‘Mind’ is one of those slippery terms like ‘love.’ The proper definition depends on your state of consciousness...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 aware-

ness from the subconscious. Consciousness is not mind ; awareness is not mind; attention is not mind. Mind is an obstruction, an aggravation.... The brain can be a tool...it works for the rest of the body, like a tractor...But when you can't stop thinking...or when...thoughts and memories arise without your intent, it's not your brain working, but your mind wandering. Then the mind controls you ; then the tractor runs wild...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! (pp. 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 I think they are worth any uncomfortableness 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 because: “Silence is the warrior’s art—and meditation is his sword. With it, you’ll cut through your illusions...With it, he cuts the mind to ribbons, slashing through thoughts to reveal their lack of substance” (pp. 74–75). I am not proposing that we should teach and/or encourage our students to meditate. However, as “peaceful warriors” in the classroom, our students 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?”

In another “metaphysical” journey, Dan becomes one with the universe and becomes “the pure light that physicists equate with all matter, and poets define as love...And it came to me that the highest purpose of the human body is to become a clear channel for this light...Then I knew 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 war-

rior” 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?” I think that 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” (pp. 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.

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 it is my sincere belief that the *effort* is worth it—our students *will* come away with more than they started; they *will* become a better student, even if it is in a very small way.

The meaning in this book goes far deeper than the words on the page. Some who read this book will read a story. However, Millman is writing beyond the story, and those who are so bothered after reading this book that they can’t look at a tree the same way, were truly ready for its lesson. But more importantly, the lesson it teaches our students is 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 *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, our students will become better, more active learners.

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