
Preface

I remember as if it were yesterday, the day my life changed forever. I was a kid from the streets of Los Angeles who was not supposed to live to see my 16th birthday, let alone achieve any level of personal success. I was engulfed in the gang life, living in constant threat and turmoil, with hate, bitterness, and so much pain. Growing weary of this life, I posed a simple question to the older homeboys, “Why are things the way they are for us?” Their answer was, “It is what it is.” After several months of wrestling with their response, the answer came to me clearly. You see, I realized that the answer isn’t simply, “It is what it is” but instead, “It is what it is . . . because someone made it that way.” That meant I could change things. This epiphany began the transformation of my life.

I went from a disengaged, standoffish, apathetic, disruptive student who seldom went to school to a young man who embraced education and recognized it as a source of empowerment that would help me change the world for the better. Never having known anyone who had graduated from high school made the journey a mysterious and scary process. But thanks to a handful of wonderful educators—from the custodian in elementary school who taught me I was not a monster, to my mentor, Dr. Wasson, who guided me through undergraduate studies and into graduate school—I learned the necessary skills to allow me to be successful in school. I felt like quitting many times. However, my momma’s words echoed through my mind, along with images of my homeboys who had lost their lives or were locked away in prison and the voices of the people who said I would never amount to anything in life. These all further strengthened what my momma called my belief muscle—the belief that through my efforts and struggles I could achieve the unimaginable for a kid like me, and it was my responsibility to not let this belief weaken.

During graduate school, I worked as an adjunct instructor at a community college and taught General Educational Development (GED) courses at a university. I was fortunate to then be offered a tenure-track faculty position. This allowed me a platform to teach courses, conduct research, and create programs through service. I was incredibly humbled to be awarded Honors Professor of the Year for my teaching and a National Human

and Civil Rights Award for a program I created that has served thousands of students considered at risk of dropping out of school. As I progressed as a faculty member, I came to a point where I wanted to further evolve and contribute to the success of professionals working with students and communities. I transitioned from my professorial role to working with universities, community colleges, high schools, and nonprofit organizations around the country. Through my pedagogy, I helped develop, assess, and restructure educational initiatives; created programming; conducted workshops; delivered keynotes; and trained educators, administrators, and others in my approach. I am extremely fortunate that I have had and continue to have opportunities to contribute to the success of so many institutions and organizations attempting to empower students.

This book is something that I created from a moral and professional obligation. I have experienced the hardships and challenges of being in the classroom as both a student and a teacher. I decided that instead of becoming cynical, I would create something new from the standpoint of a former dropout, researcher, and educator to assure that I could contribute further to the success of dedicated professionals and the students they serve. Although the foundations of this book took root in a GED program, they have evolved and been successful with thousands of higher education, K–12, and nonprofit professionals I have trained in using, applying, and modifying this approach. Others' implementation of the pedagogy in a plethora of classroom types and environments has contributed to the evolution of the approach to what it has become today, the focus of this book.¹

The Pedagogy of Real Talk was created for use either in its entirety or in conjunction with other approaches. Flexibility is essential, as teaching should not follow a rigid cookie-cutter approach. The pedagogy is built to provide a research-based foundation with applicable, practical tools for the reader to use according to his or her individual personality and style. Additionally, I wanted to provide a resource that supports the fact that relevancy, connections, and relationships with students matter when attempting to teach them. I view teaching as an art form that takes time to master. I have aimed to supply individuals with another tool to paint their masterpieces through the success of their students and fulfillment within their careers.

It is my hope that this book will support the beginnings of a paradigm shift in teaching and learning within our educational system. Teaching is not a method to control students, impose perspectives on them, or merely prepare them to pass a test. Teaching is the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning, one in which we offer students the opportunity

¹Although I most often refer to teachers, this is something that can be used by instructors, professors, or any other professional in a classroom with students.

to learn the necessary skills to pass tests, prepare for the workforce, and ensure that they have as many options as possible for their futures. Teaching needs to allow students to be heard and create an inviting space where students want to be instead of where they have to be. Teaching our students means getting to know them; otherwise, how can we possibly teach them? We are powerful educators who have the opportunity to empower lives.

I fully expect that through the brilliant minds who engage in this pedagogy, this approach will further evolve. Thank you to those who embrace or challenge it. I remember words of wisdom from my momma (translated from Spanish): “Remember that you will never reach the pinnacle. You will always grow and learn new things throughout the rest of your life. You will only stop growing when you stop caring.” Therefore, I leave you with *The Pedagogy of Real Talk*, an approach created to support all who care about our students and their future.