

## Teachers and Students as Co-Learners: Toward a Mutual Value Theory

reviewed by Jacqueline R. Stillsano – October 22, 2015

**Title:** Teachers and Students as Co-Learners: Toward a Mutual Value Theory  
**Author(s):** Dengting Boyanton  
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Dengting Boyanton, author of *Teachers and Students as Co-Learners: Toward a Mutual Value Theory*, experienced “extreme culture shock” when she left her native Chinese educational system to begin graduate study in education at the University of Virginia in 2003. Despite the fact that she had been an enthusiastic and successful learner in her home country, Boyanton often felt perplexed and disappointed regarding the behavior expected of her in U.S. classrooms. She was inhibited about speaking up in class, afraid to ask questions of her professors or classmates, and insecure about offering her opinions and comments. Boyanton’s international student colleagues, with whom she shared her feelings, reported experiencing the same negative emotions. When Boyanton began questioning American-born students about their classroom experiences—with the goal of helping herself and other international students adjust to American classroom culture—she discovered to her surprise that American students also felt alienated, invisible, and lonely in their classes. For example, one Caucasian male student told her, “Like most new students here, you feel lonely, nobody knows you, nobody talks to you, and nobody seems to care about you either” (p. xvii).

Intrigued by the differences she saw between Chinese and American educational cultures, Boyanton began studying political, social, and cultural issues in American education from the viewpoint of an outsider, observing in classrooms and interacting with students, colleagues, and professors. Positing that a lack of motivation and interest in schooling and learning was prevalent for American students and teachers alike, Boyanton began her dissertation studies in 2005 determined to identify factors that contribute to powerful learning in a classroom setting. Her research revealed that value in a classroom setting is a key element in motivation and high quality learning. Through numerous hours of observing student/teacher interactions in classrooms and studying the philosophies of notable education researchers and scholars, Boyanton subsequently developed what she titled the Mutual Value Theory of Learning. Since the development of this theory, Boyanton has successfully applied its precepts and methodology in her own classrooms as an assistant professor, first at University of Texas Brownsville and subsequently at Long Island University Post.

*Teachers and Students as Co-Learners* is written for undergraduate and graduate education majors, K-12 classroom instructors and administrators, as well as higher education faculty. Boyanton introduces her vision of a classroom climate in which all individuals feel empowered, confident, and motivated and in which powerful learning occurs. The book consists of two sections, offering a theoretical and a practical approach to the Mutual Value Theory.

Part One introduces the general philosophy and foundational concepts of Mutual Value Theory—value, authenticity, and powerfulness. In contrast to the traditional practice of *accepting* individuals of different backgrounds, race, or ethnicity, Boyanton’s theory calls for reciprocal classroom relationships in which teachers and students embrace, admire, and value each other. In short, she advocates for a community of respect in which “people want to appreciate each other rather than feel obliged to be nice to each other out of courtesy” (p. 31). Authenticity is a non-cognitive aspect of learning that can affect a student’s performance and learning to a greater extent, even, than instructional factors. When authenticity is present in the classroom, individuals feel so comfortable within the self that they can be honest, unaffected, and respectful toward others and empowered to perform tasks to their highest potential or ability. Finally, powerfulness refers to the level of an individual’s engagement in the classroom and/or learning experience. Unlike Fredericks, Blumenthal, and Paris (2004) who argue for behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement, Boyanton’s definition focuses on the cognitive aspect and includes presence, active listening, and higher-order thinking. For powerful learning to occur, a teacher must create both authenticity and powerfulness in the classroom.

Each chapter in Part Two is based primarily on Boyanton’s dissertation research, but examples from her own teaching and daily reflections are included. In this part, the author expands the central theme of the book as she focuses on four specific interactive types of value she believes are essential in creating powerful learning in the classroom and that comprise the Mutual Value Theory. These four values are applied to both teacher and student and are created in part as a result of teacher/student and student/student interactions.

The first three values—*self-value*, *perceived self-value*, and *other-value*—are critical in creating authenticity. Self-value in the classroom refers to a person’s general assessment of his or her present or future qualities and potential as a student or as a teacher. It impacts motivation, confidence in class participation, and willingness to put forth effort, among other aspects of an individual’s learning. Perceived self-value relates to an individual’s assessment of the extent to which the person is valued by others, and affects learning through its impact on individuals’ self-confidence and motivation. Other-value pertains to the value that an individual allocates to other people. In the classroom, this aspect includes student other-value for colleagues, student other-value for the teacher, and teacher other-value for students. Feeling value for others—both teacher and peers—can positively impact students’ behavior and motivation to learn.

Self-value, perceived self-value, and other-value form the foundation for *course-value*, which Boyanton believes is the most significant of the four values in terms of student learning, behavior, and motivation. Students with high course-value are more likely to exhibit positive emotions

toward course materials and the course itself, participate in class activities and put forth strong effort, as well as have high expectations and motivation for their course performance. If the four types of values are applied to both students and teachers, eight sub-values are created that constantly interact with, and are influenced by, each other.

Boyanton weaves personal anecdotes regarding her schooling in China, family and friends in China and the US, as well as personal and professional colleagues in both countries throughout the book. Her Chinese background and experiences comprise a large part of who she is as a scholar, an educator, and a person. The anecdotes that emerge, in many instances, embellish the tapestry of her educational philosophy and research interests. They also offer a unique perspective on the American education system through the eyes of someone who came to this country with a preconceived view of our education system as a model for other nations.

*Teachers and Students as Co-Learners: Toward a Mutual Value Theory* is a good introduction for readers who are interested in the relationship between cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of learning as well as creating a classroom environment in which all individuals feel appreciated and recognized for their unique qualities. Perhaps novice teachers and teacher candidates would be the most likely to appreciate this interesting piece of scholarship.

#### Reference

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