

ENHANCING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WITH TOUCH: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

By John Powers, Jr.

The following is from a half-day conference for Tucson-area teachers, administrators, nurses counselors and parents held August 11, 2002 titled "Enhancing the Learning Environment with Touch." In his presentation John Powers, Assistant Principal of a Tucson public high school (and later Principal of a Magnet School in Tucson where he used Bio-Touch in his daily work), outlines the compelling reasons for reintroducing safe, healthy touch, namely Bio-Touch, into the school system.

Current brain research indicates that creating an optimal learning environment enhances student learning and leads to measurable increases in student achievement. There are well-documented links to infant and child development and the importance of touch in establishing rapport and security. The need for touch does not go away as we get older. However, the complications of appropriate touch often along with cultural variables make many in education reluctant to engage in what they may consider "risky" behavior.

Bio-Touch is a process that can ease touch back into the educational environment. By providing a simple, safe and non-intrusive technique, Bio-Touch allows this natural human impulse to have expression in an appropriate way. In addition, this process is available to children and adults alike and empowers them with a feeling of efficacy and well-being. With these things in mind, I would like to briefly outline the impact that I believe Bio-Touch can and will have on our students and ourselves [educators].

I have been an educator for over 25 years and in that time I have seen many challenges and purported remedies for those challenges. We are not here to make wild claims for this process. I will offer my views later as to the impact I see Bio-Touch making in the school environment. But first, I want to share with you how I personally became involved with the process as well as the many wonderful people who make Bio-Touch a growing reality in Tucson as well as in other places.

As an educator, I was always interested in maximizing the learning of my students and I have studied many approaches to learning. Theories such as learning styles, multiple intelligences and brain based learning have captivated me with their potential to help educators address every learner in ways that will give students the power to harness their minds for the tasks that may await them in life. I was always struck by several aspects of the research I did, as well as a personal conundrum.

The personal conundrum is that nearly all children learn two of the most difficult tasks without a formal learning theory or professional educators' intervention. Those two tasks are walking and talking. In each case, a very small, vulnerable, developing child successfully negotiates with his/her environment to master these tasks to an enormous degree. What they require, besides their own assertiveness and desire, is a supportive human environment that is virtually full of touch.

The research on various learning theories indicates that bodily, kinesthetic learning is largely ignored as students' progress up the educational ladder. A large exception is the area of sports and fine arts as well as some vocational areas such as auto, wood shop, welding and photography. However, the "core" of our curriculum is concentrated in four areas that are essentially passive intellectual activities with very little opportunity for the use of the touching sense.

The famous anthropologist, Ashley Montague stated that many mothers in the animal world must do extensive touching of the newborn or very negative consequences could result. The mother may reject the newborn as not hers. The newborn could actually die from the lack of stimulation it does not receive from its mother.

I have become convinced that each of our senses is a gateway to expanding our exploration of the world around us. This especially applies to the relationships we have with others. I first experienced Bio-Touch at a health and wellness fair where a former teaching colleague of mine invited me to try it. I was skeptical, especially since she was selling the instructional video and instruction booklets. Though they were reasonably priced (even for a cheapskate like me!), I declined to buy and told her I might check it out at a later date.

Three months later, I came to the Bio-Touch Center for a session due to some pain in my legs and arm. I was amazed at the state of mind this process produced in me. I was further amazed that the session cost me nothing (remember, I was and still am a cheapskate). I started inquiring into the organization and the process. I attended an Open House [Ed. Note: which was also free] and decided to do the training and the internship for certification. I was amazed at the people who came and the stories they related about their experiences with Bio-Touch.

Something started to click in my mind as I went through the training and internship. I believe that we are often imprisoned by a lack of opportunity to express ourselves kinesthetically. As our society is becoming more "touch phobic" we are facing increasing and more intense violent behavior. Of course, we can blame video games, TV, the movies and rap music, but the fact that several of my colleagues are

afraid to be left in their offices or class rooms alone with a female student for fear of being accused of something inappropriate says a lot about the state of affairs in education and society at large. Another colleague tells me that “hugging is a no-no” and that “touchy feely stuff has no place in education.”

I do not share those views and see them as proof positive of the sorry state of affairs in education. It is amazing that students from grades one to three appear to do relatively equally in school regardless of academic background, social, economic status or ethnicity. It’s strange that as education becomes more impersonal, differences become more pronounced. Those primary teachers are often like second mothers to their students, but then the path of the educational ladder takes students closer and closer to the college environment that is more distant and foreboding. Nurturing is not high on the agenda of most college campuses.

If you talk to students and listen to them talk about their best teachers, they will invariably say that those teachers “touched” them in some way. It may not have been physical, but a connection was made. In these times in which both parents are breadwinners and the number of single parent households continues to rise, schools often represent the greatest potential influence in a child’s life. I believe that the people in schools must reach out and touch their students to help them surmount the difficult challenges they face, now as well as in the future. Bio-Touch is a way to break down barriers and show students, faculty, staff and parents that school is a caring place for all its members. As an old Diana Ross song puts it: “Reach out and touch somebody’s hand, make this world a better place if you can.”

Even beyond what Bio-Touch can and will do for students, it has great implications for teachers as well. The best teachers are those who remain students throughout their educational careers. I believe that Bio-Touch can help relieve stress and give a sense of calm contemplation to the challenging mental and physical states the current educational environments produce.

Impact on the brain

A. Preliminary research has suggested that Bio-Touch may help quiet certain types of brain activity while the recipient is also very alert. There is potential in working with students with ADD and ADHD.

B. Bio-Touch promotes a calming affect which would be extremely helpful with students who are touching inappropriately or suffer from emotional trauma.

C. Multi-modal connections are powerful stimuli to the brain.

Impact on faculty and staff

A. Faculty and staff members can counteract a great deal of job related stress through the use of Bio-Touch on each other.

B. Bio-Touch helps build rapport between the teacher and student as well as with other colleagues and staff members.

C. Bio-Touch allows for reflective time in a supportive way considering the often stressful nature of the school environment.

Impact of learning Bio-Touch

A. Research on the readiness to learn indicate that emotional security is necessary for students to maximize their learning potential.

B. Bio-Touch is simple, easy to administer and makes each person who learns a successful learner. This empowerment establishes efficacy that can be used to move to other areas of inquiry.

C. Bio-Touch is an excellent example of cooperative learning.

D. Bio-Touch demonstrates resiliency – the power to meet uncomfortable circumstances and emerge in a positive state of mind.

E. Bio-Touch lends itself to developing sensitivity and self-knowledge.

F. As we move toward the greater use of technology in education, Bio-Touch will become even more valuable to making connections with students.

Impact on the school community

A. Bio-Touch is a technique that students can take home to use with their siblings and parents

B. Parents can use this technique as a means of bonding with their child as well as empowering their child.

C. Students from higher grades could be used to train students at lower grades as a means of articulation.

D. Bio-Touch will offer opportunities for students throughout the larger community through community service.

With these impacts Bio-Touch is a natural extension of the kind of learning that is integrative, dynamic and interactive on a small and large scale.

Expected Positive Results

- A. Reduction of anxiety, anger and disruptions in classrooms.
- B. Greater interaction between students, teacher, and parents.
- C. Greater self-discipline and empowerment of student and staff.
- D. Increased opportunities for articulation with feeder school pattern.
- E. Improved opportunities to address stress related issues in school.

Where can we go from here?

- A. Form study groups that can receive credit toward salary increment.
- B. Set up research projects to test Bio-Touch's efficacy.
- C. Integrate Bio-Touch into some of your curriculum.
- D. Set up individual projects for students.
- E. Set up stress relief using Bio-Touch with faculty and staff.

We hope to spur interest in setting up some small research sampling in school settings. This will supplement intensive research already being done at the University of Arizona. Please join us in this effort of bringing awareness of this simple technique to your school community. The major investments are a small amount of time and a great amount of care. These resources are available to us – it only requires our will and commitment to begin to reap the benefits that Bio-Touch can bring.

COMMENTS AFTER THE WORKSHOP FROM TEACHERS:

"I see Bio-Touch being implemented in drop-out prevention, learning disabilities and anger management."

"It's hard to shoot someone you've touch!"

"Students could feel empowered by providing healing touch for family members and other students."