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From Survival to Self-Actualization: Reflections on Teaching and Teacher Education

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As a college student in the early 60s, I actively resisted the idea of teaching. However, my father, who was paying all the bills, insisted that I take a few education courses as “insurance.” After graduation, when my summer job at a soft-serve ice cream place was about to end, he reminded me that I was expected to pay room and board. So I quickly scrambled in late August to find a “real” job. There were not many options for liberal arts graduates other than teaching, but teachers were in such short supply that it was easy for any “warm body” to get hired—even without any student teaching. The superintendent didn’t even see any problem in hiring me, with a B.A. in history and government, to teach high school English.

I now see that the historical context had a great deal to do with my career choice. At the time I entered the workplace, women, who weren’t at home raising children, typically became secretaries, nurses, or teachers. Given that some of my female friends had to enroll at schools like Katherine Gibbs after graduation to learn the practical office skills needed to get jobs as secretaries, teaching seemed very desirable: higher status, no additional training required. Though I may describe myself as an “accidental teacher,” the truth is that my career was in large measure determined by the context of that time.

Young women, who have many options today, must want to teach, and, unlike me, they must be prepared to do so. Higher standards for beginning teachers and fewer jobs have made teaching as a career more competitive. As any experienced teacher knows, however, there is no way one can be fully prepared for dealing with the complexities of teaching. Translating theory into classroom practice is a challenge in any context—there are some important aspects of teaching that can be learned only through painful experience. It helps, though, to have someone point the way. By reflecting on my own professional life, I have learned new ways to understand my own circuitous—and largely accidental—development and how to more effectively work with students who are preparing to teach.

The Long Journey from Recipe Collecting to Reflective Practice: Stages of Development

Despite the fact that teaching will never be “easy,” I have drawn on my own experience and worked very hard to find ways to make the entry into teaching easier for my students. My first year of teaching was truly “the year from hell.” I was given class lists and stacks of books but no advice from veteran teachers, who believed that a “wait-and-see, sink-or-swim” approach was the best way to initiate new teachers into the profession. Then, there were the students in my general English classes, who had their own ideas about initiating novice teachers. Because my own high school classes had been rigidly tracked, I had never known that kids like these existed. My students didn’t even pretend to play the school game, and some were almost as old as I was. One boy in my homeroom, who had his own apartment, asked me to personally deliver his report card. Several others suggested that bringing in six-packs would help to quell the chaos in the large study hall I had to supervise in the gym.

With no model for teaching English other than the one my teachers had used, I conducted classes like those I had experienced: endless grammar exercises, spelling tests, reading assignments in the literature anthologies, and weekly essays, which I dutifully spent hours editing and returned to students, who checked the grades and then slid them into their notebook clutter or crumpled them into balls and aimed for the wastebasket.

Of course, many students were not motivated to do homework assignments so there were many failing grades. And regularly there were also serious classroom disruptions which I tried to handle—at first by giving detentions and later by sending the offenders to the principal’s office. Nothing worked. The principal, formerly a football coach and business law teacher, apparently didn’t or couldn’t help me see why I was failing as a teacher.

After a very long and painful year, in June I happily packed my VW bug and headed to California, resolving never ever to teach again. But, once again, I discovered that teaching was still the most easily accessible career for a lib-

eral arts graduate. This time, though, I was lucky to get a job in a large junior high school in Southern California teaching “core” (double-period classes which combined English and social studies).

Pasadena, proud of its reputation then as one of the leading school districts in the country, provided me with all the support I needed to learn to teach. The curriculum supervisor in my school, a wise and encouraging older woman, who worked hard with grade-level teams to develop a unified English-social studies curriculum and assessment program, became my mentor. She visited my classes, gave me much needed feedback, and invited me to participate in a summer project to write a guide for teaching slow learners. Even though I was paid as a regular teacher, that first year in Pasadena was like an internship.

Once I had learned the basics of teaching, I began to take some risks to be more creative. I found interesting ways for students to do book reports, e.g. mock trials. I developed a more meaningful year-long current events project, “The Ambassadors’ Report,” which required each student to serve as the “ambassador” for a specific country, collect news items, and report on its status every six weeks. After another teacher told me about the National Council of Teachers of English, I pounced on every issue of *English Journal* as soon as it came, looking for even more clever ways to engage students. The kids enjoyed my classes, and I felt good about my teaching.

I thought then that I had arrived as a teacher, but now I know I had only passed from Stage 1, Confusion, Chaos, and Survival—Theory Discounted, to Stage 2, Coping and Recipe Collecting—Theory Ignored or Denigrated, (Dodd, 1994). The recipes I tried out—suggestions gleaned from reading *English Journal* and practices I discovered accidentally—were creating the base from which I would later develop my own theories about teaching. When I had my students write journals, for the first time I began to see my classroom from their perspectives and found that they had their own “voices” (though at the time I didn’t know that term for their authentic writing). Reading the journals was much more enjoyable than suffering

through the stiffly-worded essays I was required to assign, and I began to use their feedback to make small changes in my classes. To make the mythology unit more interesting for my thirty^gth graders (a mix of students with learning and behavior problems and others who had just arrived in the United States from Cuba and Indonesia—Special Ed and ESL classes were still in the future), I asked students to write their own myths. After I typed all of the myths on dittos and made copies for everyone, the students designed their own covers for the booklets. They were thrilled with the result and kept asking me to type all of their writing and make copies for them. I had seen the power of what we now call the “publishing” step in the writing process, but for me then it was just another clever idea to engage students.

When I moved back to Maine in the late '60s, I was unable to find a teaching job. The small-town superintendent, ignoring the fact that I hadn't been in an elementary school since I was a student, focused on my master's degree (in English this time) and hired me as the elementary supervisor for nine schools in seven towns. Visiting some of these schools was like taking a trip back in history: one of them contained all eight grades in two rooms. This position did give me some time and motivation to write. Thinking that I perhaps could convince teachers to try new methods, I submitted several articles on student-centered teaching practices to various publications. More valuable than the first check I received for something I had written, though, was another understanding I gained about the writing process. For the very first time that I could remember, I wrote because I had something to say—no assigned topic, no deadline.

When I returned to high school teaching the next year, I no longer taught as I had been taught. I still hadn't figured out how to put all my new but random understandings together, but I had moved to Stage 3, Trusting the Experts—Theory Borrowing (Dodd, 1994). I eagerly continued to collect recipes, but I was more selective because I had begun to ask myself why some practices worked better than others. I adapted the skills for interviewing clients I learned in a course called “Introduction to Counseling” for

use in conferences with my students about their writing. In workshops I attended on T-groups and values clarification, which were in vogue in the early '70s, I gained the background for teaching students how to work effectively in small groups to help each other improve their writing. Most important, people were now talking and writing about teaching writing. From reading Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1968) and Ken Macrorie's *Uptaught* (1970), I began to see how all the pieces fit together to form a coherent theory that later came to be known as the process approach to teaching writing. Because I came to teaching English too early, it took me years to figure out for myself what teachers can now get in a one- or two-week National Writing Project summer session.

Changes in schools in the early '70s also fostered my developing ideas. When the English electives replaced year-long courses, I volunteered to teach both creative and expository writing courses. And I experimented, establishing minimum requirements and final due dates but giving students in a couple of courses an almost unlimited amount of freedom to choose their own topics, genres, and deadlines. I tried contract grades in the creative writing courses. At the end of each course I asked students for feedback and put what they had to say together with problems I had observed to make changes for the next course. The biggest dilemma was finding the fine balance between teacher control and student freedom. In the end I moved toward more structure than others, such as Ken Macrorie, for example, would recommend, because my high school students simply weren't mature or motivated enough to always make the best choices on their own.

Over time and after having taught writing in three high schools, I can now see that I had moved from Stage 4, Questioning the Experts—Theory Building, to Stage 5, Self-Actualization—Theory Refined and Integrated with Reflective Practice (Dodd, 1994). My classes were student-centered writing workshops. They incorporated all the elements people now see as essential for effective writing programs: students select their own topics, write extensively in journals and in a variety of forms, address audiences other than the teacher as critic, revise and later edit

their drafts, share their writing with peers, conference with the teacher, publish what they write, and come to see themselves and their teacher as writers.

Thanks to many books, articles, workshops, and conferences, my student teachers today can learn about teaching writing much more quickly and more easily than I did. Yet just having information about effective teaching does not make one an effective teacher. Each teacher must internalize essential understandings about teaching over time and in her own way. By examining my own development as a teacher, I have come to believe that the key to self-actualized teaching is reflection on practice. Reflective thinking is important because, as Dewey (1916) notes, experience is not always educative. The ideal of growth requires thinking of education as “a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. ...Reconstruction of experience adds to its meaning and leads to increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities in which we are engaged” (76–77). Schon (1987) points out that what one learns in the process of reflection creates new objects of possible reflection. Thus, my goal is to help my students learn—sooner than I did—why they should strive to develop reflective thinking as a habit of mind.

Essential Questions for Future Teachers

Just as I had to move through several developmental stages, so, too, will my student teachers. At first, their concern will be survival and then they will likely look for recipes. My job is to help them move beyond these immediate concerns to considering their choices in a larger context. I discourage them from collecting recipes unless they always ask: How, what, and why might this practice help students learn? There are other also questions that help student teachers learn to view planning and teaching in a more purposeful way so that, rather than filling up class time with assignments and activities and concerning themselves with covering the curriculum, they actually think about what they want students to learn and why. The first questions invite them to look more critically at their own experiences as students.

- What is your mental model of a classroom and teacher-student interaction?

I ask students to close their eyes and look at the mental image they get when I say “classroom.” For almost all of them the image is a traditional class with desks in rows and the teacher standing at the front of the class. We discuss the possible origins of these images and how they may affect what they do as student teachers. For example, if their images reflect an authoritarian model of the teacher, then they need to realize that this may be their “default setting” when they run into difficulties with students. When they suddenly have to deal with a disruptive student or class, they are likely to resort to punishment and threats instead of using a more productive problem-solving approach. By understanding that they do have a default setting which may prevent them from choosing more effective means of dealing with an unexpected situation, they are more likely to make better decisions on the spot.

I ask students the questions that follow after a general discussion about the definitions of *learning* and *teaching* and often refer back to these discussions when I am working with individual student teachers on their problems or plans. The list is not exhaustive, but, over time, I have come to believe these are key questions to address.

- When did you have a difficult time learning something?

We share these stories and try to list all of the characteristics that made the tasks so difficult for them, such seeing no point to learning whatever it was, thinking they weren’t capable of learning it (maybe math phobia), or being so afraid of making mistakes they didn’t even want to try.

- When did you get so involved with a school assignment, project, or topic that you did more than the teacher required or maybe a great deal of time passed while you were working on it and you didn’t even realize it?

As with the previous question, we share stories and make a list of characteristics. As one might expect, students often mention projects they chose, ones that had personal meaning for them. Sometimes they received public recog-

nition for their work—just why savvy English teachers have students write for real audiences and find ways to publish student writing. Of course, the point of examining both of these questions is for students to apply what they know from their own experiences as students to designing more meaningful activities for the students they teach. The group lists we create are later used for reflecting on their own lesson plans.

- What is the difference between an activity that is *entertaining* and one that's *engaging*?

The purpose of this question is to move them away from looking for recipes towards more purposeful planning. Games and activities that are fun for students may keep students happy and involved but not lead to any important learning. The real key is finding ways to *engage* students in meaningful learning by making learning relevant to their own lives or giving them some choice about what or how they learn.

- Can you say you have “taught” something if you have no evidence that students have learned it?

This question usually surprises students because we have come to use the word *teaching* to refer to what the teacher does, i.e. covering the material, but *teaching* suggests learning. When we discuss their responses, they begin to think about teaching in terms of results. Effective teachers don't only look at what they do; they are even more concerned about what students are able to do. If students haven't grasped a concept or skill, teacher need to reflect on the situation and try to figure out why and what they might do to address the problem. Student teachers can learn to go beyond merely correcting student work to more thoughtfully examining and understanding what students have done.

- How might or does this lesson, problem, or situation look from the perspective of someone else (student, parent, principal, colleague)?

I have come to believe this is the most important question of all. Often the key to solving even the most difficult problem can be found if we think about how someone else might view the situation. And, to do this, we usually need

more information. For example, by getting individual feedback from students in the form of freewrites or learning logs, teachers can begin to see how students are experiencing class activities or whether they understand or misunderstand a novel they are reading. Over time the student teacher will get a better sense of who their students are and how they are likely to respond to particular assignments or teaching methods. With this knowledge they can create more effective lesson and unit plans.

This question is even more useful for solving “people” problems—with a motivated and perhaps disruptive student, an angry parent, a difficult colleague or supervisor. In practice it means the student teacher needs first to listen to the other person. For example, when a student comes late to class, the teacher (in a non-confrontational way) asks why. The automatic response of some teachers to immediately assign detention may not solve the problem—and it prevents them from knowing what the problem really is. If a student is late because she was hiding in the bathroom to avoid being harassed at her locker by an older girl, then detention would make the situation worse, not better. If this were the case, then a better strategy would be to help the student find a way to solve her problem so that she could get to class on time.

Our perception of events and other people's actions are usually based on our own—often, incorrect—assumptions. If we try to imagine how the other person may see things, we would be less likely to take offense. For instance, what seems to teachers like a request from the principal for unnecessary, time-consuming paperwork may look quite sensible when considered from the principal's perspective. Even if teachers don't like having to do the extra work, they will reduce their own stress levels by accepting the task as one that has to be done.

All of these questions help student teachers begin to think about teaching in more productive and purposeful ways. By reflecting on their own experiences and the perspectives of others, they can begin to see how the insights they gain from the process can help them both improve their practice and interpersonal relationships. Gradually my hope is that my student

teachers will move—but sooner than I did—from recipe-collecting to self-actualization and reflective practice.

Conclusion

To become confident, self-actualized teachers, my student teachers have to see the importance of being lifelong students of teaching. There is no “right” answer, no “right” way to teach. What works well one time with one group of students may not work at all another time with a different group. As they try to make sense of contradictions and complexities in their own classes, they must use many different lenses to “see” what might be there. They must be comfortable dealing with loose ends, questions, tentative answers, and further questions. But, as they engage in reflective practice, they will gradually gain a greater understanding of and skills to create a classroom environment that fosters student learning, and they will also model for students a process for living in a world where change is the only constant.

I try to prepare my students for the “real world” by sharing my stories and asking them to reflect on and share theirs. As students, they need to see how they can learn from experience. In fact, I often say, “A classroom disaster is really an opportunity for learning something we probably wouldn’t learn any other way.” As future teachers, they need to know that, no matter how well prepared they think they are, that first year of teaching will probably be one of “confusion, chaos, and survival.” Although I hope that, unlike the veteran teachers in the school where I began my career, the colleagues in their first schools will give them the personal and professional support they need to learn and grow. It is no secret that, without such support, many potentially great teachers leave the profession before they find out how good they can be. Of course, most of my student teachers will probably not work in ideal schools. Thus, my goal is to prepare them to cope in less-than-ideal situations by helping them to learn a way of thinking about teaching, which begins with critically examining their own experiences. And, equally important, by sharing and using what I have learned from reflecting on my own career, I want my students to believe that a journey over the roughest road can eventually lead

to a wonderful place.

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