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Teacher's Experience

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Breaking Free of the Puppeteer: Perspectives on One Practice Teacher's Experience

Lynn Rotanz

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I am no closer to knowing how to teach now than I was before I started practice teaching. I know who I am as a teacher only in contrast to who I know I will not be.

This excerpt from an entry in my journal, written two weeks after I completed a semester as a secondary English teacher-intern, displays the confusion created in my mind by a situation mostly beyond my control. Time has helped me understand that I learned valuable lessons about my identity during my practicum, but they were lessons learned the hard way. Those months were my introduction to the detrimental effects of pretending to be someone I'm not in the classroom. I experienced a range of other struggles as well, from classroom management difficulties to failed attempts to implement a writing workshop. Looking back, it's difficult to believe that ten weeks could so dramatically affect my outlook on the teaching profession and on myself as a teacher.

Research Methods

I found my way through data by immersing myself in it. . . letting it lead me, rather than imposing a predetermined, standard analytical scheme. (Bissex, 1996, p. 28)

My university courses and independent work with two professors formed my background in ethnography and teacher research. I knew that the practice teaching semester would be a significant time in my development as a teacher. Likewise, I knew that this experience would be a valuable source of data; since I was going to be immersed in it, I decided to record and study its effects on me.

I began actively reflecting on my experience and my reactions to it in the form of a dialogue journal with a professor/mentor, a process that we continued throughout my practicum semester. While we did not limit acceptable topics for entries, I began by concentrating on this focusing question provided by my mentor: how do you see yourself in the process of learning to teach? This broad question was designed to help me focus on myself as a subject; as time passed and I became more comfortable with the journal writing, I used the journal as a place to record

any and all concerns. While some passages seem to be mere venting of frustration, many others, when examined, chronicle my development as a teacher.

I confess that, for the first two weeks of practice teaching when life seemed to be one all-consuming lesson plan, I resented the time needed for writing in my dialogue journal. Initial entries are less reflective, more forced, but even the short statements about what happened each day serve to remind me not only of specific events but also of my state of mind at the time. Had these moments not been recorded, I would have lost them forever in a haze of fragmented feelings.

Once I received feedback, I realized that I was desperate to tell someone what I was doing and feeling each day. I began to anticipate my nightly journal time with eagerness, and writing helped me to put into perspective some tense and trying times. I also decided that I will never teach without keeping a journal; the nature of teaching creates fragmented days, and it is impossible to keep track of the day's events to fully examine them if nothing is recorded.

The Puppet Show: Scenes from My Practice Teaching Semester

I remember the afternoon that I first realized practice teaching might be the worst of times without the best of times to even the scales. I was assigned to a wonderful teacher whose methods and philosophy matched my own, until the day two weeks before full-time teaching when I was transferred to another teacher's classroom. I was informed about a widespread policy that does not allow practice teachers to take over classes culminating in a state exam. I felt a lack of control over this that for me became symbolic of "my" classroom for the remainder of my experience.

Act I: Losing Lynn

"Hope you have a reasonable class so you would be more of yourself.. .Keep it real!"

Tawana's advice, contained in her farewell card, surprised me. She was the student who used her popularity (and loud voice) to help me maintain control of the class, but I had not recognized her accurate perception of my struggle to suppress my own identity according to the

instructions of my partnership teacher.

From the beginning, my partnership teacher, whom I will call Mary, made it clear that my natural personality was not consistent with that of a "real teacher." She told me after my first week that I was being "too approachable" in laughing with the students or speaking less formally. (While this was acceptable with a single student, she said it would cause discipline problems in front of the class.) Using humor is the way I alleviate my own nervousness and create a comfortable classroom atmosphere. It came naturally to me to bond with students using anecdotes from my own life as well as theirs, but Mary told me this was too personal and the students would take advantage of me.

I ask myself now why I put so much faith in Mary's opinion, but the nature of her role as cooperating teacher made me see her as all-knowing. I trusted her judgment and experience; as a new teacher I had little confidence in my own instincts.

By the time I thought to question Mary's "advice," I had already alienated some of the students by pretending to be the dictator I'm not. I strictly enforced rules that I could not rationalize to students because they were not my own, and they reacted as younger children do when told "Do it because I say so." I spent much of my time convincing them to spit out gum or put away closed drink containers, procedures I found as insignificant as they did.

I also had to pretend to support lenient grading policies and decontextualized assignments even as I doubted their effectiveness. Mary's policy allowed students the freedom to do nothing until the week before report cards went out without penalty; as long as work was turned in eventually it was given a perfect grade. Students liked this policy until the end of the quarter when they rebelled against having to complete the assigned worksheets at all. The first time I faced the complaining crowd, I wanted to say "I agree with you. The assignments I'm forced to give you are no longer useful, and the grading system is unfair." What I did, instead, was put on my strict teacher face (in imitation of Mary) and explained the poli-

cies again. When homework assignments and exams are not connected to the classwork and to their lives, students do not see them as important. While I knew this, my hands were tied as I was not allowed to make my own rules or procedures.

In *Partial Truths*, Glenda Bissex writes, “there are no generic teachers, only individual teachers—I could not become a teacher, but rather the particular teacher I could become, given who I was” (1996, p. 8). During my internship, my inability to develop my self as a teacher was of great concern to me. I thought I lacked the experience needed to ever become the teacher I want to be, and it is true that I did not advance toward that goal as much as I had hoped to. However, I learned some valuable lessons about the identity of a teacher. I realized that students know when you’re saying something you don’t mean—I will never again make rules I don’t believe in or lie to students to get them to perform. I know also that I can never be the aloof, authoritarian teacher I was forced to impersonate, that in order to be true to the students I must be true to my own identity and convictions.

Act II: The Quest for Authority

March 6, 1997

“So many things tell me I’m not the ‘real’ teacher—I’m allowed to make decisions only when my choices agree with Mary’s.”

There are university classes that teach interns how to avoid power struggles with students, but none sufficiently address those that arise between student teachers and the experienced mentors who accept us into their classrooms. As the above journal excerpt suggests, my days were a constant struggle to assume some authority over the students and my situation.

Mary’s control went beyond my own personality modification to more specific pedagogical cases. Often, I planned innovative lessons that were approved, but I question whether Mary read them carefully. I would discover her opinion when she would reprimand me in front of the students as she wandered into the classroom. When I would begin to assign group work or address a project I had designed, she would interrupt with “Ms. Rotanz, there’s a better way

to do that—why don’t you think about it some more and do something else now.” Not only was I forced to revise lessons in progress, but the students also came to know that I was not in control of planning. One of my classes reacted with sympathy; the others seemed to see an opportunity to take advantage of my lack of control.

At other times, Mary’s control over the classroom was less obvious but just as intrusive. On many occasions she would pass notes to me from the back of the room regarding something I should say or do differently. One day, when it became obvious that many of my juniors had not read *The Scarlet Letter* for homework, she instructed me to give a quiz and even imposed a two-minute time limit. Most of the students failed, including those who could honestly tell me that they had completed the reading. I expected this result; many did not understand the novel without class discussion. Still, here was a zero averaged in to almost every student’s grade, and they blamed me for the unexpected evaluation since they did not know Mary was pulling the strings. This was a catch-22: if I wanted to appear in control, I had to pretend these were my choices. Even if I wanted the students to know the truth, I could find no way to tell them short of rudely announcing it and involving them in my conflict with Mary. Asking Mary for feedback beforehand did not alleviate the problem since she usually advised me to do whatever I wanted assuming it would match what she wanted.

As the frequency of these incidents increased (and Mary’s confidence in me decreased), I learned to pretend that I did not see the notes as she brought them forward. It seemed pathetic at the time, but this was my only way of seizing any control over my own situation.

As time progressed, I even began to see some of my discipline problems arising from my inability to be myself in the classroom. I reached this conclusion in one journal entry:

“Kids have to know I’m a real person in order to care about what the teacher says.” I understand that all teachers revise lessons in progress and all must deal with some discipline problems, and I did not expect my experience to

be different. However, my background in teacher research was my framework for thinking about ways to modify my teaching; I wanted the freedom to reflect on my behavior and that of the students. I wanted to implement changes based on the conclusions I reached. This was my most frustrating struggle—I was not allowed the opportunity and authority to think for myself and make these decisions; instead I felt controlled in Mary's classroom.

I interpreted some of the above incidents as misguided help at first, but combined with some of Mary's other actions, I found it difficult to ignore her behaviors which undermined my authority as well as my self-concept and identity as a teacher. For instance, when I accidentally threw away an absence note, I was forced to go through the garbage can in front of the students to find it because Mary wanted to verify its legitimacy. The note turned out to be genuine, but my self-concept and authority were damaged because the students watched the humiliating event. I don't know if it was Mary's intention to embarrass me, but I felt that my authority could have been spared if she had asked me to search for the note after class. At such times, I was certain that Mary did not respect me either as a teacher or as a person.

Act III: Voiceless Teacher, Voiceless Writers
February 22, 1997

"I must have been under some delusion that I'd be able to put into practice all of these great theoretical ideas....Practice teaching has me using methods I don't believe in.

In addition to my conflicts with Mary, I also was frustrated when attempting to put theory into practice. The above journal excerpt is one of the most pessimistic, but I often felt removed from the university where I had learned progressive methods and began to believe in the benefits of student-centered classrooms.

For instance, I hold a strong belief in the importance of the writing process and workshop atmosphere, but I saw little opportunity to implement these lessons. In my own classroom I would have created this part of the curriculum in September; when taking over Mary's classes in February, I was unable to do so.

I felt trapped in a culture where I was told that my ideas did not work in the "real world" of teaching, that I would soon see how my university methods courses had failed to adequately prepare me for such a "reality." My students hated writing, and so did the other teachers, but no one appeared interested in hearing different approaches to writing in the classroom. In essence, I was as voiceless as my students were.

I was supposed to devote as little class time as possible to the research papers, so students did the writing at home alone. This in itself troubled me, since I believed that students would benefit from working in groups to draft and critique each others' work. Revision was a concept foreign to Mary and the students, and her expectations of their writing abilities were so low that she went so far as to condone plagiarism "as long as they got the paper done."

One specific lesson plan of mine included 20 minutes at the end of class for students to respond to others' drafts. Mary told me to modify it because "they wouldn't have their drafts anyway" and "they just waste time—use class time for something they'll do." I was not naive enough to think this would work well the first time since students had no experience, but Mary squelched my excitement about discovering how they would react and working to improve their skills.

Every one of my students had difficulty completing the research paper according to Mary's form. When I pointed out that even the seniors with years of experience had no idea what to do, Mary admitted that she doesn't know why we have to teach writing at all, but that it was our responsibility to "cover the curriculum." "Covering the curriculum" was a term she used to justify everything from teaching decontextualized grammar lessons to skipping discussions on most literature selections because they would take too much time.

The teaching of writing was not the only area in which my expectations conflicted with reality. While I was allowed to create some exams, I was advised to believe in the power of the multiple-choice test. As someone who visualized rubrics and essay exams, I found the

literal level questions I had to choose from greatly disappointing. I tried to include higher-order thinking skills when creating projects, but the students rebelled and Mary supported their arguments against the necessity of such “extra work.” My rationales for approaches and assignments were unacceptable; when I explained my reasons I was often told that “this is not the way real teachers do it.” I did not begin practice teaching with the assumption that I could change the practices of the experienced teachers, but I expected to be allowed to try on my own, and to fail, if necessary. Instead, I was treated as a puppet who followed unexplained procedures for learning that I did not agree with.

Act IV: Abandoning the Lesson Plan

March 15, 1997

“I abandoned my lesson plan in favor of a seminar discussion. For the first time, students realized we could talk about more than the plot... I felt like this is what teaching is all about.”

Despite the daily challenge to break free from my puppeteer, I had moments in the classroom that reinforced my desire to teach.

During the week that Mary was sick with the flu, I was able to be myself and try some “forbidden” activities. Without my fear of her reaction or interference, I felt freer. In this rare state of control in Mary’s absence, I did some things that made me feel more in control. For instance, on the second day of her absence I spent my free period erasing her writing on the boards and rewriting everything myself. This made me feel like I owned the classroom, like I was the real teacher in a way that planning a lesson that she would revise could never do. When, toward the end of that week, a student named Rebecca complained, “Ms. Rotanz, you’ve been giving us work like all of our other teachers,” this comparison to the real teachers at the school made me thank her and not apologize as she had assumed I would.

I will always remember one *Jane Eyre* discussion that would never have taken place with Mary in the room. My lesson plan had required students to read the final part of the novel and create discussion questions on an assigned chapter. As the first few students asked the class their questions, it became obvious that most had

focused on literal level details. Some were reading the chapter during the “discussion” and creating their questions out of context without having finished the novel; others had completed the reading but did not appear to understand it.

For the first time, I abandoned my lesson plan and began what was the only real, student-centered discussion I recall having in any of my classes. I was able to relate many of the major themes to the students in ways they could understand and respond to: we discussed treatment of the insane then and now, debated whether lying to a loved one can ever be condoned, and evaluated Rochester’s sense of responsibility. After my first few questions and examples, the students took over the discussion, switching from personal to novel-related details and directing their comments to one another instead of to me. In writing about this hour, I can feel all over again the excitement that prompted me to write in my journal that “this is what teaching is all about.” In teaching this lesson, I understood why teachers would continue to get up in the morning, and I saw reader-response theory at work. It also prompted this realization about real student-centered classrooms:

It took me a long time to shift my concentration from the six-point lesson plan to the students themselves... Giving the students some control means taking it away from those six steps that I have so carefully devised.... In the beginning, I obeyed the lesson plan; these days I obey my instincts.

Up to this point, I had assumed that a well-planned lesson would create the atmosphere that I wanted; that day I learned my own lesson about what it means to say that the students are the most important people in the classroom. Without knowing it, I had fallen into the teacher-directed pattern of discourse that Mary modeled for me. I was not prepared for my confusion or the fear that allowing the students some freedom and responsibility would bring. Contrary to popular belief, I found it more difficult to facilitate such a discussion: I had to think on my feet, controlled by the ever-present fear that I would ask or say something to kill the excit-

ing discussion. Nevertheless, I found the engagement of the students more than enough compensation for my extra effort.

After the Puppet Show: Perspectives, Implications, and the Writing Process

“What I need is perspective....depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface....Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground. Otherwise you live only in the moment” (Atwood, 1985, p. 143).

So what happens to a practice teacher after graduation, left only with fragmented moments recorded in her journal to remind her of the internship? I had spent three months functioning (barely, it seemed) by living only in the moment. With very little time to impose an order on my thoughts or to reflect on them in depth, I had focused instead on my emotions as they seesawed in reaction to my relationship with Mary and the students.

In rereading my journal, I was surprised to find so many entries characterized by anger, especially since I pride myself on dealing with difficult situations rationally and not emotionally. I had not been able to see the larger picture or understand the implications of my daily actions and reactions.

Only in working through the process of writing this narrative did I begin to put things in perspective. In my journal accounts, I noticed patterns of behavior, both on my part and Mary's, and was able to look beyond my emotional reactions to the effects on me and on the students. I searched for the underlying assumptions that influenced our behaviors and for the first time was able to understand why Mary might have treated me as she did. The effects of my new perspectives proved to be dramatic; a friend who read excerpts from my journal as well as the first draft of this piece commented on my evolution from a “vigilante” to a more diplomatic writer.

The nature of a teacher's work is fragmenting; what goes on in the classroom is only one of many responsibilities. Our attention is divided among students, the curriculum, parents, research and development, administrators, and

our personal responsibilities. Small but significant moments disappear in a split second unless they are recorded. Our daily successes and mishaps are difficult to remember, even as we know the way to become better teachers is to reflect on what we do and who we are in the classroom. Only through the power of the narrative process can we frame those moments into an account with depth and understand the implications instead of living with our faces “squashed against a wall.”

The implications of my situation range beyond my own short-lived doubts about my ability to teach. While revisiting my journal, I discovered hidden lessons I had been unaware of learning. I know now that the relationship between practice teacher and cooperating teacher is akin to that between parents: young people involved must perceive a united front in order to understand the behavior expected of them. The conflict between Mary and me established a situation where students felt unsure about who was the authority; in many cases, they tried to seize control. Instead of the structured environment needed for real learning to take place, we created a battlefield where consequences for actions were never clearly defined and expectations for behavior and performance changed in accordance with Mary's presence in or absence from the room.

Mary's unwillingness to relinquish or at least share the control of her class with me might appear to be a sign of her own lack of confidence as a teacher. This element is also visible in her pedagogy: she always had complete power, authority, and responsibility and never allowed the students (or me) to assume any. Is this a sign that she thinks relinquishing some control might mean she could never gain it back? If so, should a classroom be run with such a tenuous grip on its structure? Having been made aware of these questions, I will be more prepared for them in my own future classroom.

As Mary and I struggled for power in the classroom, we also revealed our own weaknesses as communicators. A confrontation early in the semester might have alleviated our conflict, but neither of us was willing to initiate such a discussion. In clinging to an atmosphere of forced politeness, we created the impasse which

blocked communication regarding our inner concerns or problems.

Additionally, I found that the teachers I interacted with all hold the same negative attitude toward university teacher education courses: namely, that they were not valid. Many, including Mary, do not respect the knowledge we teacher-trainees bring from the university; a favorite joke in the teachers' lounge concerned how I was dealing with "reality" as opposed to the "fantasy world" presented at the university. This was disheartening for me. I felt misunderstood by people whose experience I respected, but at the same time I could not help but wonder if my university education had indeed been unrealistic.

My intention in writing this narrative is not to prove that Mary is somehow a bad teacher or a bad person. In retrospect, I think that her actions arose from good intentions and a genuine attempt to initiate me what she sees as the "reality" of the profession.

As new teachers, practice teachers face many unknown pressures and decisions that we are unprepared to deal with. It would be beneficial to be able to trust the experience of those we first encounter in our professional capacity. However, we can only open the lines of communication if we feel that our knowledge and opinions will be equally respected. Using writing forced me to see things from Mary's perspective; if we had kept a dialogue journal, or if she had been a writer who struggled to see through my eyes, we might have broken through the barrier erected by our differing perspectives.

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