

JOURNEYS OF THE MIND: REFLECTIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Of my two children, my son was the one I stopped asking very early on about school. To my “What did you learn in school today?” the answer was *always* “Nothing.” He gave up on school because of the learning problems he was having and I gave up asking. Seems that school and reflection were not part of the same equation for him: teachers didn’t reflect on how to help him achieve success, and he just went through school in a state of numbness.

What I may have failed to do with my son, I focus intently on in my college classrooms. I base my practice on Freire’s concept of problem-posing education, involving questioning and reflection that lead to the construction of knowledge. Reflection in school and in life functions as a mediator between experiences and learning, allowing for the integration of understanding and experience to enable better future actions or choices and enhance a person’s effectiveness (Freire, 1997; McCarthy, 2000; Rogers, 2001; Fiddler & Marienau, 2008). I reflect to improve my teaching and I want my students to reflect to improve their learning and to engage in critical thinking.

According to Rogers (2001), reflection has great potential for engendering lasting and effective transformations in the minds and lives of students. It is a personal, cognitive and emotional process that involves an examination of one’s responses, beliefs and premises in light of the situation at hand, resulting in integration of the new understandings into practice. Reflection can thrive in an open, dialogic classroom where there is a balance between mental challenges and support of the students learning. Through examination and questioning of the individual’s experience - which is valued and highlighted in this process - insights and awareness surface that may be incorporated into future action.

My pedagogy involves mainly retrospective reflection (Loughran, 1996) in the form of a final “Journey of the mind” paper (1-2 pages in any format the student chooses, ungraded) in each of my college/university classes. The goal is for the students to delve as deeply as they can on the reflection continuum from content-based reflection to metacognitive reflection, through self-authorship reflection and, hopefully, reaching the deepest form of transformative reflection (Grossman, 2009). The directions for writing this paper are to chart one’s personal and cognitive journeys through our course: where you came from and where your knowledge of yourself and

of the topic currently stand. This assignment is reflective on two levels: one for the students to focus on and realize their learning processes and growth of knowledge throughout the semester; the second is for myself - an evaluation of my teaching, what works and what doesn't.

For several years I taught reading classes (sometimes referred to as "Developmental Reading") to freshmen. My goal was to get the students hooked on reading for personal growth, since most of them confessed to some form of reading aversion, from "I don't read" to "I hate reading". Some of my tactics were beginning class with giving everyone an A; all they had to do was "their best" to keep it. No tests, quizzes or comparisons. Books could be chosen from a list and all dealt with issues relevant to the students' lives, issues that were discussed openly (Ben-Yosef, 2008). Most of the students found success in these classes and their ideas about reading/books were transformed. Their Journey papers reflected on past behaviors, present conditions and future possibilities, revealing their new understandings of personal processes and gains, as well as illuminating pedagogical issues for me, their teacher.

Personal growth and empowerment:

- *"I never questioned the text ... When I started to question and make connections, the text began reading to me .The material became much more comprehensible"*
- *"I have begun to not only read the words but to read for meaning and to question what the author is trying to show me. "*
- *"I found out what I like to read about and what keeps me into a book and that is reading about kids my age"*
- *"We the readers have the power to give meaning."*
- *"I've always hated reading books. Whenever I picked up a book I would immediately fall asleep...I never thought they even sold books like the ones I read in this class. I've learned that...if you become open minded you will find books that you will love to read."*
- *"[T]his course helped me discover what I want to become after graduation from college."*
- *"I still hate reading books, but now [I consider] reading books because of [their] informative and interesting stories."*
- *"I have broken the barrier that has plagued me my whole life: I have finished [reading] my first book."*

And what worked pedagogically? Removing grade anxiety, allowing their voices to be heard and respected, giving them control of their pace and processes, creating a balance between challenges and support:

- *“The organization of this class promoted learning about reading because...we did not have to worry about the threat of grades, judgment or competition”*
- *“In [this] class, nobody’s wrong about anything. I think this gives the students confidence to speak what is on their mind and not have to be worried about being criticized”*
- *“When we were given assignments that only had to be one page long, I found myself writing two to three pages.”*
- *“I could never keep up in high school because the teacher always went too fast. In [this] class I completed my first book.”*
- *“I’ve lived my life trying to avoid any issue that didn’t directly have an effect on my life. Well, I won’t say I’ve changed that yet, but this class has made me aware that I need to.”*
- *“[M]ade me look outside of my comfort zone, and though I was not happy when it occurred, looking back I realized that it made me a better teacher-candidate.”*
- *“Allowed me the freedom to explore [books] in a way that was best comfortable for me.”*

These same students suggested changes and also criticized my pedagogy for being too accommodating. I changed some practices (though not the freedom in the classroom):

- *“The only suggestion I have... to enforce set readings. Sometimes students take advantage of the freedom you give and neglect the readings”*
- *“[I]n order to keep students coming in on time, you should give a reward or if students are 10 minutes late count it as an absence”*
- *“[B]ring in some films that can make the students become socially conscious”*
- *“[A]llow the students to choose one of the books as a whole class.”*

Graduate students in my education courses reflect in two formats: they respond to readings in a weekly dialogic journal to which I respond, and they write a Journey paper at the end of the semester. Their reflections tend to be mostly efferent, documenting the knowledge they are taking with them:

- *“Taking this course on emergent literacy, I have become more aware of all the attributes a teacher must acquire in order to benefit her students”, A.F.*
- *“I always thought literacy was about reading and writing...I am starting to think out of the box and realizing that literacy has to do with all aspects of the child’s life. Literacy is a process, not a script.”*

- “As a teacher it is important to remember that children develop differently. They should never be judged according to a standard... I must allow children to have successful experiences which will lead to better learning.”
- “If a student is struggling, I know I will not help that student by repeating over and over the instruction that they clearly don’t understand. This will make the child feel a sense of failure and it will frustrate me as well. Instead, I must be innovative...and think of an approach that will teach the same task in a completely new way.”
- “I have learned that both student and teacher need each other in order to be successful in the classroom.”
- “...[H]ow important it is to take the time to reflect on what we are doing as educators.”

I must preface here that when I initially tell my students that we will be learning how to use poetry to promote literacy in the classroom, a communal sigh is heard in the room. Poetry phobia reigns. At the end of the semester, however, approximately half of the responses are in poetry form... Here are some examples:

I am a Teacher, but also a learner/ C.C.

...
 I understand I must go beyond the cookie-cutter model
 I say: Why should everyone have to write with a pencil?
 I dream of reading in order to fly
 I will respect children for what and who they are
 I hope I always question myself so growth can occur
 I am envisioning literate lives.

Oh, the places I went/ M.F.

...
 True literacy does not lie in spelling, grammar or prose,
 true literacy is a seed that with experience grows.
 I went on a journey so that now I can say
 to all of my students “Learn literacy your way”.
 Oh the places you will go with literacy!
 Don’t be confused, literacy lies in all that you see,
 play video games, read comics and draw-
 do not think of literacy as merely a chore...

Some document their struggles as well as the insights:

*He remembers being in class disagreeing with everything the teacher says.
 He remembers wanting to go home and watch the big game.
 He remembers why he hates philosophy and theoretical thought.
 He remembers realizing that the teacher is just playing devil's advocate.*

He remembers noticing some theories can be combined and applied to the classroom.
He remembers begrudgingly trying to write creatively.
He remembers realizing the potential creative writing might have in the classroom.
He remembers seeing those hated theories applied in the classroom.
He remembers seeing those same theories working in a classroom.
He remembers enjoying a book “response”.
He remembers satisfaction at discovering a different way of looking at education¹.

Teachers must continually “rethink what has been thought and revise their positions” (Freire, 1998:17). I reflect on my practice to better my teaching, learning what I can from my students. The most troubling reflection was written by an undergraduate: *“I didn’t learn anything from you this semester. All I learned was from our books”*. This happened after preservice students in that class reacted very harshly to my introduction of race and class issues into our conversation about access to literacy. They ended up going to the Dean and asking that I be fired because I was a racist... Although the paper focused on the student’s anger and frustration rather than her learning journey, it helped me realize that social justice issues should have been introduced more gently and with much scaffolding to the population in that specific class and others like it at our School of Education (mostly white, suburban young women). The fact that the incident, which happened in mid semester, had impacted the entire semester’s learning experience for this student was an important learning moment for me. Searching for possible solutions, I found Rogers’ advice applicable: *“[Our students may] expect their educational experiences to be easy, simple, and unchallenging. A process of reflection can thus evoke negative reactions if students do not share the same values...What is needed is an appropriate balance of challenge and support”* (Rogers, 2001:50). I have since created a curriculum that better balances challenges with extra support, and it has already served us in other courses.

Another student commented on my rushing: *“When I heard I would have to write poetry on the spot, I wasn’t too happy...I did and I was very happy with the outcome...[But] an educator that teaches a lesson on creative writing and then says, “Students, you have 10 minutes, be creative”, doesn’t make sense to me.”*, M.H.

Reflection is a basic tenant of my classrooms (from unpacking formulaic language, to inquiring into labels, questioning cultural concepts, reading critically, writing journals and Journey papers). I model my reflection in classroom discussions and respond reflectively (rather

¹ Format based on Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*.

than critically) to students' work. Students learn that in our space it is safe for them to reflect on my own practices, whether positively or negatively.

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