I Did It My Way With a Little Help From My Friends

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Exploring how I came to be the teacher I am today is quite a fascinating challenge. I suspect that most contributors to this volume could write lengthy treatises-their own *Emile* or *Lives on the Boundary*-to address the topic. In many ways the writing I have done since the mid-1980s has been an effort to explore what I think is involved in good teaching, or at least good teaching as it has appeared through the various lenses I have tried. To produce a short essay on my development as a teacher, then, requires me to boil a lot of thinking down to a few succinct points.

I think if I were to identify two general rules that currently guide my thinking about teaching, they would be:

1. Learning is social and active.
2. People learn by making things that are important, useful, and meaningful to them.

I believe that these two principles have guided my thinking about teaching since 1976, when I first began my M.A.T. at the University of Chicago and taught in the Upward Bound/Pilot Enrichment Program for inner city teenagers; through my high school teaching in Westmont, Barrington, and Oak Park-River Forest (IL) High Schools; and finally in my work in the English Education program at the University of Oklahoma. I will next try to trace some of the experiences that help me recognize these principles as important.

One of my favorite tidbits from educational research comes from a study conducted by Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993). They were trying to understand how learners felt at different points during the day: how engaged they were, how they responded affectively, and how they otherwise felt when involved in different pursuits. In one high school honors history class, the teacher was lecturing to the students about Genghis Khan's invasion of China. When asked to describe their levels of attention, affect, and engagement during the lecture, only two of the twenty-seven students in the class reported that they were thinking about anything remotely related to the lecture; and of those two, one was thinking about Chinese food and the other was wondering why Chinese men wear their hair in ponytails.

My own experiences as a student, as a professional attending conference presentations, and as an educator have impressed on me why most of the students in that honors history class were drifting off into another world as the teacher imparted important knowledge about the Khan's invasion. Learning, as Vygotsky (1962) argues, comes about through social engagement. I first learned the importance of this fascinating concept as a graduate student in George Hillocks's M.A.T. program in English Education. George stressed, among other things, the importance of using small groups as a vehicle for promoting learning, and the importance of developing instructional activities to engage students in learning processes. Both involve students in *activity* to keep them engaged in learning.

In my subsequent teaching, I was fortunate to work in a stimulating environment at Barrington High School through the departmental leadership of Dale Griffith. Many teachers I have met over the years have said that they would love to engage students in active learning, but that they are discouraged from doing so by administrators who are disturbed by loud classrooms that deviate from the straight-and-narrow path. During the formative years of my teaching I was given (along with the rest of my colleagues) a great deal of latitude to develop activities and conduct extremely noisy classrooms. Dale saw my teaching as being in the process of development and encouraged me to explore and take risks, even when what I was trying appeared to be off the wall. In retrospect, I think that Dale was really urging us to engage in a continual process of teacher research; he urged us to throw out "the curriculum" and maintain notebooks in which we would inquire into our own practice and reflect on the relationship between our teaching and our students' learning. I would say that working in an environment that encouraged adventuresome teaching was a critical factor in helping to foster the way I learned to think about teaching and learning. My own learning flourished during those years because of the level of creative activity in the department as a whole, the enthusiasm that we generated among ourselves over teaching and learning, and the interrogation I routinely conducted into the processes of my classrooms.

After six years of full-time teaching I took a year off to begin working on a doctoral program. After I completed my doctoral course work, I returned to teach full time at Barrington High School. By that point, the department had developed a new speech program in which every sophomore in the school would devote one semester to an untracked course that required participation in public speaking oral interpretation, improvisation, role playing and other activities involving oral communication. At that time, I taught juniors and wanted to make sure that students followed up their learning from the sophomore speech program in their subsequent learning. With released time

provided by my supervision of a student teacher, I was able to observe a number of speech classes, discuss their purpose with the teachers, and plan appropriate instruction for the students when I would teach them as juniors.

My incorporation of the speech activities into the junior curriculum brought about changes that profoundly affected my approach to teaching. My classes had always been activity oriented, but my exposure to the activities in the speech classes opened up new possibilities to me. The students brought a tremendous amount of imagination to their oral work and had become acclimated to an environment in which spoken and acted texts were valued just as much as written ones. When I encouraged students to develop literary interpretations through oral speech activities, they would bring a wide range of resources to the projects, often providing musical accompaniment, elaborate sets, costumes, and even special effects: One group dramatizing the satanic side of Puritan literature provided a spectacular (if dangerous and probably illegal) effect by, first of all, simulating a boiling cauldron by using dry ice (fogging an entire wing of the high school in the process), and then darkening the room and striking a lighter beneath the jet from an aerosol can to shoot flames across the set as part of a nocturnal ritual.

Exhibitions such as this-though I subsequently insisted on a few restrictions to bring the activities in accordance with fire regulations--created an atmosphere that valued different ways of constructing meaning as legitimate. In the following years, in addition to the core of writing I required, I increasingly encouraged students to represent their understanding of literature through unconventional types of texts. My rationale for doing so was that the students were, almost without exception, highly engaged in the projects they would undertake, far more so than they were when being evaluated through conventional writing. In particular, students who were low achievers-including many students whose Patterns of communication at home were dissonant with the conventional genres of interaction and evaluation in school—were often among the most enthusiastic and productive workers on these projects. Students who were loath to turn in simple homework assignments would spend all weekend producing elaborate video productions dramatizing their interpretations of literary relationships. Above all, the students, besides being engaged, were clearly demonstrating an understanding of literature in ways not accessible through their writing. Not only were they active, they were learning in the process.

My interest in students' artistic production of texts led to my reading of Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1993) and the development of a research program investigating students' composition of artistic interpretations of literature. It also led me back to a reexamination of my attitudes about writing. If writing is as valuable a tool as teachers of writing insist it is, then students should find it to be as engaging a mode of production as they do making films, producing sculpture, and fashioning other types of texts. I found that when my students produced their nonwritten interpretive texts, they were learning a great deal *through the process of creating the texts*, because the films and other unconventional productions that they developed were interesting, important, and useful to them. Could I say the same of all the writing that my students were doing?

My question was driven home to me one year when I was teaching at Oak Park-River Forest High School and was participating in a Teacher Evaluation and Student Achievement (TESA) program through which I observed a number of other classes around the school. One day I was observing a driver's education class that included several students who were enrolled in my "basic" sophomore English class. The driver's education class was conducted in the "simulation room," which was a large room with twenty-five or so simulated car cabs complete with dash board, steering wheel, brakes, and other accessories for driving. The students would sit in the simulated cabs while in front of them, on a large screen taking up the front of the classroom, they viewed a film that provided a view of the road from out of a car's windshield; I felt myself in an odd time warp as I viewed the same grainy driver's education films that I had seen as high school student in the sixties as the cinematic car, fins and all, negotiated contrived traffic situations. The students, without the benefit of my sense of anachronism, felt as though they were actually driving their simulated cars: they would turn on their signals when the film slowed for them to make a turn, hit the brakes when a car pulled out in front of them, and otherwise "operate" their cars in response to the conditions presented by the film.

At one point, the film was speeding smoothly along at about sixty miles per hour when suddenly a car swerved onto the screen in the path of the "drivers," seeming to come from out of nowhere. At that point, I was watching one of my "basic" English students, who was so engrossed in his driving that he spun his steering wheel violently and then actually fell out of his seat from the momentum of the turn. Fortunately, he was wearing his seat belt or he might have flown out of his cab entirely and crashed into the student in the next lane. Many other students in the class had the same reaction, and there was much embarrassed laughter among the students over the incident. My own thought immediately was: How could I make that happen in my class? How can I make the activities so real to students that they actually fall out of their chairs from involvement?

The answer, of course, is that it is hard to motivate basic students to read and write to the extent that they are motivated to drive a car. Yet, the question has haunted me ever since and forced me to think how useful my class is to students. Are they truly engaged in activities that absorb them in meaningful ways? Is the process of writing (or the

process of creating other kinds of texts) an activity so real to them that they believe in it even in the "simulator" of a classroom desk?

Unfortunately, just as I was beginning to explore those important questions, I made a career move to a university setting. I have since had the opportunity to explore those questions-at least as they apply to adolescents-through research, though not so much through my own teaching. Yet the questions have still influenced my thinking as I teach my undergraduate courses in language development and methods of teaching English, and my various graduate courses in the teaching of writing, the teaching of literature, the study of language, and other aspects of language arts instruction.

At the undergraduate level, students are preparing for a career, and should enter the workplace with as many tools as possible to help them perform effectively, especially during that first overwhelming year. In my view, the most useful tool my students can have when they begin their first jobs is the ability to plan units of instruction. Our undergraduate teaching methods class, then, is built around teaching preservice teachers how to conceive of instruction in related blocks of study, primarily in the form of thematic units of literature. The class is structured as a workshop so that students spend time both in and out of class working collaboratively on the design of teaching units. No one has yet

fallen out of a chair, but the students do create units of instruction that they often use during their student teaching and then subsequently in their permanent teaching jobs.

At the graduate level, I've learned that people go to school for a number of reasons, and I feel that my duty as a professor and graduate advisor is to help teachers use their education to serve the needs they sought to satisfy when they decided to return to school. For some practicing teachers, the most productive way to use their course time is to rethink courses they are already teaching, or plan courses they will teach in the future. Other graduate students want to try to break into publishing and, therefore, want to use their course work to learn how to write for publication, develop conference presentations, and otherwise enter the public side of professional life. In all cases, I encourage students to use their course work to help them learn how to create products that are useful, interesting, and important to them, and that enable them to learn through the process of creation. I have been very happy to see some of these students influence the curricula of the schools they teach in, present their course projects at state and national conferences, and, in some cases, publish their ideas in journals. For a graduate student, that is possibly the closest we can come to my high school student's driver's education car crash.

In my own work I have also found that my learning has taken place through the creation of useful products, originally in the form of classroom activities I developed for my high school students, and more recently in the form of books and articles I have written about teaching. In many cases my learning has been highly social, starting with my early collaboration with Tom McCann and Steve Kern on a series of workshops and a TRIP book for NCTE, and progressing through a number of other collaborations with colleagues and graduate students. By writing about the issues I am interested in, I learn more about them; and by sharing my writing, I engage in conversations that help me learn further. The composing process I go through in writing and talking about education is vital to my con tinued growth as a professional. I hope I never reach the stage where I think I'm an expert with nothing more to learn; if I ever do, please lock me in an empty classroom and leave me there to enlighten the four walls, who will listen about as attentively as would a room full of people.