



Themes of Teaching

A Reflective Study

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Case and Field Tutorial – Fall 2011

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1. INTRODUCTION

This project is a reflective study of my practice as a teacher. As such, the main source of its content is personal memories and experiences collected throughout my immersion in the field. Through personal reflection, a wide variety of themes are thrust to the forefront of my teaching practice. This paper clearly identifies the themes, values, and convictions I hold as a teacher.

This personal, reflective journey is driven by the following questions:

- What are my themes of teaching?
- How do my themes of teaching communicate a deep-rooted awareness of teachers, teaching, learners, and learning?
- What is of significance in my teaching?
- Where has my teaching journey led me to this date?

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 pinpoints my themes of teaching through careful study of my teaching memories, and lesson and weekly reflections. After identifying and supporting my themes of teaching, section 3 aggregates my experiences and formulates a metaphor to address my journey to date, focusing on teaching, learning, and leading. Section 4 concludes.

2. THEMES OF TEACHING

In this section, I identify and elaborate on the key themes of teaching in my practice. As mentioned above, the key source for this section is personal memories and reflections gathered from my classroom experience.

2.1 PROOF NOT PRODUCT

As I begin to formulate the key themes in my teaching arising from this semester, I am consistently reminded of my overall purpose as a teacher. To me, teaching is not merely the transfer of knowledge from one entity to another – it is infinitely more than that. If teaching *were* truly about transferring and gaining “knowledge”, my chosen vocation would, I believe, be on a downward spiral of importance. On September 23, 2011, I wrote the following in my *Hopes and Dreams Letter*: *“The primary responsibility of a teacher is not merely the presentation of facts; after all, Google is much better at that than me.”*

As I began to teach and formatively assess my students’ learning, this worn-out notion of education as knowledge transfer steadily crept into my thinking. Throughout my teaching this semester, one of my favourite sayings – rather, my *modus operandi* in the classroom – was “proof not product”. At first, my students were slightly bewildered by that statement, which allowed us to have an important conversation about my beliefs surrounding education. In the context of that conversation, I matter-of-factly explained to my students that “answers, to me, are secondary”. I continued, “I am more interested in your way of thinking, and the proof, or evidence, you have to supplement your answer – that is, prove to me you understand.”

On a practical level, I fostered an environment where “knowing” something was simply not enough. On an academic level, my students discovered that true understanding involves analyzing why, debating views, predicting results, choosing positions, creating different outcomes – indeed, the upper-most categories of Bloom’s Taxonomy. A simple open-ended statement such as “prove to me you understand” fosters incredibly deep-thinking, which is exactly the type of thinking I encourage in my students.

2.2 PRESENCE NOT PERFECTION

From day 1 of my field experience, I have been challenged to make numerous decisions that affect my students’ learning. Many of these decisions are made in a split-second, including decisions on group-work, expectations of volume in the classroom, or homework. In my previous professional roles – in government, academia, or business – I rarely was expected to make quick decisions. Rather, in my various functions, it was my responsibility to gather the necessary data, analyze its significance, put forth a hypothesis, and, lastly, promote a plan of action. This process was time-intensive, rather than time-sensitive. As such, I expected perfection from myself throughout the entire process, and so did my assistants, colleagues, and supervisors.

My experiences in the field continuously teach me that perfection is not attainable, desired, or expected. One memory clearly expresses this fact. On November 3, 2011, with my host teacher away the entire day, I was notified that I would be teaching the entire day. As I graciously accepted the challenge, I prepared and reviewed my lessons the night before – a dress-rehearsal, of sorts. The day was running remarkably well – the students were engaged,

excited, and keen. Our last hour of the day was science, where the students were continuing their independent wetlands research. As the students began shuffling around the classroom to find their sources of information, I was reminded that about half were expected to finish their math pre-assessment work. Fearing the worst of revolts, I quickly reconvened the students, explained my mistake, and introduced the new expectations. There was no revolt, no uprising against my imperfection. This experience is a clear reminder that my students do not expect perfection from me; rather, they purely expect that I care about them and their learning – *presence not perfection.*

2.3 COMMUNITY NOT COMMON

Another distinct theme in my teaching is focusing on building a *community* of learners, not a *common* learner. This semester, I remarked the following in one of my reflections: “As most school boards, the Calgary Board of Education included, push towards full-inclusion in classrooms, we, as teachers, are expected to meet the needs of all our students. As such, different strategies must be used for different students, as all students show diversity in their learning.” The notion of a common learner is out-dated and, frankly, incorrect. In my experiences at Fish Creek School, I have been exposed to many different types of complex learning needs, including autism, learning disabilities, and overall delays. This type of diversity in our classrooms is now the norm for schools. I believe this diversity affords us the incredible opportunity to build the diverse, inclusive communities of respectful learners.

2.3.1 INCLUSION

As Greene (1993, p. 212) writes: Inclusion does not mean “...normalization that wipes out differences, forcing them to be repressed, to become matters of shame rather than pride.” Inclusion means celebrating our differences – be they cultural, physical, psychological, intellectual – and learning from the many opportunities they present.

2.3.2 RESPECT

Respect is of crucial importance in a community of learners. Students need to know they are vital pillars of a classroom’s construction, akin to a building’s foundation – if one stone is removed or damaged, the integrity of the entire structure is compromised. The same is true in a classroom. The beginnings of establishing each student’s immeasurable worth in the classroom is building deep respect – between students *and* teachers. As I aspire to create a classroom community where respect is of utmost importance, it is fundamentally crucial that I respect my students.

2.3.3 OPPORTUNITY

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “Ability is of little value without opportunity.” While the contexts were likely different, the importance of this statement on education must not be understated. Students must be afforded all feasible opportunities to succeed, including multiple entry points for learning and meaningful ways of displaying their learning. Furthermore, stereotypes based on social ethnicity, mental or physical disabilities, and socio-economic status must never inhibit a child’s opportunity to succeed. As a teacher, I must never underestimate my students, thereby placing a ceiling on their learning.

In summation, and to complement this section's themes of teaching from my practice, I end this section with an excerpt from a reflection written the week of October 10, 2011, summarizing my views on education, teaching, and learning:

"I read a remarkable book this summer titled The Blue Sweater by Jacqueline Novogratz (2009). In the book, the author offers the following opinion: 'People need to believe that they can participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives and have a stake in the societies in which they live.' (p. 275.) In the context of The Blue Sweater, the author proposes the above as part of the solution for eradicating poverty – that is, empowering people with the capacity to be change in their lives and societies. I, on the other hand, relate the above recommendation to a model for education: students must feel they are vital components of their own education and schooling."

3. JOURNEY METAPHOR

As I begin the process of formulating a metaphor for where my teaching journey has led me to this date, I focus on a theme of transformation. Clearly, synthesizing two years' worth of learning is a challenging task, yet I feel it is of critical importance, as only through reflection do we truly learn. The transformation in my thinking surrounding all aspects of teaching, learning, and leadership has been significant, like the wearing away of a bank caused by rapidly flowing water: *my learning journey is the flow of a raging river, continuously eroding pre-conceived themes of teaching, learning, and leadership, while simultaneously building up new areas.*

It is undeniable that this journey has seen an awakening in my passion for teaching. Indeed, this journey has caused an awakening in my passion for education and personal

growth. Over the course of this journey, I am privileged to have read many scholarly articles by authors such as Palmer, Ayers, Fried, Davies, Tomlinson, and others. However, the article that has had the most profound impact on my learning journey, and largely motivated my yearning for growth, is titled *The Authority of the Teacher* by Claudia Allums (2010). In this article, Allums writes at length about the importance of mentorship – between teachers – in an educational setting. The reason for my interest in this theme was puzzling at first, since acquiring a mentor did not appeal to me in my past career. I often wondered why this was the case, and now I clearly understand the reasoning: a mentor is someone that guides and shapes your growth. In my case, I did not want to grow – I was happy waking up in the morning, making my way to work, and leaving at the end of the day, unchanged. This is truly not the case with my teaching, learning, and leading: I desire to grow, indeed, I need to grow. The transformation in my desire to grow as a teacher – in teaching, learning, and leading – has been rapid and unwavering.

I remain intensely excited about this journey and the world of wonderment to which it constantly leads me.

4. CONCLUSION

This reflective paper has examined my themes of teaching through the use of my teaching memories and reflections. Using these as inputs, the paper then sums my experiences to formulate a learning metaphor that captures the essence of my learning journey, including all aspects of my teaching, learning, and leading.

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