THE READING PROFESSIONAL

To be a good teacher: Growing beyond the garden path

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I had a sassy red planbook, a teaching certificate, and a nameplate on my door. I had a storehouse of language arts guides, a fat file of mimeographed story starters, boxes of paint and clay, and a black light poster of the Beatles. At 21, I was prepared to transform children's minds through language and art. Bring on the children.

In my long-haired, wide-eyed youth, an image of the good teacher stalked the hallways of my mind, bearing guilt and unease. I never seemed to do right. The good teacher filled her planbook daily with goals and objectives (I never could separate the two) and doggedly, like an ant on a mission, delivered the goods by the end of the day. The paths the children and I took, however, were seldom straightforward. The good teacher also "knew his/her subject" (isn't that what they whispered in the staffroom?); s/he had a stockpile of knowledge that allowed pulling an outline, with textbooklike headings and subheads, from brain to planbook with ease.

Not me. I was concerned more about the *who* (the children) and the *how* (making it to the end of the day); the *what*, I believed, could always be found in a book somewhere. The specter of the good teacher, like a finger-wagging parent, reminded me of my weaknesses. As I've grown away from that model, I've learned that this mythical schoolmarm (or master, as the case may be) shadowed my colleagues as well, reinforcing our collective belief that success in our profession is measured largely by unwavering focus and encyclopedic knowledge. One of my rites of passage was to recognize that teaching, like life, isn't always focused, the path not always straight. Another was to value the wisdom of practice.

The straight and narrow path

Early in my teaching career, I thought a lesson should have a linear, controlled quality; the end should be known from the beginning. The lesson—like the curriculum, a career, or a life—must have a specific, predictable direction. Varying from the path, the lesson, or the norm suggests a lack of focus or control, a fickleness, a vaguely immoral or subversive nature. Even worse, it means we are winging it, or we are lost. This belief in continuity that drives us all is deeply rooted; it affects daily and lifelong decisions and creates pressure and disappointment inside and outside the classroom. Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) describes the debilitating effect of the myth of the linear goal on people's lives, claiming that as a society we see achievement as "purposeful and monolithic, like the sculpting of a massive tree trunk...rather than something crafted from odds and ends like a patchwork quilt that can warm many bodies" (p. 4).

The only constant in life is change and, Bateson claims, if we choose a path, we must be prepared to find it has disappeared in the underbrush. Composing a life, she argues, is an improvisatorial art. As teachers we should not apologize for our abandoned lessons and dust-covered planbooks; our moments of flouting "what the book says" and capturing serendipity should not make us feel guilty. Teaching is often improvisation. This does not mean that it lacks focus or direction. It simply means that as we devote our time and passion to meeting goals with our students, we must recognize that the goals are mutable. They change, students change, and so do we.

Good teaching is not the successful execution of a teacher-directed plan but the collective weaving of knowledge and understanding we create with our students in our reading and writing experiences. The most satisfying and challenging experiences have a certain balance and diversity, and by our being open to learning with our students, we are open to improvising in our teaching. We watch and we listen. We take sideroads that provide a different view. We teach by refocusing and redefining commitments according to the students, the time, and the resources. And the more experience we have, the more we trust ourselves to offer that book to Margaret, to suggest this strategy to Juan, or to leave Jesse to work alone. Experience becomes a preparation deeper and more trustworthy than words in a planbook. Experience and awareness allow us to improvise.

My years of baking bread have taught me which ingredients will blend and how to create surprise. I can feel within a moment of kneading the dough whether the yeast is working; I know where to put the bread to rise in the summer and in the winter. For years, the false promise of a good recipe for bread, just like the ideal of a good teacher, created disappointment and guilt in my classroom and my kitchen (not to mention a few good doorstops).

We owe it to ourselves as professionals to assert our instinct for improvising, for wandering off the recipe or the mythical garden path. We owe it to our

students to be flexible and to gain enough wisdom through experience to make the teaching and learning nourish everyone.

Knowing what and knowing how

As a young teacher, I believed good teachers not only were single-minded in their plans but also that they "knew their stuff." For me that meant book knowledge, knowledge that could be transmitted and received through language, knowledge that was spoken or written: books, theories, articles, and resource guides. Words and symbols, after all, are the tools we use to communicate with one another and with our students. Indeed, to be literate is to be able to move around in words and numbers purposefully and with ease. What else is there to know?

The educational community has always separated knowledge, as it can be conveyed through language, from experience. By so doing, we ignore our richest source of professional understanding. As Eisner (1988) says, education has been dominated by theories about how the world is and how we think, learn, read, and write. These theories, which have defined educational research and conversations for some time, are stated as propositions. And, as Eisner observes, propositional language dominates because "it is the vehicle, par excellence, of precise communication" (p. 16). It also "focuses upon categories and thus generalizes more than it particularizes... knowledge, we are told, consists of making warranted assertions" (p. 16).

But what I now know about teaching reading and writing, I know not only in my mind, but in my bones. This knowing transcends words on the page and goes deep into that twilight zone that makes researchers wary: personal practical knowledge. Because this wisdom of practice is difficult to see, label, measure, count, or stamp, we call it intuition, sixth sense, or—strangely, considering its status—commonsense. It is the essence of good teaching, the root source of improvisation, and traditionally the most undervalued knowledge in the educational enterprise. Practical knowledge—the wisdom of practice—goes beneath, beyond, or through language, and it is profound. This knowing is messy, seldom predictable or generalizable, rarely precise, and known and learned as much through our eyes, ears, hands, heart, and soul as it is through our mind.

Describing this way of knowing is difficult, especially when we must use words. It's the moment we know a child is engaged with the story or when decoding slides smoothly into reading. It's recognizing the complicated storyline a child intends in her drawing. It's reading a student's face as s/he approaches with a book and knowing, in our heart of hearts, what s/he wants to say. It's knowing when to change the subject. It's understanding the life, reading the pulse and the meaning beyond the desks, people, books, and paper in the room. Teachers, like fish in water, are saturated with this knowing. As Elliot Eisner, Howard Gardner, and Donald Schon, among others, claim, it is these forms of knowing—the artistic, the intuitive, the social, the nonpropositional—that are vastly undervalued by our profession and the public.

Ways of knowing beyond propositional language infuse our stories, our insights, and our shared histories with students and colleagues. Such personal knowing is tacit, difficult to name "embodied in our practice, but difficult for us to make explicit" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 33). It is also highly individual.

Propositional language, and the research it writes in education, has a linear, objective quality. It has also been largely the province of men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), although the majority of the teaching population is female. In the last decade, we have begun to read and learn from the increasing number of narrative, descriptive, and anecdotal accounts of classroom experience, all of which bring to life the sounds, images, and personalities in classrooms, and all of which demonstrate how powerful and vivid alternative ways of knowing and telling can be.

Nonpropositional forms of knowing and reporting are common to women, but not unique to them. Neither are the "second nature" instincts of personal practical knowledge. Praising Wayne Gretzky, a journalist describes the hockey player's uncanny ability to see the larger rhythms, sequences of action, and repeating patterns of the game. "He can read a configuration of players on the ice, anticipate what is likely to develop next, and react to it instantly, without pausing to think" (Whyte, 1990, p. 26). Gretzky's "second nature" is not superhuman; it's the meeting of individual style with experience. What looks like intuition or wizardry is a deep understanding of the forces at play. Novice teachers are often bemused by experienced teachers' skill and agility in choreographing the social, personal, and environmental forces that shape learning. At 21, without experience, I invested my hopes in my new red planbook, my notes, and the myth of the good teacher.

Experience makes it all look easy. She graduates from playing the scales to playing jazz. He tosses away the recipe and creates a gourmet *tour de force*. The good teachers, the thousands who daily guide children towards independence through literacy, are working from deeply-ingrained and hard-won personal knowledge. Such knowing and teaching is worth celebrating. Bring on the children.

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