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**The Weaving of Charlotte's Web:
In Praise of Spontaneity in Early Childhood Classrooms**

by

Benjamin Mardell

Introduction: Planfulness and Spontaneity

In early childhood education, as in our culture generally, there is a strong value associated with planfulness. Teaching that involves deliberation over when, why, and how materials and activities are presented to children is considered good teaching. A popular text on early education goes as far as to call on teachers to outline the specific goals, instructional objectives, procedures, and evaluation criteria of each classroom activity (Seefeldt & Barbour, 1990).

I subscribe to the belief that planfulness is an important characteristic of good teaching. However, the privileging of planfulness should not obscure the importance of spontaneity. In the present article I argue that spontaneity is also an essential ingredient to a successful early childhood classroom. In my experience, it is only when spontaneity is allowed to flourish that the magical moments described in the following story appear.

Before I begin the story I want to describe my sense of spontaneity. By spontaneity I am not talking about the times when a planful teacher's design calls for children to be given time to explore materials freely, or when that same planful teacher "kicks back" and allows children a second recess on the day before spring vacation. And I am certainly not talking about the classroom of the teacher who never plans. What I am referring to are the occasions when teachers "go with the flow." At these times specific lesson plans are discarded. Classroom rules may be modified. The teacher follows children's leads and collaborates with children to extend exploration and learning. To best describe spontaneity I offer the following story.

A Story: The Weaving of Charlotte's Web¹

It was 3:30 on a chilly Friday afternoon. In the four-year-old room of the Jacob's Daycare Cooperative it was group time. I was sitting in a circle with the thirteen children under my charge. Some of us were singing "The Eensy Weensy Spider." Others were listening to the "The Eensy Weensy Spider" being sung. Still others seemed to have their attention focused elsewhere.

Among the singers was Thomas, who was belting out the spider song as he sat comfortably on his father's lap. Thomas' dad Walter, who was also singing, was the parent help for the afternoon (acting in the role of assistant teacher to fulfill his cooperative responsibilities at the day care center). Among the listeners was Emma who was watching attentively as the group time proceeded. In her third week at the day care center, Emma was often observing as she acquainted herself with a new environment. Among those "with attention focused elsewhere" was Meiko. Sitting off to the side of the group, she stared aimlessly around the room. With English as her third language, it was not unusual for Meiko to "check out" of these language based group times. Also checked out was

¹The following story is an example of teacher-research (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990), documenting and reflecting on a slice of classroom life. The bulk of the article is presented as a story because it is through narrative that I make sense of what happened one April afternoon in the preschool classroom where I taught. As the work of Vivian Paley (e.g., 1992) demonstrates, teachers' stories about their classroom experiences can provide powerful arguments about pedagogy.

Samuel, who wiggled on and off his carpet square as the meeting progressed. With a two-week-old brother at home, Samuel had other things on his mind besides small spiders.

After a few go rounds of the spider song we moved on to the final agenda item of group time: a description of the choices for the ensuing “exploration time.” I gained the children’s attention with a fanfare. “Ta ta ta taaa! At the long table there is mosaics. Samuel’s family brought in more beads, and kids can glue them down on the hard paper to make designs. The block area is open with the farm animals. Kids can build farms like you did yesterday. The round table is open to cut and tape, and the dramatic play area is open as well.” Samuel interrupted. “Is the loft open?” I nodded, and he and William cheered. I continued, “And here in the book area I have this yarn, and kids can use it to weave a web just like Charlotte did in the book.”

Web weaving was included in the exploration time menu on a whim. Earlier in the day, as I was going through the art supplies in preparation for the mosaics activity, I happened across a box full of yarn. For some reason the yarn made me think of spider webs. I had been reading the children E. B. White’s (1952) classic children’s book *Charlotte’s Web*. Each day before nap time I would summarize a few chapters, and the children were quite taken by the story. In the past I had found that children enjoyed playing with yarn, exploring the properties of the material. In a manner that I thought would make sense to four year olds, I tied the dramatic realm with the physical realm and concocted the choice of spider web weaving.

The about to begin exploration time generally lasted an hour, and was the last major event of the daycare day. During exploration time children chose from a variety of activities that were set up around the room. While they were asked to make an initial selection as they left group time, the children were free to change activities at any time. My role during exploration time was to help children stay engaged in the activities, furthering involvement with the materials. Some days I would stay in one area, helping with a particular project. On other days I would rotate around the room, observing what the children were up to.

After quickly reviewing the options, I sent the children off to play. At first it appeared that I had missed the mark with the web weaving activity. Voting with their feet, the children indicated that working with yarn was not all that appealing. While clusters of children settled in the block area to build farms, sat at the round table to cut and tape, assumed roles in the dramatic play area, and designed mosaics at the long table, no one remained in the book area to weave webs. Without a large time or emotional investment in the activity, I was not disturbed by the lack of interest in web weaving, and headed to the block area to talk to the farmers.

Then, five minutes into exploration time, I was approached by Thomas. Complaining that he had not found a sufficiently interesting choice, Thomas requested advice on “what to do.” The request was not unusual, and I had become skilled at helping Thomas connect with the exploration time activities. However, my opening gambit, linking activities to social interaction, fell flat. “Thomas,” I began, “I think Allister and Meiko need help building their farm.” “No thanks.” “Jai-Qui and Leah look like they are having fun in ...” Thomas cut me off with a curt “no.” An overture with dramatic play overtones was, as I should have expected, more successful. “Spider Thomas,” I began my next attempt, “you need to weave your web like Charlotte does.” That simple statement was sufficient. Possessing a rich imagination and loving all form of dramatic play, Thomas leapt into spider mode. Crawling into the book area, he began to carefully tie the yarn around table legs and chairs. With Thomas engrossed in web weaving, I returned to the farmers.

After about ten minutes I decided to check in with Thomas. Stepping over a tangle of yarn, I ventured into the book area and asked, “So what’s going on, Mr. Spider?” Thomas answered in a typically enthusiastic manner, peppering his speech with multisyllabic words and appropriate literary references from *Charlotte’s Web*. “Salutations, Ben Mardell,” he began. “You know what? I’m a spider, and I’m weaving a web. Zoop. Down I go, using my spinnerets. I’m working. I’m working with all my might! Zoop! I need to expand my web so it will be reallllly big! Really, really, really big!!”

I concurred with Thomas' assessment that he needed to weave a bigger web and then, sensing an impending crisis in the block area, excused myself. I spent the next few minutes helping the farmers—Allister, William, Michael, and Meiko—negotiate territorial disputes. Impressed with Thomas' enthusiasm for the project, I was curious to see how the web was proceeding. Unfortunately, a tall shelf impeded my view of the book area.

Fortunately, my curiosity, was satisfied without having to leave the block area. Thomas had indeed expanded his web. While I had thought this would take place within the book area, it was clear Thomas was thinking on a much grander scale. He had taken five chairs and lined them up in a row about four feet apart from each other. He then strung yarn between them. As a result, the web now spanned out from the book area, past the round table where Jai-Qui, Beth, Leah, and Emma were working, and reached the edge of the block area.

The expanding web, while impressive, certainly violated the classroom prohibition on removing materials from their designated areas. The situation presented me with one of two choices. I could either: a) limit Thomas' activities to the book area, requiring him to dismantle most of the web; or b) allow the web to spill further out into the room. The first option was the neater, more controlled, and less disruptive alternative. The second option was the more novel and potentially more interesting alternative. It was Friday afternoon. The children were confined inside because of inclement weather yet again. I was feeling loose. I let the expanding web stand.

It turned out that my spontaneous decision was a critical one for the weaving of Charlotte's Web. I am convinced that forcing the web back into the book area would have deflated Thomas' enthusiasm for weaving, and the project would have shriveled and died. Instead, by allowing the web to grow into the room, Thomas proceeded full-speed ahead on the project. Additionally, a new cadre of weavers was added to the enterprise, and the web began growing at a rapid pace.

The new web weavers included Michael, Allister, William, and Meiko. Having seen Thomas at work in the middle of the room reminded them of the web weaving activity and demonstrated what weaving was all about. Perhaps more to the point, seeing Thomas at work in the middle of the room also captured their interest and imagination. Having yarn strewn across the classroom was not an everyday occurrence. As Francis Hawkins (1974) points out, the breaking of rules and routines draws children's attention and interest. The present instance is a case in point.

The new weavers joined the activity seamlessly. Allister worked with Thomas to bring chairs into the block area. Michael and William clamored for more yarn and then began weaving the block area addition. Meiko joined in the weaving, tying yarn from chair to chair. Since the language in use here was a universal language of action, her current English proficiency did not impede her participation.

Bugs for the spiders to eat was the next major, and unplanned, addition to the play. Since I missed its inception, I am not sure how the children began making and taping up paper "bugs" on the web. The idea might have come from Walter or from a specific child. It is more likely, however, that the idea emerged out of some sort of collaboration. That collaboration could have involved the following dialogue:

Thomas: I'm really hungry.

Walter: You need to catch some bugs.

Jai-Qui: (working at the round table cutting paper) Here's a bug.

Walter: Thomas, why don't you tape that bug up on your yarn web.

Allister: (taking the "bug" from Jai-Qui) I'll tie the bug up with my silk.

And so on.

However it started, by the time I arrived on the scene the round table had become a bug assembly line. Emma, Leah, Jai-Qui, and Beth were all supplying paper bugs to a crew of hungry spiders that included Meiko, Thomas, and Allister. The bug makers would carefully draw and cut

out creatures that, depending on the assembler, included legs, eyes, and even antenna. The “spiders” would then take the prey and tape it up on the yarn web. The operation was a model of cooperation. I was especially pleased to see Emma participating in this group activity. Such experiences were sure to help her feel part of the classroom community.

Soon almost everyone was involved in some part of the weaving of Charlotte’s Web. Only Samuel remained on the outskirts of the play, off camping up in the loft. Though he would occasionally converse with the spiders, he preferred a solitary activity on this particular day.

The activity continued for almost an hour. The children delighted in the weaving itself, and in the physical artifact that the weaving created. In the end, the web stretched over half the classroom, utilizing all fifteen chairs and most of the tables. Over fifty “bugs” were taped up to the web. And, while children’s efforts were closer to an ant-like model of cooperation than a solitary spider spinning its web, I refrained from pointing this out.

I let the children weave straight through clean up time. I did this, in part, because I wanted the children to be able to share the web with their parents. Mostly, however, the children were so engrossed in their play that I could not bear the thought of stopping it. Eventually, all the children were picked up and taken home. I was left alone to dismantle the web. The job took longer than I thought, as the children had done a very thorough job weaving. But I didn’t mind the time alone as I lingered in the room, recounting the afternoon’s spontaneous activity.

Conclusion: In Praise of Spontaneity in Early Childhood Classrooms

Based on theoretical advances in developmental psychology and an acknowledgement of the changing world economy, a growing number of educators are calling for the creation of learning environments that emphasize collaborative group endeavors (Katz & Chard, 1992; Brown, 1994). The successful implementation of such curricula clearly requires careful planning. In addition, the successful implementation of such curricula also requires an element of spontaneity.

Central to the success of these collaborative learning endeavors is the creation of community. In fact, so important is the notion of community to such curricula that some theorists describe these educational contexts as “communities of learners” (Brown, 1994; Rogoff, 1994). Why community is so critical becomes clear when one considers what it means to collaborate. Collaboration involves people working together. It involves relationships. It is predicated on trust, and requires a willingness to take risks. It is only when children and teachers form a community of learners that the potential of collaborative learning activities is fully realized.

While teachers can devise contexts that are conducive to the formation of a community, the actual creation of community cannot be planned for. I would contend that pivotal to the construction of a community of learners is the transformation that occurs to a group engaged in spontaneous activity. When a group ventures off the established path, jointly exploring new terrain, the resulting transformation includes an increased willingness on the part of participants to take risks and a greater trust in newly acquired colleagues. Stated succinctly: spontaneity is the elixir for the building of communities of learners.

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