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Classroom Inquiry: Transforming Perplexity Into Pedagogy

by

Cynthia McCallister

> We live in, we enter into, spaces of uncertainty when we teach. I often think of teaching in simile: it's like standing on the threshold of a door that opens into nothing short of a void. I stand there a moment–falter, teeter, and sometimes return to the side of the threshold where I can plant my foot on terra firma. Less often, I step into the white space.
>
> (Ruth Vinz, 1995, p. 1)

Beginning teachers at any level lack the benefit of experience. But even some veteran teachers who have acquired years of experience lack the ability to use it as a vehicle for moving closer to the needs and challenges of students. One of the most essential challenges to the beginning teacher is to somehow make the most of experience as it unfolds–to examine classroom incidents reflectively and deeply in order to maximize learning–in essence, to be researchers. As I reflect on my first years as a college teacher, this challenge has translated into a quest for developing strategies for understanding the classroom perplexity while at the same time developing the skill to read the classroom more objectively. This is a quest to develop what Dewey (1933) terms "wide-awake" thinking. Initially, my responses to students in the classroom were based on assumptions about teaching, learning, and knowledge that I had acquired through my experiences as a student in public school and as a student of teaching. My actions were based upon a foundation of subjective knowledge that was distanced from the classroom reality. Over time I have tried to move the base of reality from which I operate as a teacher to a place that more closely parallels that of the classroom. Situating myself in the classroom, rather than in theoretical fields or educational traditions, has ultimately proven to be the most effective mode of professional development. Tarnas (1991) writes

> Human thought [is] determined, structured, and very probably distorted by a multitude of overlapping factors–innate but nonabsolute mental categories, habit, history, culture, social class, biology, language, imagination, emotion, the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious. In the end, the human mind [cannot] be relied upon as an accurate judge of reality. (p. 353)

How do teachers become more accurate judges of classroom reality? Perhaps some never do–those who base their actions on the mental categories that are worlds away from the classroom and never move inward. But the teachers from whom I've always learned the most seemed to be astutely aware of my needs. They have been spontaneous and responsive. They have asked me to accomplish tasks that have had personal value to me as a human being. As a developing teacher, instructional approaches that have helped me create mental categories that stem from the classroom reality have helped me be a better judge of that reality. Assessing and monitoring the classroom helps me achieve unity with the learning community.

As an elementary teacher, I had become comfortable with the pedagogy of assessment-based instruction (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). I felt competent in the process of observing students, making assessments based on those observations, and responding with appropriate instruction. But my skill as an elementary teacher didn't naturally translate into a

college-level teaching pedagogy. The notion that a constructivist (Piaget, 1926) pedagogy was tailored to the mature college student escaped me. As a beginning college teacher I spent long hours planning my first courses–combing through texts, refamiliarizing myself with important theories, and assigning extensive readings. Each time, I organized what I thought was a thorough curriculum that covered all the material I deemed essential for my students to know and understand. *Good teaching* translated into the degree to which I efficiently covered content. My well-planned curriculum fostered an illusion that I was standing on *terra firma*–I was secure believing I was covering the necessary material. College teaching was new to me, and I relied heavily on plans. Improvisation was not a quality I equated with teaching. Nachmanovitch writes,

> Whether we are creating high art or a meal, we improvise when we move with the flow of time and with our own evolving consciousness, rather than with a preordained script or recipe. In composed or scripted art forms, there are two kinds of time: the moment of inspiration in which a direct intuition of beauty or truth comes to the artist; then the often laborious struggle to hold onto it long enough to get it down on paper or canvas, film or stone ... In improvisation, there is only one time ... the time of inspiration, the time of technically structuring and realizing the music, the time of playing it, and the time of communicating with the audience, as well as ordinary clock time, are all one. Memory and intention (which postulate past and future) and intuition (which indicates the eternal present) are fused. The iron is always hot. (1990, p. 18-19)

Some years ago I left the firm terrain and security of my elementary classroom in order to begin a doctorate in literacy education. At the time I had a vague sense that I would be putting my teaching career on hold while I learned, among other things, how to do research. But these recent years of researching, learning, and more teaching have helped me realize that my teacher identity is tightly meshed with my researcher identity. The more I view my students through a researcher's lens–striving to analyze and interpret their understandings in order to chart a course of instructional action–the more successful I am.

The most challenging aspect of my journey as a teacher, formerly at the elementary level and more recently at the college level, has been to learn to become comfortable stepping into the *white spaces* of the classroom world, spaces that are defined by perplexity, frustration, and curiosity. There was a time when I would have resisted those elements, believing that a thorough and effective plan of action would eliminate the unknown and spontaneous from happening during my classes. Learning to work in *white spaces* forced me to acknowledge the importance of perplexity. It also helped me understand the need to forfeit some control of the classroom world and allow students' questions and criticisms to guide my teaching responses.

At the time, *hot irons* or ambiguous *white spaces* made me panic. The questions and criticisms of students, which often exposed gaps in their understanding, tended to take me off guard and make me defensive. When they showed signs of misunderstanding or of having failed to grasp important ideas and concepts, I usually viewed their shortcomings as a limitation or weakness rather than an opportunity for learning. I had, I believed, done my part. In those instances I reasoned: They must not have done the readings. They aren't doing the required work. They aren't striving to make connections. They aren't open minded. I suppose that mode of thinking initially served as a defense mechanism, helping preserve my self esteem and feelings of competence. But because my students' naive understandings were threatening, I didn't

incorporate structures into my original course plans that invited their questions. As a result, students didn't have a share in shaping the curriculum or charting their own learning process.

With experience, I began to gain confidence in my teaching. I became less threatened by students' questions; and I learned to reject the notion that those questions implicated my teaching. These realizations didn't come without pain or dissonance. My understanding of the need to approach college teaching in a developmental manner, much as I had done as an elementary teacher, took time and effort. The perplexities brought about by listening to my students' questions forced me to search for instructional approaches that would help me meet the specific needs of adult students.

Over time, I have come to value my students' comments and criticisms, however naive or misguided they seem, as glimpses into their learning and thinking processes. I have learned to incorporate ongoing assessment structures into my college classroom that have helped me to gauge students' thinking and respond to their questions and concern. Dialogue journals are one example of ongoing assessment (Fulwiler, 1987). They consist of blank, lined paper. Sometime during class the student writes on one side of the paper, and after class I respond on the other. On the first day I ask for a response to the first class meetings—I'm interested in students' questions, concerns, and comments. They help me know what concerns to address during the next class. After the first day, students decide the focus of their journal entry. These journals serve as a place where students and I communicate on a one-on-one basis. They help me "decanter" (Donaldson, 1978) from my perspective—that of the more experienced teacher with an instructional vision—in order to better understand the point of view of the less experienced students I teach. They serve as a mechanism for my students' voices to inform my teaching vision. The more I can understand their perspective the better I can tailor experiences and activities that will address immediate needs.

On the first day of class I ask for feedback about the class, prompting their responses with questions such as: How did things go for you today? What questions do you have? What went well? What didn't go well? My students' responses give me immediate feedback that helps me plan subsequent classes. Their responses help me read the class as a whole and, at the same time, understand their individual questions and insights. This process helps me to be responsive, making needed adjustments as I plan.

Using dialogue journals serves as a powerful informal assessment tool that helps me know when and how I can challenge my students' assumptions, monitor their attitudes and opinions, or offer advice or information. They allow me to step into the treacherous white space of reflection. Now, when confronted with a challenging student response, I might reason: Did I misjudge my students' needs? Have I incorporated the right content to meet their needs? Could I do something else in order to make certain they understand a particular concept? What would I do differently next time? My willingness to welcome the students' point of view, and to respond accordingly, has marked a turning point in my teaching. Their misconceptions serve as a window into their thinking and an opportunity for me to learn about their needs.

I'd like to share one story of a recent teaching incident that is representative of the kind of searching and re-searching that has been so essential in my development as a college teacher. This story describes a recent period of perplexity brought about by reading a set of critical responses to a class meeting. The comments of my students threw me off guard and forced me into a mindset of self doubt and insecurity. However, I had invited my students' comments through the dialogue journal assignment. I confronted the crisis deliberately, thoughtfully, and methodically

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by using basic research techniques in order to understand the situation and determine my subsequent teaching actions. The experience forced me into the treacherous *white space*, to flounder there long enough to wrestle with problems and consider possible solutions, and to eventually climb back onto a terrain more firm as a result of the odyssey. This story highlights one approach to working through perplexity by looking into the minds of students and inviting their responses and criticisms toward my teaching actions. It also helps describe the powerful pedagogy that results from those interactions.

"I feel clueless!"

In my first year as a faculty member at a small, liberal arts college I was assigned a course called "Teaching and Learning" which, as the name suggests, deals with the basic and fundamental ideas of classroom teaching and learning. While the focus is seemingly basic, teaching the course proved to be a challenge. Until this teaching assignment, I had only taught literacy methods courses during my experience as a doctoral student—this course forced me into unfamiliar territory. I decided to incorporate autobiographical inquiry into the course curriculum (Pinar, 1994). I wanted to make sure students had sufficient opportunities to construct a personal understanding of basic concepts, and so I incorporated whole- and small-group class discussions and activities organized around important concepts. The first two class sessions went smoothly. I relied on the familiar writing exercises I had used in the past that entailed prompting students to explore a previous learning experience through writing and discussion. But on the third day, the situation began to deteriorate. I asked students to read their texts aloud to others in the writing response groups we had formed. Afterward, we discussed the experience of taking part in these writing response groups. I attempted to weave in a discussion of the importance of immediate feedback to the learning process (Weiner, 1986), of the importance of collaborative work and social learning opportunities (Vygotsky, 1978), and of the importance of learning opportunities that allow students to construct their conceptions of teaching and learning—structural questions to help students become independent learners (Champagne & Klopfer, 1986; Piaget, 1926).

As the class session proceeded, I began to feel uneasy, as if I were falling off firm ground and into the white abyss. I detected confusion on my students' faces. They seemed reluctant to work in groups, to share their writing, to respond in the large-group discussions. While the logic of my presentation for the day looked great on paper, it was painfully obvious that it was failing in the real world of the classroom. Things seemed to go from bad to worse until, finally, the clock signaled the near conclusion of class.

I couldn't let my concerns go unaddressed before class ended. Not knowing exactly what to say, I floundered: "I sense the energy level is low today … what's up?" Apparently that was the wrong question, for the only responses I got were more disengaged looks and shrugs of shoulders. "Well, as you write in your dialog journal today, try to think about what's going on for you in class. Try to tell me what's working for you. If you're feeling confused or frustrated, write about the questions or concerns you have." Finally, class ended and I was free to go. As I walked across campus in a bewildered state, I was overcome by a heavy sense of dread and self doubt: What if this unsuccessful day is a sign of worse days to come? What if I can't get the course back on track? What is the nature of the "track"? What if I fail? I climbed the stairs to my quiet, third-floor office, retreated behind a closed door, unloaded the dialogue journals onto my desk, and began reading through them. I knew I was in a quandary, but I wasn't sure exactly why. In a state of pessimistic anticipation, I began to assess the damage using techniques I had learned as a researcher in order

to develop a grounded theory (Shatzman & Strauss, 1973) about what was going on in my classroom and why.

I began reading the journals with an eye to linking specific examples in the data to my own questions. I used a research technique developed by Corsaro (1985) in which I coded entries according to possible theoretical connections. The coding of data helped me identify patterns and themes as they emerged, and facilitated better refined categorization. As I scanned the dialogue journal entries, one by one, categories began to emerge. The negative responses stood out, as they always do. These responses, and many others like them, confirmed my fears:

- We seem to be hopping from one thing to another; there doesn't seem to be a clear focus.
- I feel clueless.

I finally made my way through the pile of journals, and felt dismal. I responded to each comment as best I could by explaining or reasoning through my approach. Eventually, though, I had to move on. I set the journals in a pile on the floor and began to tend to the multitude of other jobs that awaited my attention. But they were never out of view and inhibited my thinking. Throughout the day I stole a few minutes here and there in order to read through them again. I was preoccupied with my students' concerns and criticisms and felt almost desperate to make sense of them.

As a habit, I tend to focus on negative responses, and I had to remind myself about the constructive comments. My constant wheel-spinning obsessions were getting me nowhere. Toward the end of the day I decided to analyze the comments in a systematic way using a time-honored practice of coding student responses in order to identify themes (Weiner, 1986). I read through the responses again, this time noting the issues that seemed to concern my students the most. I found that their responses centered around four themes:

Group Feedback–This is a process which students worked through in writing response groups, giving members feedback on their papers.

Free Write/Paper Assignment–I began the class with a ten minute free write about a learning experience they had once had. They would eventually bring this free write to a final draft of a paper describing a learning experience. As a part of the assignment I required them to attend one writing conference at the campus writing center.

Class Activity–I had students work in groups twice during class. First, they read their papers and heard feedback from group members. Later in class I asked them to think of some essential skills needed in their discipline or major area of study, asking them to discuss these skills in their groups.

General–Comments that didn't fit into any category or referred to the class in general.

I jotted down the gist of each student's comment into one of the four categories, further labeling the entry with either a "C" for critical or a "P" for positive. This process allowed me to view the themes that described my students' learning and the patterns of negative or positive attitudes that they possessed. This is how my analysis looked:

Group Feedback:
- C Didn't work with this particular group
- C Loose structure of groups didn't work
- C Dislikes groups, prefers large group discussion and different groups
- C Group didn't work
- P Useful to improve writing and share ideas
- P See the power of peer work; enjoy getting to know others
- P Peer response - help develop writing ideas
- P Feedback gave direction for revision
- P Enjoy what others have to say: gives strategies for working with students in future to help them turn weakness into strengths
- P The activity was difficult because it was a rough draft

Class Activity:
- C Confusing at first
- P Gave way to get feedback
- P Helpful as a framework for asking yourself questions
- P Helpful as a framework for asking yourself questions about writing; ambiguous, but see value—elaborate on the process in class, please

Free Write/Paper:
- C Not helpful—out of ideas for writing
- C How does it fit in with the class? Need broader concepts tied together
- C Don't like the Writing Center assignment

General:
- P Like how instructor models teaching strategies so I can file them away for future use
- P I'm getting used to the experience of a discussion-based class

Neutral comment—student "checked out"
- C seems we are bouncing around; connections aren't happening
- C Pace in class today lagged; needs more energy
- C Feel lost
- C Feel clueless
- C Sorting out all the assignments is a challenge; too much due at once
- C Jump from one thing to another; how does it all fit in?

As I studied the data I had collected and organized, I began to interpret the results. Several ideas ran through my head. First, my informal research project had disconfirmed my earlier assumption that the class had been a total flop. Next, I discovered that the students had been enjoying the group work and the writing exercises, for the most part. However, I also discovered that a good proportion of my students were feeling lost or confused. They couldn't make the leaps and connections that I assumed they naturally would (or that I had made in my plans). I realized I would need to focus more attention on being explicit about what topics we were studying and how

the class activities tied into them. The critical comments also helped me realize that my uncertainty at teaching a new course, my own, "cluelessness" about how I should proceed and what I should cover, was playing itself out in the minds of my students. Those critical comments provided a signal to me that I should become more organized. As a result, I wrote an overview of the course topics we would be covering. This helped me plot out the curriculum. I listed broad headings with specific concepts we would be addressing in class.

I met my students two days later in a much more confident and self-assured state of mind. Before they arrived, I sketched out a display of the analysis of their journal comments. I explained that I had sensed a general feeling of confusion and frustration during the last class; then I explained how the journal entries helped me unpack the general state of the class. I explained how informal research techniques, such as the ones I described, should be a part of their own classes eventually in order to help them assess how well they are meeting the needs of students.

It would be overly positive to say that class was a complete success. Even as I approach the end of the semester, the Teaching and Learning course doesn't seem completely successful. But class that day had gone much more smoothly. I felt better about my teaching, and my students' dialogue journal response confirmed that my approach had worked. I didn't need to analyze the results. For the most part, they were all positive or constructive and acknowledged that my efforts to clarify confusion had worked. They showed some indication of becoming aware of ideas I was attempting to get across. Helen wrote:

> It's great how Cynthia evaluates the classes so well. Not only did she try to find the pros and cons of our last class, but at the same time showed us how to evaluate our own classrooms. Again, it's another model for practicing what you preach!! Also, our group works very well together. We can comment seriously on our pieces, yet joke around at the same time.

Not every student's comments were as positive, nor did anyone else as clearly make the connection that I had been trying to model what I hoped my students would eventually try to do themselves. But most comments were positive, even those that had previously been most negative, as was the case with Don's response:

> Small groups were cool, but we ended early because it seems that we all [comment on] the same thing.

Josh, another student who had previously been confused and frustrated commented:

> The opening of class today was a clarifying one. I feel more confident that our topics fit together.

Typically, I don't need to do systematic assessments like this one. It's easy to get a global reading of the class by simply reading the journals. But on those occasional days when students seem a little "*clueless*," having simple research techniques at hand can occasionally help me sort out the perplexities of the classroom world.

Closing

As a beginning teacher, I was armed with a wealth of knowledge: personal experiences that had to do with being a student myself, an assortment of mental categories filled with the ideals of learning theory and practice, and the experiences of having been an elementary teacher. While these bases of knowledge have been the sources of expertise that have supported my teaching vision and philosophy, I quickly discovered they were not enough. I was left to operate from a base of reality that was not close enough to the immediate needs of students in my college classroom. Dialogue journals, and other classroom inquiry techniques, have been the bridge between theory and practice. They have helped me get in touch with the *here and now* of the classroom to the degree that I could contextualize theory and present ideas in a way that my students understand.

The more I develop my research identity in the classroom, and the techniques to assist me in engaging in classroom inquiry, the more I learn about my teaching identity. My research identity is the key to helping me achieve my potential as a teacher. Still, after several years of college teaching, perplexing episodes occasionally occur, and they continue to put me on guard; but I have learned to accept them, to occasionally invite them, and to ultimately capitalize on them for their rich potential to teach me what I need to know in order to teach my students.

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