Tuning to the Language of Relationship in Student Teaching

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As a teacher educator of pre-service students, part of my responsibility is to supervise students during their practice teaching rounds. During conversations with associate teachers,' many questions have been raised about their role in relation to the Practicum. These questions in turn prompted me to consider, how might we understand the nature of the relationship between an associate teacher and a student teacher? As I pondered on my understanding of this relationship, I wondered about it in terms of what is written in faculty of education handbooks and educational literature. Was there more? How might associate teachers[1] experiences be listened to and written about differently? Associate teachers speak in terms of personal uncertainty, professional duty and a feeling of being taken-for-granted (Slocum, 1989). They talk about discovering conflicts in their positions, their concerns and tensions and the pleasure and excitement of experiencing collegiality with the student teacher (Slocum, 1989). Is this pointed to as part of the associate teachers role and responsibility in practicum handbooks? In other words, what remains silent and hidden and taken for granted about this relationship? In what way may we enter into this relationship so that the invisible becomes visible?

Phenomenology invites us to turn to the associate teachers' experiences as a starting point allowing their voices to be heard and making it possible for their experiences to become visible. Inviting the associate teachers to talk of what the experience is like to work with student teachers and university supervisors[2] offers us the chance to become acquainted with what things mean in their world by becoming attuned to their everyday world through their words. Hermeneutics is concerned with understanding lived experience and human existence in different ways. It asks, how might we come to understand the associate teachers' everyday experiences differently through their language? In what ways does language fulfill the notion of role? Their speech is a personal language of relationship, of conversation, of listening and hearing the student teachers' voice, a spontaneous way of being and speaking with the other. Language contains the stories of who we are, the basic interpretability of life itself and the interconnectedness of everything (Smith, 1991). Hermeneutics is not simply a reporting of an expedience but brings about new forms of engagement and dialogue about the world we face together (Smith, 1991).

This paper listens to the associate teachers' perspectives on the student teaching practicum by bringing to light the different ways they speak about the experience. The purpose of this research is to examine ways associate teachers speak about experiences within the practicum to illuminate possible opportunities for developing, encouraging and speaking the language of relationship.

The data was gathered during one school year and consists of audio taped and transcribed interviews conducted with four associate teachers individually on three separate occasions. This presentation consists of an attentive analysis of these unstructured interviews and reflects on ways we can become attuned to the language of relationship in the associate teacher's world and together cultivate new forms of engagement and dialogue.

FORMS OF LANGUAGE

Eugene Peterson (1989), in struggling with his primary educational task as a preacher, teaching people to pray, began to pay attention to his own way of speaking, as a pastor and as a person. Being influenced by current philosophers of language, Peterson became "in awe of the way language works and to realize the immense mysteries that surround speech" (p. 97). The three types of language Peterson names and describes

include Language 1, the language of "relationship," Language II, the language of "information," and Language III, the language of "motivation." He argues that informational language and motivational language dominate our society and claims that `the language that develops relationships of trust and hope and understanding languishes" (p.99).

Investigating the ways associate teachers speak about their experiences using Peterson's three types of language as a guide provides opportunities for drawing attention to the language of relationship. At the same time, Peterson's guide offers possibilities for revealing openings for recalling and reclaiming language that is required if we are to engage in different ways of thinking and acting towards deepening our understanding of relationships within the practicum.

In listening to and analyzing the interviews, the themes: *talk, voice* and *conversation,* emerged as a way to focus attention on the different ways associate teachers speak about the practicum experience. In a back and forth manner between audio-tapes and transcripts and literature on language, each theme is explored for examples of language I, II and III. The following descriptions take the form of presentations of the combined experiences of the four teachers and are heard in the *talk* of Mrs. Timmins and her student teacher Jane, in the voice of Mrs. Violet and Susan and in the *conversations* of Mrs. Candy and Ruth.[3] Reflective interpretation of the themes points us toward possible openings for bringing about new ways of being and becoming attuned to the language of relationship in the practicum. Chart I portrays a summary of the relationship between language I, II, and III and the themes talk, voice and conversation.

HOW DO TEACHERS SPEAK ABOUT THESE EXPERIENCES?

Talk Amid the Traffic

Schools are busy places. There is always that last minute duty to fulfil, papers to send to the office, students to help, meetings to attend, lesson plans to prepare and on it goes. Having a student teacher means making room for someone else in an already over crowded day. At the same time, it means having someone to talk with about proposed new changes in curriculum, teaching strategies, problem students and about how the day is going in all its murkiness, and rewards.

Language I is attentive to where we are in everyday life. It is the encouraging and familiar *small talk* as *real talk,* not mindless chatter, between the student teacher and the associate teacher, caught in the traffic of routines and activities in classrooms and hallways with enthusiastic/bored, happy/rebellious, and attentive/noisy students. Mrs. Timmins notices the frustrated look on Jane's face as she teaches her second lesson for this first visit to the school. Approaching the desk to pick up some papers, she spontaneously whispers, "do you want help?" Jane's look of relief signals "yes" and afterwards Mrs. Timmins smiles and reflects "that's what it's all about." The first experience of finding lice in a child's hair is shared in the question "What do you think? What do we do about it?" A mode of willingness, given to the occasion is expressed in Mrs. Timmins laughter indicating "there is never a dull moment in this classroom." Later Mrs. Timmins picks up on Jane's nervousness. Jane is shaking as she begins her lesson. Quiet words from the heart "calm down, you'll be fine" reveal Mrs. Timmins attempt to be "tuned in as an associate." On another day, Mrs. Timmins and Jane are trying to teach a lesson during a very wet week. Students come in to use the dryer in this Family Studies classroom, others have a ripped coat. "Well, this is all part of it! How will you decide how many favours you are going to do for these students?" is attentive to the human condition and the messiness of everyday life.

CHART I

Ways Associate Teachers Speak About Their Experiences
Forms of Language

Themes	**Language l**	**Language II**	**Language III**
Talk amid the traffic	Small/Real talk Intimate Trusting	No talk Giving information Delivery System	Big talk Coach like Encouraging/paternalistic
Voices as spoken word	Personal voice As heard by "other" (being an authority)	Informational voice Facts as spoken (having authority)	Motivational voice Speaking in self-interest (having authority)
Conversation as a way of speaking experiences	Who you are Discourse of joining in conversation	What you know Discourse is about applying theory to practice	What you do Discourse is about learning skills III

As Mrs. Timmins speaks about becoming an associate teacher, an example of language II, No talk, is heard in her sigh "We were not really asked, it was just a memo out in the schools." As she continues, Mrs. Timmins talks of being taken-for-granted by the university.

> *You're just left to do it on your own. The university sends me the student and I'm away over in right field, the university is in left field and my student teacher is in the middle. We're very far apart.*

The impersonalness of *No talk is* reflected as Mrs. Timmins hesitantly expresses appreciation for the end of the year thank-you letter, "it's a form letter and it says pretty well the same thing every year." Yet in her desire for ordinariness and order in working with Jane, Mrs. Timmins sometimes wishes there was 'a generic training plan which covers everything." *No talk* signifies a distancing, a silence between players, felt and lived as one who is disconnected, ignored and invisible.

Although language *III, big talk,* may give the speaker a sense of power, of control in its efficiency and directness, it is likely to cast a shadow of doubt and loneliness over the hearer. When Jane arrives with "new strategies and throws around new terminology from the university" Mrs. Timmins becomes increasingly uneasy and "often feels very isolated as an associate teacher." Is the need to speak the same language "a plea to establish" more interaction between the faculty of education and the associate teachers? Is the literal silence from the university about "knowing what associates should expect from the student teacher" an intimidating form of silent treatment or neglect by assuming that what is perceived as self-evident is not really so apparent to associate teachers after all.

VOICE AS SPOKEN WORD

Attuning to language, audible in the voices of associate teachers, allows others to become acquainted with the world of associate teachers in different ways from reading the written word of the practicum handbook and educational literature. "Voice, in this context, suggests the individuals struggle to create and fashion meaning, assert standpoints, and negotiate others" (Brizman, 1991, p.12).

We are all encouraged to read practicum handbooks for information about how to fulfil our roles. Commonly in reading I see but I do not hear. In this case my eyes distance me from the lived world of the associate teacher. In this act lurks the danger for all participants in the practicum of being forgetful of language I, the language of relationship audible in the personal voice. Associate teachers come into this situation not primarily to get

the facts of management but to relate. They "work hard at making this an understanding relationship." In their expertise and wisdom, they know that central to school life is the *personal voice.*

In the midst of the written word that defines her professional role, Mrs. Violet's struggle to create and fashion personal meaning is hinted at in this expression of her view of the practicum experience, "My philosophy is that we are partners. We learn from each other." Mrs. Violet would like to see the collaborative model applied here.

> *It ties in with learning because you learn from one another. This is when you sit down and talk about what has happened that day. You have to recognize that while I have had years of experience teaching, Susan has had work experiences and learned things I have not had the opportunity to learn. I keep a file on these things and at the same time my files are open to Susan even after she has left.*

In this partnership, Mrs. Violet encourages Susan to observe her teaching and give her comments and pointers afterwards on what happens. This in turn, encourages Mrs. Violet to think about what she is really doing and what she should be doing. In terms of planning it helps Mrs. Violet to re-focus.

> *I sit in the back of the room and watch a lesson. It gets me thinking how Susan and I have both grown. I influence Susan and she influences me.*

In this way, we are mindful that students 'show us what we are able to make of ourselves and of this shared world' (van Manen, 1991, p.15).

Language II orients us to reality and enables us to find our way in and out of the intricate maze of planning and instructing, observing and evaluating. The *informational voice* satisfies our inclination as teachers to be tellers, and information givers so there are no misunderstandings. Mrs. Violet gives Susan a booklet she has prepared and explains exactly what lessons Susan is to teach. Mrs. Violet finds that when it comes to Susan planning she doesn't just say, well here's a topic, do something with it. She gets involved and Susan uses her as a sounding board. If Susan is up against a brick wall and doesn't have any idea about how to approach a lesson, Mrs. Violet gives her a lesson plan to use as a starting place. Mrs. Violet encourages Susan to go through her files and get as much as she can. Mrs. Violet gives Susan direction on where she stands on attendance, dates and other things. In her struggle to assert standpoints Mrs. Violet

> *wants to pass on to Susan, skills of bow to discipline, how to be an effective communicator, things to do to make a classroom safe, how to be a positive and pleasant teacher and bow to handle students who are having a bad day. I want to offer Susan a great realm of information.*

Language III encourages us to get things done that otherwise would not get done. The *motivational voice* with its commands and requests promises a successful experience. Mrs. Violet finds she has to be very organized as an associate teacher. In one particular situation, she had to tell a student teacher who was refusing to teach a lesson, "well you go and work it through and see how well you do. I sort of forced her to do it." Mrs. Violet tells her student teachers one of the most difficult things for students in a room like this (foods and sewing lab combination) is to be able to oversee the whole room. "You almost need eyes in the back of your head." In her struggle to negotiate particular standpoints, Mrs. Violet argues that there definitely needs to be input from the university as to their expectations from us.

> Mrs. Violet suggests:
> *The associate teachers have a session where they meet at the university and the university clarifies for us what should be the goals that we should set out for ourselves. In what way can we be most helpful to the student teachers? How can we make it a really good learning experience? We're giving the students exposure in the classroom. We're role modelling. But what exactly have they done before they come out?*

CONVERSATION AS A WAY OF SPEAKING EXPERIENCES

What is it that I hoped for in conversations with associate teachers? What is so good about conversations and being attuned to the spoken word rather than a written questionnaire? Is it that while spoken questions guide responses, responses in turn, give rise to new and different questions, taking conversation out of the hands of the participants and thereby letting it take on a life of its own? In *The Tone of Teaching (1991),* Max van Manen speaks of different kinds of conversations. Some of these are: conversations outside the daily experiences of the classroom, noisy conversation within which we can still hear the call of the other, pedagogical predicaments and difficulties which remain the subject of conversation, recollective reflection in conversation and tactful silent conversation. Might conversation, as a way of speaking experiences yield new insights into the way practicum participants are oriented to curriculum, to children, to teaching and learning? Being attentive to clues and connections, sensitive to situations and concerned with others' understanding of what is happening and what is being spoken about means being mindful of the way things are talked about in conversation. When Mrs. Candy and Ruth engage in conversation during the practicum, aren't they bringing to language information *about who they are, what they know and what they are doing?*

Conversation in language *I is passionate and personal,* where "feelings are articulated and silences honoured" (Peterson, *1989, p. 71).* Confessions and appreciations of being human express and deepen our understanding of the human condition, the condition of life as experienced in this case, by Mrs. Candy and Ruth during the practicum and beyond. Who *they are becoming is* revealed in the complexities and contrctions of these experiences.

Mrs. Candy engages in conversation that is a tactful, attentive silence. "I don't want to interfere with Ruth's lesson but if she needs me then we'll signal." Feelings of uncertainty about sharing lesson plans while fostering the creative effort are shared in conversation. Even in the midst of her busy schedule, Mrs. Candy remains attentive to what is happening with Ruth.

> *Sometimes Ruth is really discouraged when it comes to planning. I get involved and she uses me as a sounding board. There isn't a hard and fast way you can say this is how you do it, except talking to them quite a bit and sharing ideas.*

This however becomes a pedagogical predicament. It is a subject of much conversation for Mrs. Candy and Ruth as they contemplate Ruth's final written evaluation as a student teacher.

> *The evaluation is a hinderance to our relationship as partners. Ruth needs a safe environment to come in and try whatever she wants to try. And to fail. I think in failing a lesson Ruth learns more. And this evaluation hanging on at the end often acts as a deterrent to Ruth going in and being totally creative, loosening up and not teaching for me.*

Sensitive to the student teaching situation and concerned with Ruth's understanding of it, Mrs. Candy reflects in conversation about teaching and learning, children and curriculum through confessions and appreciations of her role as a former student teacher and now, as an associate teacher.

> *I fed my associates were interested in my teaching, they would stay and observe. They gave me a great deal of encouragement and that has affected my being an associate teacher. I find student teachers are performing. When they can get beyond that and recognize the needs of their students then perhaps they will understand what teaching is all about. A good teacher teaches about life.*

The way Mrs. Candy speaks about her teaching style is personal and passionate, challenging us to consider what it is about our own teaching style that speaks of a deeper understanding of the human condition. The struggle for genuineness for herself and for Ruth is experienced as a struggle between acting as role model to be mirrored and as colleague encouraging Ruth to develop her own teaching style.

I think my teaching style has a lot to do with my personality. I'm open and honest in front of my students and my student teachers, I'm very human. It's a way of being, a way of knowing who you are, it's the way you live.

Mrs. Candy encourages Ruth to take the initiative in her teaching.
Ruth may look at a topic from a different angle than I do and decide to present it another way. She should have the freedom to make mistakes, to try something new without knowing if it is going to work.

Conversation in language II becomes descriptive and offers a place for telling *what we know.* Mrs. Candy shares with Ruth some of what she knows about content and curriculum, students and teaching and learning.

Having had many student teachers, Mrs. Candy recognizes when Ruth feels she "has to take over the teacher role and be the expert. At that time, an important factor for Ruth to remember is that she needs to have a good working knowledge of the subject area." In lessons when she feels limited with her knowledge of content, Ruth thinks it is "easier if she stays in control of the class. That way she hopes she is not going to get anything thrown at her that she doesn't know." In conversation, Mrs. Candy and Ruth contemplate this ongoing pedagogical difficulty. Mrs. Candy believes "being willing to realize you don't know everything and admitting that to the students in the class only comes with more confidence and years of teaching."

On the other hand, Mrs. Candy is convinced Ruth "needs to know about clarifying objectives." In her work with curriculum planning the model used focuses on "focusing the content so the objective and content and evaluation all tie together. If they do you are on the right track."

As Mrs. Candy engages in recollective conversation, she reflects on what it is she gets out of having a student teacher besides the pure informational aspect.

Rejuvenation. They are eager, they are enthusiastic and having something to offer them revs me up. It puts me on top of teaching again and makes me excited. It gives me a great sense of accomplishment to be able to tell them I've been doing this for many years and it really works!

Finding time for feedback about what Ruth is doing as she teaches is a continual dilemma for Mrs. Candy. Language III provides a way for her to persuade Ruth to get into the habit of constantly reflecting on her teaching. At the end of the day, they go over what happened, how Ruth felt and what Ruth thinks she should change. While not able to give immediate feedback on most lessons, this conversation does take place on a daily basis.

At the conclusion of Ruth's student teaching session, the final written evaluation is not likely to take her by surprise. It has remained a subject of conversation throughout the practicum. Ruth is naturally very concerned about it because it is this evaluation that is used for hiring purposes. Mrs. Candy wonders if this isn't defeating the purpose of why Ruth is here - to learn how to teach. Mrs. Candy confesses and acknowledges her appreciation for the situation Ruth is in.

Writing that final evaluation is very difficult. It would be wonderful to have some guidelines for writing up the report. I want to make sure it is worded just so. I write it on my own, give it to Ruth and then we discuss it. I've kept notes. There aren't any big surprises for Ruth at the end.

It is evident that, as reported in an earlier study by Peterat and Slocum (1992) evaluation permeates the practicum experience rather than professional development or inquiry into teaching. The power of evaluation might be diminished with changes in ways of observing and reporting student teaching practices, through engaging in questions and conversations attentive to connections and concerned with other understanding of what is really taking place.

SUMMARY

The themes *talk, voice* and *conversation* emerging from the interviews with the associate teachers provide a way for us to hear openings for the language of relationship. Appreciation for the languages of information and

motivation are evident in the need to communicate directions and get things done. However, the possibility of belittling as sloppy and non-academic our *small talk,* our *personal voice* and our speaking about and asking who we are and what we are about in the rush of what we are doing and must get done, is very real. To abandon the language of relationship would be to remove the fertile top soil where ordinary things take root and grow, and replace it with concrete that keeps us from getting muddy and messy; where we also pull out or poison new shoots around the edges lest they crack our smooth surface.

Small talk, as *real talk,* not mindless chatter, invites us to be present and attentive to the ordinary. Insights come at the most unexpected moments. Who has never had a flash of insight within the bounds of a good laugh, an encouraging word or the observational comment of another? Who has not been reminded of particular words spoken amidst the traffic of life, long ago forgotten yet of precious meaning in another's life?

Tensions experienced in the practicum, dwell between our inclination to lead and convince and our desire to listen and provide openings for creativity and imagination in teaching. Listening tills the soil for the associate teacher and student teacher; to partake in a special relationship. As the associate remains open, vulnerable and sensitive to the student teacher's experience, she shares her life as a source of human understanding. Willing to be an authority while hearing our story in another's story, creates a sense of belonging and acceptance. This research points to the centrality of the language of relationship as a primary stance out of which university supervisors need to move in order to respond to associate teachers.

WHAT IS OUR EDUCATIONAL TASK?

As I reflect on ways of being and imagining who I am becoming as a university supervisor, I wonder what new forms of dialogue and engagement we might create together. Simultaneously new questions arise. What does it mean to represent the language of relationship in a world devoted to competency and skills, efficiency and control, measurability and standardization? How do vulnerable inviting words survive against military words in teaching such as, approaches, operations, tactics and strategic? How can we hear the students who call us when we speak in terms of what drives a program?

At our faculty meetings, we talk in terms of holding public relations campaigns with associate teachers. It would be easy to fall into language II, the language of appearing important, that projects a good image, and language III, the language of power, that makes things happen. Language I, however, the language of relationship, asks us to listen, to enter into something that is already going on with associate teachers at this time under these particular circumstances and places us in a learning position. The university supervisor's task is not to impose a different way but to work with associate teachers where they are, not using them, but connecting with them and learning from them.

Even in our good intentions of more extensive consultations with associate teachers lurks the danger of the university continuing to define the associate teachers' role. As associate teachers occupy this consumer role, they move to the safe distance of anonymity or the safe closeness of cooperation (Slocum, 1989). However, this position does not allow space for associate teachers defining themselves to themselves and to us. Henri Nouwen (1986) draws our attention to the illusion this kind of safeness fosters in us:

> *Distance allows us to ignore the other as having no significance in our lives, and closeness offers us the excuse for never expressing or confessing our feelings of being hurt. (P. 32).*

In the language of relationship, of uncertainty and collaboration, the tension between distance and closeness is dissolved and a new horizon appears. This horizon is a place in which we can come to different understandings of the meaning of the practicum, a place where we might create new ways of being with each other. For example, it is the people in the program, not the program itself that guarantees a particular discourse. It is the particular student working with the individual associate that makes it go the way it will go.

In the midst of educational reforms and faculty of education program changes, unexamined pre-understandings of our roles in the practicum lock us into accepting the traditional conventional image of the associate teacher. This image, defined by the university is projected in the language of information and

motivation where discourse is about applying theory to practice and about learning skills. Unquestioned is the way this language speaks or does not speak about the reality of the associate teacher in which trust, hope and understanding are fostered. Through a critical awareness of our own language, we might begin to free ourselves from mind-sets which unconsciously work against recalling and reclaiming the language of relationship. In bringing as many words as possible as are appropriate into the language of relationship, we are helping each other develop and speak the language that is the basic language of expression. This is the Ian age that contains the stories of who we are, of our connectedness, our interrelatedness to everything. In this discourse lies the hope of creating new forms of dialogue and engagement for the participants in the practicum as we join in conversation.

NOTES

1. Associate teachers refers to a teacher who supervises teachers, and who is more commonly called a cooperating teacher.
2. University supervisor is used to refer to the person who represents the faculty of education, and liaises with teachers and student teachers during the student teaching practicum.
3. All names are fictitious.

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Back to Table of Contents