

The Difficulty of Walking the Talk in Teacher Education

Christine Gehrett

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With a deep commitment to a transformative approach to constructing knowledge, I enter my classroom of would-be teachers full of hope and optimism. With my own insistence on the necessity of creating a viable alternative to the traditional classroom, we establish community, we enter into large group dialogue, we collaborate in smaller groups, we read and reflect, question and examine. Students write that they are stimulated and excited about what they are doing in the course. Then about halfway through a student asks, «When will we learn what to *do* in the classroom?» «And what about discipline?» another worries. And the clincher, «How are my students going to pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning if I haven't addressed all the Essential Academic Learning Requirements?» Even though the students are engaged in an alter-native classroom experience which is positive and meaningful, students-who-will-soon-be-teachers want to know what to do in a *real* classroom. I understand the dilemma. As new teachers, they will be entering a classroom in a school which is very much like the one they knew as they grew up. Even in a school that seems innovative, the state standards and assessments are the driving force to which everyone ultimately must answer. (The «Or else!» is another problem....)

The new teacher is not alone in not wanting to break from tradition. Teachers everywhere, even those who really want to approach their classrooms differently, are afraid that if they do, their students will perform poorly on the state and national tests. They feel that they cannot afford to take a risk. Disempowered, overworked, and highly stressed there is certainly no time for reflection. They fall back on tradition to get them through while the progressive view drifts farther and farther from reach.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

For the purpose of establishing a starting point, arbitrary as that may be, I wish to say that, in my view, education is a non-linear process-without-end. Possibilities and opportunities for refinement continue to emerge as experiences open new avenues, offering choices and a path to true freedom: the freedom to be the best you can be. Heartily embracing Dewey's notion of education as growth, I believe

that «being finished» is really never at issue. In other words, *end* and process are one and the same. The child grows toward personhood. The kind of educative process necessary to this growth requires that our schools and universities provide experiences which nurture the whole of us - bringing us to wonder, which sustains our search for meaningful knowledge; cultivating critical thought, enhancing the quality not only of that knowledge but also our beliefs; fostering dispositions of care and compassion which informs our choices, our judgments; and freeing our creative expression, leading us to new metaphors and possibilities and back again to wonder.

This transformative approach to learning and knowledge requires that teachers be willing to relinquish attitudes and beliefs that inhibit the child's growth towards personhood, and forgo those restrictions which narrow the educative process. Compliant models and extrinsic rewards stifle the creative cognition of both young and old, closing them off from the possibilities which allow and promote growth toward becoming persons. When knowledge is imposed, as in a mimetic approach, students are denied opportunities for questioning and reflecting. Knowledge is given, received, and regurgitated. For many students, little learning occurs. For Freire (1970) the imposition of knowledge is oppressive; and further, the oppressed are depersonalized- dehumanized. Further, Maxine Greene (1986) sees freedom as the power to act and choose and to overcome obstacles which keep us from defining ourselves and being the best we know how to be. Knowing or recognizing the barriers in our personal paths is impossible in an environment which makes our choices for us and tells us what we should know and how we should act. Lacking autonomy we haven't the opportunity for cognitive *praxis* which would open avenues of possibility for each of us. If we are unaware of the obstacles which keep us from being the best we can be, we can never really be free for we cannot overcome something which is out of our awareness. In an oppressive, imposed school environment how can a person fulfill his or her potential? Students either blindly comply (and «succeed» in the system, unaware of the cost) or they simply cease caring (and drop out). Lacking empowerment in the form of autonomy to make choices or take action, many of our students grow up without realizing their potentials. Often they don't even have a clue as to what their possibilities might have been since they were denied opportunities to «see» and «know.»

In this essay, I do not wish to negate the fine examples of transformative teaching and learning that do, in fact, exist in our schools today. There are some who continue to follow their intuitive and knowing hearts and minds, creating learning environments that do promote growth and autonomy. Others have wonderfully enlightened moments which sustain them and their students with brief glimmers of the way it could be. Unfortunately, the pressures and mandates which teachers face daily work at wearing them down and at forcing them to comply to models they don't believe in. In their disempowered state, most give in, sometimes even forgetting why they became teachers in the first place.

DIFFICULTIES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY CLASSROOM TEACHERS

What we find in most school environments are hard-working teachers, buried in mandates to «cover» certain material so that their students show gains on standardized tests. Steeped in traditional modalities and requirements to teach the basics, teachers also are being told to be reflective, teach

critical thinking skills, use collaborative groups, and so on. Teachers are caught in a tug-of-war with purposes at odds with each other. It is no wonder that education appears to be in crisis.

In order for significant change to occur in the classroom, teachers must be *willing* participants in that change. Teachers will not change unless they are exposed to and engage in learning which they *see and experience* as significantly better than what they presently do and understand. College and university education departments and schools must provide the impetus for change by engaging preservice and inservice teachers in experiences which create opportunities for critical examination of and change in basic, deeply held beliefs about how a classroom should be.

If pre-service and inservice teachers never actually experience another manner of being a student, they will continue to rely on the methodologies that were used when they were students as they teach in their own classrooms. Elliot Eisner (1994) reminds us that would-be teachers have been trained in the profession from the age of five, some even younger. They learned from their own teachers just as we did. They had models of what to say and do and how to act. Teaching them about a different way of doing things usually has little effect:

Students often enter a college of education with a set of conservative expectations and predispositions. They want to become teachers like those they have known, and they expect to teach students just like the ones who were their friends. More often than students in other fields, they attend colleges close to their homes and hope to teach in their home states. Accordingly, their acculturation into the profession requires little break with their past and their childhood values. In short, teacher education students tend to avoid alternative ways of seeing; they often show little interest in finding new lenses through which to conceptualize knowledge and pedagogy. Instead they walk into their classes searching for information delivery recipes and classroom discipline approaches. Questions of purpose, context and power are alien and irrelevant. What, they ask does such information have to do with teaching (Kincheloe et al, 2000 p. 242-243)?

Peter McLaren (1994, p. 22s) offers another story which comes from Henry Giroux.

A middle-class female teacher is horrified by the blatant sexism exhibited by her male students. Predictably, the teacher presents her students with a variety of feminist tracts, films, and other curricular materials. Instead of responding with interest and gratitude for this political enlightenment, however, the students demonstrate only scorn and resistance. The teacher is baffled; the students' sexism appears only further entrenched. As Giroux points out, the teacher falsely assumes the self-evident nature of the correctness on her position; she has refused to allow the students to 'tell their own stories, to present and then question the experience they bring into play.' She has also denied her students an opportunity to question sexism as a problematic experience; she is, in other words, simply telling them once again what to think-as middle-class/institutional authority so often does.

In standards driven education, having students tell their own stories is hardly feasible. This type of education wreaks havoc on progressive designs which foster autonomy, not so much by creating stan-

dards, but by the means of utilizing those standards to assess and evaluate schools, teachers, and students. As a new faculty member in the state of Washington, I learned that the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction with the State Commission on Student Learning has worked to create for our statewide public school system four goals which are supported by Essential Academic Learning Requirements. The first two goals deal with standard academic knowledge, but the third and fourth goals push beyond that: to think analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems; and to understand the importance of work and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect career and educational opportunities.' This piqued my interest. But let me finish. The *assessment* component for these goals and EALRs, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning or WASL, is given at the fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. It is different from the run-of-the-mill standardized achievement test or tests of basic skills in that it asks students to explain answers, to tell why they made the choices they did, write essays, and generally begin to get beyond the usual regurgitation and demonstration of basic knowledge required on most standardized tests. (Interestingly, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills continues to be a part of the state assessment as well....)

In my view, one problem is that even though the EALRs are fine and the test is so much better than the usual fare, the students will not be prepared to do well on this assessment unless the teachers begin to approach learning differently. They must encourage and teach their students *how* to think and engage in activities where they practice these skills and abilities required on the assessment. BUT, teachers feel they are being forced to change by their superiors. It's a top-down mandate, an oppressor/oppressed relationship. In an article on the value of oral history in helping us understand our past so that we can chart a course for the future, Jan O'Neill (2000) states that «people don't resist change; they resist *being* changed.» Where is the support for the changes required of teachers? Where is the inservice that teaches new ways of looking at teaching and learning? When someone is told to do something that they don't know how to do and they are not given any help, they generally become defensive. And angry. And most of all, they resist the change and see the change itself as the enemy.

Principals and superintendents are mandating the change in approach, methodology and strategies - in reality, a paradigm shift for most teachers. The difficulty with this top down, oppressor/oppressed reality is only one problem. Additionally, this pressure comes in the form of the requirement to improve the WASL test scores by certain predetermined percentages each year. In the teachers' view, this is then at odds with the changes they are being coerced to make! With the same expectations for all students, teachers are pressured to look past the unique needs and experience-contexts of their students to getting through all the material required of them. How can they become more student-centered when the assessment used to evaluate our diverse student and teacher population ignores the variables, ignores individuality, and most especially ignores their unique contexts?

Teachers feel that they cannot afford to take risks given the high stakes (never stated, only implied), that they face with meeting or not meeting the state standards; and changing the way they approach learning is a risky business. However, teaching students how to think involves risk as it is open-ended and the results aren't so clearly measured. This departure leaves the teacher vulnerable. A sense of one's autonomy and empowerment is essential. If the teacher is one who succeeded through compliance within the system, as many of them are, then oftentimes he or she hasn't the imagination to envision the effect of transformative education on his or her students: «How can I possibly do it that

way?» «How will the students learn?» «What's the point?» The teacher hasn't the freedom to make these choices. Having been blinded by conformity and compliance, she doesn't see that the choices exist.

DIFFICULTIES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY TEACHER EDUCATORS

Problems of risk-taking are compounded by the university professor who also is traditionally educated and has beliefs about how his or her university course should be taught. Having future teachers successfully immersed in another paradigm, providing conditions for student empowerment and having that be positive and exciting is of the utmost importance. Seeing schools as places of possibility instead of foregone conclusions, and feeling those possibilities begin to stir within their own sense of themselves as educators is my wish for my students. Even though I am convinced that student centered learning and community of inquiry optimize not only learning but the fostering of good judgment and more generally, good people, and I am committed to this and reinforced and reassured by much research, I STILL occasionally lapse into didactic and traditional modes in difficult and stressful situations. Socialized and habituated, traditional teaching continues to be a part of my repertoire when I am in a classroom!

Many students look to their university professors for answers. Some even think we have them all! It is so easy to fall prey to that egocentric trap and think that it is our job to give answers. Of course, it is very flattering. Often, professors are not accustomed to seeing their own limitations, even less to looking for mistakes in reasoning or point of view. Neil Postman in *The End of Education (1995)* speaks of the need for a narrative that makes education (life?) worthwhile. One option he puts forth is the «Fallen Angel» narrative in which we not only admit our errors as human beings but we also actually look for them. We examine history and our own beliefs for fallibility - very Socratic. As teachers, this approach would require that we no longer look at taught and supported curriculum in the traditional way. We would have to cultivate a critical «eye» for all that we read and studied. We would have to learn how to examine and reconstruct our history, as well as our own beliefs. Not an easy task, even for one willing to undertake it.

Once again, another issue is the responsibility the professors have for preparing their students for success during their student teaching experience. There are hundreds of students who must be placed in classrooms. While there are some exceptional teachers who serve as mentors, most students will find themselves in traditional, standards-driven classrooms. They are told what to teach and how to teach it.

Here is a case in point. One of my graduate students experienced a rather remarkable extreme of a traditional teacher who was struggling to meet the critical thinking demands of the WASL. She put open-ended question examples on the overhead, wrote the answers, and had her students copy the answers from the overhead. She expected the same from my student when she had responsibility for the class. Horrified, my student involved the students in a discussion of the question before anything was written down. After the lesson, she was reprimanded by the teacher. The supervising teacher's recom-

mentation in the future teacher's placement file is the single, most defining factor in securing a job. So, at times I become the essentialist out of compassion for my students' survival.

THE POSSIBILITIES

Is the situation hopeless? Since change results from conflict, I believe that it is not. We continue to do philosophy in a community of inquiry. We strive to meet the needs of diverse populations and multiple intelligences. We may adopt a constructivist approach with problem-based authentic learning. We also may embrace collaborative learning and concept-based interdisciplinary teaching. All of these stances and approaches to teaching and learning are valuable and go a long way toward transforming the educational environment. Through some we meet cognitive challenges. Through others we are able to foster affective emotional growth. Additionally, they provide students with a basis for understanding their own socio-cultural selves through this meaningful and contextualized learning (Hargreaves and Fink, 2000).

Recently, a first year teacher in a graduate class was expressing exasperation over her curriculum. She was bemoaning her students' inability to tie facts to concepts. She threw her hands up and said, «They can't connect them. The *book* doesn't tie them together!» And then, «There's a lot of concept-based curriculum but no one knows how to teach it. There's no support.» In my experience, it is often the case that the teacher does not have the thinking skills that she or he is trying to «teach» to her students. If she cannot reach deep knowledge and understand a concept herself, it follows that she won't know how to go about teaching it. These comments are wake up calls which bring me back to work in community. I believe that this depth of knowledge and understanding can be realized through philosophical dialogue that takes place in a community of inquiry. Teachers must have opportunities to practice their thinking skills, too. We have an obligation to provide those opportunities for constructing knowledge together with our students at the university level, even if it means that we don't «cover» all that we think is important.

The student-centered classroom, as a classroom community could be called, requires that the teacher assume certain things about his or her students. At the very core of this model is the belief that given an opportunity for meaningful engagement, the student will actually want to learn. This seems obvious at first glance. However, if we examine the practices of traditional education and classroom management, we see that the basic assumption about students is that they would not learn on their own unless we somehow coerced them. We have to make the students learn and comply by «bribing» them with grades and rewards. Even though most teachers will say that they believe that all children can learn, the compliant model would add the words, if we make them.

In the constructivist model, teachers are expected to encourage students to engage in dialogue, both with the teacher and with one another. Also, thoughtful, open-ended questions are encouraged and utilized among teacher, students, and peers (Brooks and Brooks, 1999). However, it doesn't just happen. Both teachers and students need practice. Gordon Wells (1999) states, «inquiry does not refer

to a method (as in «discovery» learning), still less to a generic set of procedures for carrying out activities. Rather, it indicates a stance toward experiences and ideas - a willingness to wonder, to ask questions, and to seek to understand by collaborating with others in the attempt to make answers to them. At the same time, the aim of inquiry is not «knowledge for its own sake» but the disposition and ability to use the understandings so gained to act informedly and responsibly in the situations that may be encountered both now and in the future.» Intellectual development is essentially a process of making meaning with others. Students of all ages can engage in meaning-making and a community of philosophical inquiry provides fertile ground for this practice. Students are empowered by their roles as co-enquirers, and construct knowledge as a means of making sense of their world. The meaning this holds for each involved is incentive for willing participation.

WHAT CAN THE TEACHER EDUCATOR DO?

«Knowledge is a social construction deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations. [It is] heavily dependent upon culture, context, custom and historical specificity (McLaren, 1994, p. 178). In a society dominated by wealthy interest groups which influence and shape us, it is difficult to determine the roots of problems which face us in education. The sophisticated, convoluted nature of the politics of knowledge - who has it and what's valid - permeates federal and state legislation aimed at education «reform.» Reform however, seems to take the same old stuff and rearrange it a bit, organize it differently. But in the end it's still the same old stuff. Simplistic explanations and solutions only tick the surface here and there, as a skipped stone on a pond, and then sink into obscurity in the mud and muck of thwarted optimism.

Whose interests are served if our public education system receives the money it deserves and is able to make independent decisions concerning the changes it wishes to implement? Imagine a truly educated, aware citizenry putting up with the self-serving patrons of politics. The status quo would surely be shaken. Ah, yes, here's the rub....

I can tell my students in my classroom management class that the more engaged their students are, and the more empowered they feel, and the more «control» that the teacher is willing to give up, the better the classes will be. The students in these classes will tend to value learning that they help to create. Their needs have a greater chance of being met. «Management» issues will diminish and discipline problems will be relatively rare. And so on and so on. Yes, I can TELL my students all of this. And I believe it to be true! However, telling my students simply doesn't work. They must participate in it. They must feel it. They must appreciate it from the inside, as an affective impact. THIS is what makes it stick. This is what allows them to trust that the community will actually work. This is what allows them to trust enough to give up control. Not only do they begin to trust in the idea, they begin to know the power of trusting their own students to create meaningful learning environments for themselves because they have done it as students. They begin to understand not only that their students want to learn but how they want to learn. In a positive, equal, respectful environment most students will flourish as they participate in their own creation of knowledge.

Ideally, trust and respect for the student must pervade the classroom community environment always, not just for one subject after lunch each day or twice a week for philosophy. If students learn to think for themselves and are respected for that, what happens then to their intellectually safe environment when they examine a math concept and are told, «We don't do that now. We only question and examine during philosophy....!» But alas, even the once or twice a week P4C hour is in jeopardy constantly where unsupported teachers succumb to the pressures of having to «cover» so much, especially in standards-driven districts.

Administrators want to see the evidence that doing philosophy or taking a constructivist, student-centered stance will enhance their students' test scores before they will «allow» it to be «taught» in their schools. One of the problems with «evidence» is with the kind of evidence that society deems valid or relevant. The most convincing is that of increased scores on standardized tests. In fact, that is often the ONLY evidence that makes any difference at all! Even though there have been empirical studies of Philosophy for Children,² the evidence, no matter how positive, is not the evidence that convinces most administrators to engage in staff development for their teachers. It's not a prepackaged «quick fix» with «teacher-proof» lessons - the stuff that disempowers teachers.

What we value is at the root of what we teach. Or it should be. Even allowing for philosophical differences, the disempowered teacher is often teaching toward what someone else values, teaching to empty narratives which go nowhere for our students. Even university professors who believe strongly in the ideas of student-centered learning, communities of inquiry, constructivism, and philosophical dialogue and the power of these ideas to affect genuine, positive change also have difficulty as they attempt to create courses which exemplify these ideas. As was stated earlier, students demand to learn the methods for which they believe they will be accountable. My students appreciate learning in the environment that I provide. However, even those who have vision can see the reality they must face in the schools. I don't know what kind of courage of conviction is necessary for me or for my students, or for the teachers out there. While I engage my students in a transformative model of education, concomitantly my compassion pushes me to incorporate survival skills for the traditional model. I wonder then if I am failing them. Do I fail them by yielding even a little to a bad system? Or do I fail them by offering them another view, a hopeful view which they feel they cannot bring to fruition? Ultimately, I think that by causing doubt, by planting a seed I am doing the right thing. Even if students cannot bring themselves to take a risk now or tomorrow or even this year, maybe at some point down the road, they will recognize possibility. If they have never had a chance to see what it's like outside of the box, then they would not even be able to recognize an opportunity when it presented itself. Awareness of possibility allows for freedom and choice. At the very least, we must give our students that. Patiently and caringly, we need to awaken our students. Of course, shaking them up, breaking open the box will lead to frustration. But that disillusion may lead to change. Blind compliance certainly won't.

NOTES

1. Washington State Commission on Student Learning, *Essential Academic Learning Requirements Technical Manual*, 1998.

2. Several empirical studies appeared in *Critical & Creative Thinking: the Australasian journal of philosophy for children*, Vol 6, No 1, March 1998. All studies focused on empirical gains of students when engaged in Philosophy for Children over a period of time. Two examples will give an idea of the kind of evidence measured by some of these studies. 1) Susan Gardner examined self-protective attitudes, social values, intolerance to ambiguity, external orientation, family self-esteem, global self-esteem and self-esteem in general. This was a two year study which empirically demonstrated qualitative changes in all but two areas: external orientation with respect to parents and self-esteem in general (although the students self-esteem scores were above the mid-point to begin with). 2) Richard Morehouse and Melinda Williams studied student use of argument skills over a period of three years and found that their ability to construct a written argument was enhanced.

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Address correspondence to:

Christine Gehrett

1812 W. Riverside #205

Spokane, WA 99201

e-mail: christine.gehrett@mail.ewu.edu

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