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Musings of a Teacher: Lessons Learned

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Preparing for my contribution to this Sheridan center presentation¹ has been quite a sobering exercise, especially since it occurs, coincidentally, some four decades to the actual month that I entered the bath academy of art for the purpose of training to become an art teacher. My arrival at the academy was the result of a career choice made during the final year of my secondary schooling in a small, independent, catholic boys' school in Hitchin, a Hertfordshire market town some thirty or so miles north of London. Career advising – what there was of it at St. Michael's college – was, as I see it now, a fairly simple task for the priests of the Augustinians of the assumption, the religious order in whose charge my parents had placed me to acquire a good catholic education.

In our headmaster's mind, at least, there were only three possible post-secondary school options for pupils to consider. The first and the one dearest to his heart was that we all acknowledge some higher calling and follow a path that would ultimately lead us towards priesthood. The second option was university, but this was a choice, in truth, open only to those academic high achievers who were most likely to secure sufficiently high grades in their "O" and "A" levels; national exams taken while at secondary school, which in the United Kingdom have a significant impact on school curricula and act as a passport to a university education. The third option was that we train to become teachers, and because at that time teacher preparation took place in teacher training colleges, not in universities, this was considered by my school to be by far the least prestigious career path. So, expressing the wish to become a teacher quite definitely relegated me to bottom tier of exiting pupils, and goodness knows what the priests really thought of my desire to become an art teacher.

I have often mused as to what it was in my early education that led me to pursue a career as a teacher. I realize now that it was not just a “what” but also a “who.” the “what” is fairly easy to explain – of all the subjects I studied at school, art was the one in which I felt truly engaged. And while I readily acknowledge that my talent at the time was much more akin to that of a sturdy artisan than a naturally gifted artist, I couldn’t think of anything that I would rather keep connected to in my professional life than art. But it wasn’t art alone that caught my imagination, it was the idea of teaching art to young people that I found so compelling, and that’s where the “who” comes into the equation.

In my position at RISD, I regularly interview prospective candidates for our master of arts in teaching program and I am now quite used to applicants sharing the fact that the single most significant influence on their decision to explore k–12 teaching as a career was the positive relationship they had had with their secondary school art teacher, and so, too, was this with me. it’s not that Charles Taylor, a former monk, was a gregarious individual, or indeed an innovative teacher, but what mattered to me was the way he showed compassion for each and every one of those he taught and it didn’t matter to him whether you were the most talented pupil in the class or the one that struggled to produce anything much more than a considered scribble. Teaching art was important to Mr. Taylor, but art was really just a vehicle to assist in the personal development of us all. I saw that teaching for him was much more about life than just merely the discipline itself. And what’s more, the art room was like none other of my school’s classrooms. It had a character all its own, it was a safe haven amidst the gray neutrality of all the other academic spaces. In truth, it was in this place that teacher became “mentor.” I share these formative experiences with you because there is a legacy here that continues to influence my teaching practice and it has arguably contributed more to the shaping of me as teacher than did any of my subsequent formal teacher-training.

I view my teaching career as occurring in two distinct yet interrelated phases. the first occurred within the k–12 arena where my teaching focused almost exclusively on teaching grades 9–12. Straight out of art school, I was hired to be the art teacher and assistant housemaster at a for boys boarding school in north Wales. a three-year stint teaching at a boys’ school in oxford followed this, after which I spent 15 years teaching and administering the art department of a co-educational comprehensive school (grades 7–12) just north of London. The penultimate year of my time in this position was actually spent here in the U.S. as a participant in the Fulbright teacher exchange program, where i was assigned to teach in a public school in northern Maine, a life-changing experience if there ever was one.

Indeed, it was during this year teaching in Maine that I really began to examine my practice, brought about in part by the clear fact that I was experiencing considerable culture shock. gone was the formality I had become so accustomed to in my teaching in England and Wales; gone, at least in the art classroom, was any semblance of an art curriculum to which I could shape my teaching within grades and across grades; and finally, gone was the quality of independent thinking and action so readily demonstrated by my British pupils. My introduction to teaching in an American public school felt at times somewhat like a trial by fire as i naively attempted to replicate both the content and teaching strategies that worked so well for me in England. Fortunately for me and for my students, I soon recognized the foolhardiness of trying to replicate a British model of teaching within an American school and I shifted my focus away from content that I thought needed to be delivered to a much greater concern for the interests of my students. i am not suggesting that I abandoned any notion that there was stuff to be taught, but preoccupation with discipline-centered teaching softened in favor of a greater concern for the student as an individual.

teaching for that year at Orono high school caused me to examine a series of assumptions about curriculum content, study methods, and my own teaching practice, and it marked what i view as the beginning of the second phase of my teaching career, but this time at the college and university level. my reflection on practice was instrumental to my decision to return to England for just one year before resigning and returning to the U.S., but this time as a graduate student at the Ohio state university where, concurrent with my studies, a teaching associate ship afforded me the opportunity to teach a number of art education-related courses.

What quite astounded me was the assumption on behalf of the professors in my department that because I was by all accounts a successful k-12 teacher, I would be equally effective in the college classroom. I certainly did not have the benefit of a seminar series such as that provided by the Sheridan center to provide me with an orientation to the culture of college teaching, nor had I the opportunity to serve an apprenticeship as a teaching assistant to a professor before taking on a class of my own. in my case, it was during the second week of the quarter that the faculty member to whom I had been assigned as a TA informed me that because of the demands of her research, I would be taking over her class – a class that was steeped in the traditions and practices of American art education, of which I was sadly under-educated. while my knowledge of American educational systems and curricular practices was admittedly limited, my experience of teaching young people was not, so as I charted my course i drew heavily on my

experiences as an art teacher, which gave me, as described by my undergraduate students in their course evaluations, an “authentic voice.”

This is a quality that I strive hard to maintain in my current RISD teaching. It would be all too easy to view curriculum design and research in art and design education, my teaching specialties, just as discrete courses distanced from the complexities, dare I say realities, of public schools, but I make a special effort to be very present in various capacities amidst the swirl of reform and renewal that is reshaping public education in this state and, especially, in the city of Providence. I am quite sure that my active presence within the arena of school change informs my teaching, which in turn benefits my students.

My tracing of the line that connects my current teaching practice to prior experiences is not comprehensively scribed due in part to the time constraints of a presentation such as this, but I have chosen to highlight moments within my teaching career, not because they are especially significant or insightful, but because they hopefully describe how particular experiences mold the way we do things and the way we teach. Teaching, for me, is a dynamic enterprise; it requires teacher and student to enter into a collaborative relationship in which both are partners in learning. I am sure that as you all embark on this course and prepare for your own teaching you will be seeking advice from all quarters to assist in what, for some of you, may appear to be a formidable task.

So, what can I offer in terms of concrete suggestions that might contribute to a greater degree of effectiveness in teaching? The following are just a few things born out of personal experience that you might wish to consider: (1) preparedness, (2) the establishment of expectations, (3) transparency in assessment and evaluation, (4) feedback, and (5) the quality of the invitation.

I have become increasingly aware of the importance of being extremely well prepared to teach. It may appear somewhat self-evident, but the more prepared one is prior to teaching a class, the more freedom will be afforded you during the process of teaching itself. Preparedness also can have a significant impact on improving the quality of your communication.

One can establish expectations in a whole host of ways, but I have found that good syllabus design, in particular, is a really effective mechanism through which your expectations can be articulated in a formal and recorded manner. It alarms me how bare bones my first RISD syllabi now appear to me compared to those I currently distribute to my students. The skeletal documents of the early 1990s have given way to an extremely comprehensive

description of the scope, sequence, and requirements for my courses. And as the syllabus' primary audience is students, perhaps its most important characteristic is clarity.

Of all matters that surround teaching, assessment (the mechanism through which student performance is identified) and evaluation (the determination of the quality of a student's performance) are matters that invariably cause, at some time or other, both faculty and students a degree of angst. Throughout my entire time at art school, I was never really certain that I understood the basis upon which my professors evaluated my work. The process of evaluation was shrouded in mystery, with students trying to second-guess the professor's criteria. I have found there to be significant gains – especially for students – in making the assessment process entirely transparent with clearly articulated criteria aligned to the course objectives. With this information available, students have a mechanism that assists them in conducting a self-evaluation of their performance, safe in the belief that some extrinsic criterion will not be arbitrarily inserted by the professor at the last moment and for which the student is not prepared. I, for instance, very much prize risk-taking, the willingness to accept criticism, and the ability to be self-reflective, so these characteristics of student performance are stated very clearly in my syllabus.

Very much complementary to systems of assessment and evaluation is the matter of feedback. Instructors can easily assume that students are able to make an accurate assessment of their performance at a particular stage of the course, but I have often found this not to be the case – so I now make much greater effort to provide students with a steady flow of written feedback that is supported by individual conferences mid and end-of-semester. These formally scheduled sessions, which students are required to attend, are supplemented by office hours, which provide a time for the students themselves to initiate an advising meeting.

Finally, in talking to my master of arts in teaching students about strategies to motivate elementary and secondary school students, I find myself increasingly saying that motivation is really about the quality of the teacher's "invitation." indeed, I firmly believe good teaching is really determined to a great extent by the quality of one's invitation to one's students to collaborate in a journey of discovery. the shaping of the invitation is undoubtedly both an art and a craft and improves with experience, a willingness to listen, a willingness to reflect, and, finally, a willingness to re-design.

postscript: I mentioned early in my September 15, 2003 Sheridan Teaching seminar presentation that it occurred exactly 40 years to the month since I graduated from St. Michael's college, a small independent English catholic boys' school that lauded those

graduating pupils who pursued vocations that led to the priesthood above all other “career” choices and considered that teaching was quite definitely a third-tier career option. I have to report that a month after my Sheridan Presentation, I returned to England to attend school reunion, my first in 40 years, and while there was not a single priest to be found among the assembled alumni, there was a sizeable contingent of teachers and headteachers!

1 This paper was originally read at the opening Sheridan Teaching seminar lecture on September 15, 2003. This annual lecture features senior brown and RISD faculty describing how they developed their teaching practice and how they reflect upon and assess their teaching. Prof. Sproll is kind enough to permit us to print his remarks in this issue of the teaching exchange.