

Experiencing Teaching

Passion, hope, doubt, fear, exhilaration, weariness, collegueship, loneliness, glorious defeats, hollow victories, and, above all, the certainties of surprise and ambiguity—how on earth can a single word or phrase begin to capture the multilayered complexity of what it feels like to teach? This rhetorical question holds as much power for me now as it did when I first explored it fifteen years ago. And I still feel that the answer to it is that no single term or descriptor can possibly capture the full reality of teaching. Personally, I would mistrust anyone who dared to sum up the experience in a simple homily or set of rules. There are no seven habits of effective teaching, no five rules for pedagogic success, and if someone tries to tell you there is, you should steer clear of them as fast as you can! For the truth is (and now I'm going sum up in the way I just criticized!) teaching is frequently a gloriously messy pursuit in which shock, contradiction, and risk are endemic. Our lives as teachers often boil down to our best attempts to muddle through the complex contexts and configurations that our classrooms represent.

Muddling Through as the Honorable Response to Uncertainty

Muddling through a situation sounds like something you do before you've learned the truly professional response to it. It seems random, uncoordinated, and not a little amateurish. But muddling through

should not be thought of as a haphazard process, nor as somehow dishonorable. Muddling through is about all you can do when no clear guidelines exist to help you deal with unexpected contingencies. When a racially motivated fistfight broke out on my second day of teaching, all I could do was try to muddle through. Because the institution in which I was working had the word college in its title (Lewisham and Eltham College of Further Education), I had images of my classrooms as gentle oases of reflection peopled by eager young minds desperate for intellectual engagement. The second day I was leading a discussion with an all-male group of sixteen-year-olds when an English boy and a West Indian boy began trading punches. Immediately the thought flashed through my mind “What would John Dewey do?” When nothing came to mind I realized I would have to muddle through the situation the best I could (an intuition that accurately describes the rest of my life as a teacher and person) and hope that I could learn enough while doing that to make sure it wouldn’t happen again. Somehow (I don’t remember how) I managed to calm things down enough to finish the class. And for whatever reason I had no more fights break out in class that year.

As we muddle through different teaching contexts we usually draw on insights and intuitions born of experience. Sometimes these serve us well, but sometimes we quickly realize their limitations. For example, when something that worked wonderfully in class last semester only serves to provoke anger or confusion in students this time around, the highly situational nature of teaching is underscored. Administrators, politicians, and evaluative systems often don’t like to hear that teaching is situational and resolutely plow ahead assuming that standardized indicators of good teaching do exist that can be proven to be reliable and valid across multiple contexts. I have spent my life in such systems and, while they may make the administrative task of assigning annual scores to a teacher’s performance easier, any correlation they have with an accurate assessment of what actually goes on in a classroom is often purely coincidental.

As you can see from the paragraph above, this is going to be an opinionated, some would say polemical, book. But the skepticism expressed above is not just my opinion. A host of ethnographic studies of teacher's lives (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999; Goodson, 1992; Cohen, 1991), collections of teachers' stories (Thomas, 1995; Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995; Logan, 1993; Isenberg, 1994), and descriptions of teachers' thought processes (Day, Calderhead, and Denicolo, 1993; Carlgren, Handal, and Vaage, 1994; Schubert and Ayers, 1992) indicate that most teachers find themselves muddling through their careers. They report their work to be highly emotional and bafflingly chaotic. Career counselors and popular films may portray teachers as transformative heroes skillfully navigating classroom dilemmas, but actual teacher narratives (Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2000) emphasize much more how teaching is riddled with irresolvable dilemmas and complex uncertainties.

Some of these dilemmas, such as how to strike the right balance between being supportive to students and challenging them with tasks they resist, or how to create activities that simultaneously address all learning styles and racial traditions in a culturally and academically diverse classroom, exist in any contemporary institution. But many of these pedagogic dilemmas are compounded by the market-driven, organizational effectiveness paradigm that has taken hold in higher education. As colleges find themselves under more and more pressure to attract students, create new programs, and move up in the *US News & World Report* standings, faculty find themselves working longer and harder than ever before. It is hard to imagine how you can make a difference in your students' lives (something most of us probably want to do) when you're teaching five to six courses a semester, have long advisee lists, and are required to serve on important committees and attend endless (and often apparently pointless) department or faculty meetings. Add to this the pressure to recruit students in the community, the expectation that you will bring in grant monies to help cover your salary, and the injunction that you publish and display other forms of professional engagement.

The problem researchers in higher education should study is not why college teachers quit but why they stay!

Part of the answer to that question may be that there is sometimes a visceral joy in muddling through unanticipated classroom situations. Everyday circumstances force us to make a dazzlingly quick series of judgments about what to do next in class, how to respond to unforeseen events, or how to translate a broad pedagogic or philosophical purpose into an immediate action. When the Internet connection fails, your PowerPoint presentation dies and you have no back-up overheads, when students viciously attack each other in a discussion or answer questions in ways that suggests they have completely misunderstood what you've been trying to demonstrate for the last twenty minutes, or when they ask you probing questions and you have no clue about the answers, you hang for a moment (sometimes for what seems like an uncomfortable eternity) above a precipice of uncertainty. Sometimes this experience is wholly embarrassing or demoralizing, and you decide then and there you were not cut out for teaching and should quit as soon as possible. But at other times an intuitive "gut" response comes to you, and you find yourself doing something you've never dreamed of doing before and being astounded that it actually has positive effects!

An example of stumbling blindly into something approaching an appropriate response happened to me one day when I had prepared a series of dazzlingly provocative questions for classroom discussion that I felt were bound to generate heated, rich, and informed conversation amongst students. I asked the first question and was met with blank stares and total silence. After counting off fifteen seconds quietly in my head, I then asked the follow-up question I had prepared. Again, silence. Now I started to panic and found myself answering the question I'd just asked. I stopped myself and raised the third question I'd prepared beforehand, the one that I imagined I would be struggling to raise about fifteen minutes before the end of the class after a vigorous and sustained conversation. Dreadful, shaming quiet met my question along with the sound of my own blood rushing in my ears.

With no forethought I found myself saying something like the following:

I know that speaking in discussions is a nerve-wracking thing and that your fear of making public fools of yourselves can inhibit you to the point of nonparticipation. I, myself, feel very nervous as a discussion participant and spend a lot of my time carefully rehearsing my contributions so as not to look foolish when I finally speak. So please don't feel that you have to speak in order to gain my approval or to show me that you're a diligent student. It's quite acceptable to say nothing in the session, and there'll be no presumption of failure on your part. I don't equate silence with mental inertia. Obviously, I hope you will want to say something and speak up, but I don't want you to do this just for the sake of appearances. So let's be comfortable with a prolonged period of silence that might, or might not, be broken. When anyone feels like saying something, just speak up. And if no one does, then we'll move on to something else.

To my astonishment this brief speech, born of total panic, seemed to unleash the conversational floodgates and a veritable torrent of student comment (well, it seemed like a torrent after the silence up to that point) burst forth. After class that day a couple of students came up to me and told me that they never usually spoke in class discussions but that because I'd told them they didn't need to talk they relaxed to the point where they felt emboldened enough to say something. Apparently, my taking the pressure of performance anxiety off their shoulders, of their not feeling they had to be brilliant conversational actors to earn my approval, had removed a barrier to their talking in class. Subsequently, my suggestion that teachers start off discussions with a declaration regarding students' right to silence found its way into a book I published with

Stephen Preskill on *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005).

I wish I could say I thought this all out beforehand, that I knew in advance about the way in which performance anxiety constituted a barrier to student participation, and had therefore worked out a shrewd pedagogic tactic to deal with this. That would be a lie. What I enjoyed seemed like pure dumb luck. And yet, to call it dumb luck is perhaps to underestimate the informed intuitive rumblings that lay behind this improvisation. The rapidly compressed sequence of judgments I was engaged in as a response to student silence can be described as practical reasoning (Brookfield, 2000). Practical reasoning (in other professions often referred to as clinical reasoning) is the reasoning we conduct in the midst of situations that call for immediate action. It is unpremeditated and instantaneous but that does not mean it is uninformed. On the contrary, clinical reasoning is highly mindful, entailing a speedy yet intentionally thoughtful response to unanticipated events. Given the daily necessity of teachers to engage in such reasoning, I want to elaborate on it a little further.

Practical Reasoning as Muddling Through

I said earlier that muddling through situations is neither random nor amateurish. Or, at least, it need not be. Muddling through can be done well or badly. When it is done well, it involves the application of informed practical reasoning.

Practical reasoning comprises three interrelated skills of scanning, appraisal, and action. *Scanning* is the act of rapid apprehension that describes the ways we speedily determine what are the central features of a situation. In scanning a situation we quickly decide what its boundaries are, which patterns of the situation are familiar and paralleled in past experience, which are in new or unusual configurations, and which are the cues we observe that most need attention. Scanning is the initial sweep or experiential trawl we undertake to diagnose the big picture. In the discussion

example above, my experiential sweep diagnosed the “problem” as student silence and the contribution my behavior had made to this.

In the *appraisal* phase of practical reasoning we call on our interpretive resources to help us understand the situation correctly. These resources include our previous experiences of similar situations and the general guidelines we have learned as part of our professional preparation or in-service development. In the case of the silent discussion, I knew that I should have made sure that any questions I asked would not have a “yes/no” response. I knew too that after posing a question I should have counted silently to fifteen so as to allow plenty of time for students to collect their thoughts and gather the courage needed to participate.

During appraisal we also call on our own intuition. We attend to the instinctive analyses and responses that immediately suggest themselves as relevant. In the discussion described I had an instinctive sense that what was stopping students speaking was their perception that “good” participation meant they somehow had to be brilliant and profound. This is what the French cultural critic Michel Foucault (1980) called a subscription to invisible norms of discourse. Students had internalized an unspoken, invisible norm that good discussion participants were supposed to speak frequently and in a confident and highly articulate fashion. Something told me I had to get rid of this feeling in students, which is what my speech tried to do.

In the *action* phase of practical reasoning, we sort through the interpretations we have gathered. We decide which seem to fit most closely the situation we have scanned and, on the basis of these, we take action. Scanning and appraisal involve looking for patterns and broad similarities between a new situation and previous experiences. In action, however, we judge the accuracy and validity of the assumptions and interpretations we have gathered. This occurs through a number of interconnected processes. We sift through past experiences and judge the closeness of their fit to the current situation. We intentionally follow prescribed professional protocols and

introduce experimental adaptations of these when they suggest themselves. If we are peer teaching, we consult colleagues in the midst of situations regarding which of our instinctive judgments and readings we should take seriously and which we should hold in abeyance.

As a consequence of this third phase, we take action based on the procedures and responses that seem to make the most sense in a situation. Somehow my process of practical reasoning ended up with me blurting out the comments quoted earlier in an attempt to rid students of their adherence to the invisible norm of what constituted “good” discussion participation. I reasoned that tackling head on the issue of what participation looked like, acknowledging the legitimacy of silent listening, and emphasizing that good discussants did not have to be a cross between Cornel West and Gertrude Stein was crucial. After seeing it work in that particular situation, the practice of starting discussions with such a statement then became an explicit and regular part of my practice.

Teaching as White-Water Rafting

Even the most sophisticated practical reasoning, however, cannot rid classroom life of its endemic unpredictability. Teaching is in many ways the educational equivalent of white-water rafting. Periods of apparent calm are interspersed with sudden frenetic turbulence. Tranquility co-exists with excitement, reflection with action. If we are fortunate enough to negotiate rapids successfully, we feel a sense of self-confident exhilaration. If we capsize we start downstream with our self-confidence shaken, awash in self-doubt. These are the days we vow to quit at the end of the semester. All teachers regularly capsize, and all teachers worth their salt regularly ask themselves whether they have made the right career choice. Experiencing ego-deflating episodes of disappointment and demoralization is quite normal. Indeed, being aware that we regularly face inherently irresolvable dilemmas in our teaching, and that we hurt from these, is an important indicator that we are critically alert.

Teachers who say that no such dilemmas exist in their lives are, in my view, either exhibiting denial on a massive scale or getting through the school day on automatic pilot. We will all retire, get fired, or quit being unable to resolve certain teaching dilemmas for the simple reason that these have no solution. The most we can hope for in facing them is that we settle on responses that make sense for the context in which we find ourselves, and that lessen rather than exacerbate the tensions we inevitably feel. I know I will never strike the right balance between being credible and authentic because no such perfect balance exists. I know I will never connect with everyone's preferred learning style 100 percent of the time because the diversity of my students' personalities, experiences, racial and cultural traditions, and perceptual filters (as well as my own personality, racial identity, learning style, cultural formation, and professional training) make that impossible. And I know too that I will never judge correctly exactly when I should intervene to help a struggling student and when I should leave her to find her own way through her learning challenge.

Knowing about the enduring reality of such dilemmas, I want to make sure that the people I work with are also alert to them. For example, whenever I am on an interviewing committee deciding who will be appointed to a new teaching position, I always ask candidates which of the teaching dilemmas or problems they face they will go to their grave without ever having solved. If a teacher tells me they have no such dilemmas or problems, then mentally I move a long way toward striking them off my list of "possibles." I don't want to teach with someone who either refuses to acknowledge that such dilemmas exist or, knowing of their existence, chooses to ignore them.

It seems to me that classrooms can be thought of as arenas of confusion where teachers are struggling gladiators of ambiguity. Just when we think we have anticipated every eventuality, something unexpected happens that elicits new responses and causes us to question our assumptions of good practice. Yet admitting to feeling

unsure, realizing that our actions sometimes contradict our words, or acknowledging that we are not in control of every event is anathema to many of us. In our heads a good teacher is like a skilled archer with a quiver full of powerful arrows. Whenever a problem arises we feel we should be able to reach into the quiver, choose the appropriate arrow, fit it to our bowstring, and fire it straight at the heart of the problem, thereby resolving it. Appearing confused, hesitant, or baffled seems a sign of weakness. And admitting that we feel tired, unmotivated, or bored seems a betrayal of the humanitarian, charismatic zest we are supposed to exhibit.

When all these feelings arise, as they are bound to with alarming regularity, two responses are typically called forth. One is to be weighed down with guilt at our apparent failure to embody the idealized characteristics of a properly humane, omniscient, perfectly balanced teacher. This response illustrates the finding in Britzman's (1991) study of beginning teachers that those new to this work quickly learn the myth that "everything depends on the teacher." This myth holds that if the class has gone well it is because you have been particularly charismatic or motivational that day, or you have been unusually adept at diagnosing students' learning styles and designing the day's activities to respond to these. On the other hand, if the class has bombed or gone awry, you assume it must be because of your incompetence. Or maybe you deny that anything untoward has happened saying, in effect, that your performance has been exemplary but that your students, colleagues, or superiors are too narrow-minded, or unsophisticated, to see this fact clearly.

The most reasonable response when things inevitably fall apart is somewhere between these two extremes of self-flagellating guilt and self-delusional denial. It is to accept that when one is traversing terrains of ambiguity, episodes of apparent chaos and contradiction are inevitable. It requires recognizing that the old military acronym SNAFU ("Situation Normal, All Fouled Up" to put it politely) most approximates the practice of teaching. However, such recognition usually comes only after a series of profoundly unsettling experiences.

For those of us trained to believe that college classrooms are rational sites of intellectual analysis, the shock of crossing the border between reason and chaos is intensely disorienting. It is an experiential sauna-bath, a plunge from the reassuring, enervating warmth of believing that classrooms are ordered arenas into the ice-cold reality of wrestling with constant dilemmas and contradictions. What helps us in our struggle to deal with these dilemmas is the kind of practical reasoning described earlier that makes our muddling through informed rather than haphazard. Our classroom practices might seem to be contradictory (for example, sometimes the best way for me to help learners struggle with difficult subject matter is not to offer them help but to let them work through these alone), but this doesn't mean we should throw our hands in the air and succumb to numbing perplexity. As we shall see in the next chapter, when we research our practice to understand better what is happening in our classrooms, we often discover in students' comments suggestions that help us deal with the kinds of problems we encounter.

Growing into the Truth of Teaching

Truth is a slippery little bugger. As soon as someone tells me they have the truth about something I get suspicious. Yet, the truth is (are you now suitably suspicious?!) that each of us comes to certain understandings and insights regarding teaching that just seem so *right*, so analytically consistent, and so confirmed by our experiences that describing them as truthful seems entirely justified. The truth I am talking about here is not universal truth, the grand narrative of standardized pedagogy that says that everyone should think, believe, or teach in a certain way. It is a more personal truth, one smelted and shaped in the fire of our practice so that it fits the situations we deal with every day. In some ways it is close to Polyani's (1974) notion of implicit personal knowledge, the certainties that lurk in the dim corners of consciousness. Over a period of time each of us develops this personal truth to the point where we depend on

it and sometimes declare it. I've been teaching since 1970, and it's only in the last few years that I've felt confident enough to do some truth telling to myself about the frustrations and fears that are always there in my work. I feel I've grown into the truth of my own teaching.

By growing into the truth of teaching I mean developing a trust, a sense of intuitive confidence, in the accuracy and validity of one's judgments and insights. Much of my career has been spent growing into truth. I now know that I will always feel like an impostor and believe that it's only a matter of time before students and colleagues realize I know, and can do, nothing. I know that I will never be able to initiate activities that keep all students engaged all the time. I know that attending to my credibility at the outset of a new course is crucial and that it is dangerous to engage in too much self-deprecation (as I did two sentences ago). I know that the regular use of examples, anecdotes, and autobiographical illustrations in explaining difficult concepts is strongly appreciated by students. I know that making full disclosure of my expectations and agendas is necessary if I am to establish an authentic presence in a classroom. I know that as the teacher I always have power in the classroom and that I can never be a fly on the wall withering away to the point that students don't notice I'm in the room. I know that modeling critical thinking is crucial to helping students learn it, but that students will probably resist critical thinking whatever I do. I know too that resistance to learning is a highly predictable presence in my classrooms and that its very presence does not mean I'm a failure. And I know that I cannot motivate anyone to learn if at a very basic level they don't wish to. All I can do is try to remove whatever organizational, psychological, cultural, interpersonal, or pedagogic barriers are getting in the way of them learning, provide whatever modeling I can, build the best possible case for learning, and then cross my fingers and hope for the best.

These truths are experiential truths, confirmed repeatedly by my own analyses, colleagues' perceptions, and students' anonymous feedback. They have not been revealed to me in a series of Road to

Damascus epiphanies; there have been no instantaneous conversions. Instead, there has been an incremental building of recognition and confidence, a growing readiness to accept that these things are true for me, Stephen Brookfield, even when they are contradicted by conventional wisdom, omitted from manuals of best practices, or denounced by authority. What has been interesting to me is that as I have grown confident enough to speak these truths publicly, I have had them confirmed by strangers. Just to take the example of the first of the truths mentioned above (my knowing that I'm an impostor), I have had countless teachers tell me that I put into words the exact feeling of impostorship that they felt. Apparently it was comforting to hear or read a supposed "expert" talk about feeling like an impostor, because it named as a universal reality something they thought was wholly idiosyncratic, only felt by them.

It's a bit depressing to think that sometimes you take seriously your own private disquiet only after a supposed "expert" names this disquiet and also claims to suffer from it. Many teachers have been tricked by the epistemological distortion of "Deep Space Nine" (Brookfield, 1995, pp. 18–20)—which holds that the answer to their problems must be out there somewhere—into believing that their concerns and anxieties are irrational or irrelevant. When a new pedagogic strategy doesn't work as it should, when the square peg of a best practice gleaned from a manual is forced into the round hole of our classroom, we often conclude that it is us, not the strategy or practice, that is at fault. If only we could be more diligent or sophisticated in applying these (we think to ourselves), we would be successful. The fact that such approaches are not borne out by our private truths is evidence (we conclude) that these truths are wrong. Many of us are so cowed by the presumed wisdom of authorities in our field (they must know what they're doing, they've written books!) that we dismiss our private misgivings as fantasies until an expert legitimizes them by voicing them.

How can we accept that sometimes *we* are the experts on our teaching? When we start to think about how to deal with the

problems we face in class, our instinct is to turn to consultants, texts, or faculty development specialists to help us. The assumption seems to be that we will only stumble on useful insights or information for dealing with our problems by going outside of our own experience and consulting external sources. Far too many teachers view even a cursory reflection on their personal experience as essentially worthless. I believe that the opposite is true, that the starting point for dealing with teachers' problems should be teachers' own experiences.

In this regard we can learn a great deal from the ideas and practices of the adult educator Myles Horton (Horton, 1990; Horton and Freire, 1990; Jacobs, 2003). Myles was the founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and he spent his life as an activist educator working with labor unions, the civil rights movement, and various grassroots organizations. Although known chiefly for his social activism, he also worked out a theory of how to help people learn from their experience. "Helping people learn what they do" is his succinct description of how to get teachers to learn from their experiences.

When I heard Myles speak this phrase to a group of educators in New York, I was taken immediately with how it captured what I saw happening in the best kind of teacher conversation groups. In these groups people come to realize the value of their own experiences, they take a critical perspective on these, and they learn how to use this reflection to help them deal with whatever problems they face. In Myles' words, "I knew that it was necessary . . . to draw out of people their experience, and help them value group experiences and learn from them. It was essential that people learned to make decisions on the basis of analyzing and trusting their own experience, and learning from what was good and bad. . . . I believed then and still believe that you learn from your experience of doing something and from your analysis of that experience" (Horton, 1990, p. 57). As I work to get teachers to take their own experiences seriously, Myles' words are always at the front of my mind.

Of course, experience can sometimes be a terrible teacher. Simply having experiences does not imply that they are reflected on, understood, or analyzed critically. Individual experiences can be distorted, self-fulfilling, unexamined, and constraining. In fact, it is a mistake to think that we *have* experiences in the sense that our own being stands alone while the river of experience flows around us. Events happen to us, but experiences are constructed *by* us as we make sense of these events. Neither is experience inherently enriching. Experience can teach us habits of bigotry, stereotyping, and disregard for significant but inconvenient information. It can also be narrowing and constraining, causing us to evolve and transmit ideologies that skew irrevocably how we interpret the world. A group's pooling of individual experiences can be a myopic exchange of prejudices. Even when cross-disciplinary groups work on the same problem (for example, when teachers of mathematics, psychology, athletics, literature, theatre, and engineering join together to look at how they can respond to the diversity of ability levels, ethnic backgrounds, and learning styles in their classes), there can still be a form of groupthink. This is caused by these teachers being drawn from the same class, race, cultural group, and geographical area, and by their having gone through similar educational experiences.

There is also the possibility that we can analyze our experience enthusiastically to help us deal with problems that we think are the chief obstacles to pedagogic fulfillment and happiness, but that this analysis can be superficial and ignore the political and cultural constraints we face. What seem to be urgent short-term problems requiring our immediate attention can divert our attention from longer-term disturbances. What looks like a little local difficulty confined to our particular classroom, subject area, or students is often symptomatic of an underlying structural problem. We can focus on changing classroom rules of procedure and ignore the fact that the organizational reward system that students and teachers follow, or the ways learning is commodified in the wider society, are what really need to be changed.

Despite these caveats concerning the uncritical celebration of personal experience, the pressures on us to disregard our privately crafted truths in favor of expert pronouncements are so strong that sometimes we need to err on the side of taking experience more seriously. If you don't already do so, then, you should begin to trust your inner voice a little more and accept the possibility that your instincts, intuitions, and insights might possess as much validity as those of experts in the field. You need to recognize the fact that in the contexts in which you work *you* are the expert. Until you do these things, there is a real danger that a profoundly debilitating sense of inadequacy may settle on you. You'll assume that plans going awry, students not being engaged, assignments not producing the learning you'd hoped for, and evaluations of your teaching being decidedly mixed are personal errors rather than predictable realities. Moreover, you'll assume that these supposed mistakes are your fault, a result of your individual inability to be smart, tough, or charismatic enough as a teacher. I hope that in the following chapters you will recognize aspects of yourself in the situations I describe, the dilemmas I pose, and the responses I suggest. Best of all, I hope that as you read my words you will find that the truth into which you are growing is increasingly confirmed.