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Ray Lawson
Rochester Public Schools, Retired, Rochester, MI

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Perspective of Learning Together

Ray Lawson

*Rochester Public Schools, Retired
Rochester, MI*

Hoping to become a teacher, I enrolled at Central State Teachers College, now known as Central Michigan University, in 1936. During the next four years, my aim was to find ways of eliminating my boredom and the drudgery of studying language arts. Repeating grammar every year made no sense except that it had always been part of the curriculum, although the use of grammar exercises had not demonstrated how they could affect writing, particularly when so little writing existed. Reading novels like *Silas Marner* or *Moby Dick* (core novels at that time) did not stimulate the students because of the language and situations. Studying a Shakespearian play each year seemed not to apply to American literature or the lives of the students during the Great Depression of 1929.

Through the study of psychology and the philosophy of education, I found ways of making changes. I discovered ways of evaluating a student's progress without giving a test; learning about the needs of students, reading readiness and all the other elements of learning to become a teacher. From all of these great thoughts, I had developed a philosophy of what I wanted to do, and I had learned the importance of the individual and the effect of one person upon another, including the effect a teacher could have upon students and, indeed, their effects upon the teacher. A dream.

Following graduation and the experience of a first-year teacher, I had a five-year hiatus in the Army. Although I found the military rather difficult, I learned some important practices of teaching and how to relate with other people. One effective experience I would be able to use in my teaching after the war was my assignment to teach "illiterates" how to sign their names and how to read simple instructions. Many of these soldiers had problems of language because

English was a second language for many of them (mainly Hispanic). To assist in this project, I recruited elementary teachers from Galveston, Texas, where I was stationed at Fort Crockett during the war. I also learned that some of the soldiers really wanted to learn and that some were there because of being ordered. Because of these conditions, I decided to meet them as people rather than by military rank.

Not knowing my particular military rank or cultural background, they were able to discuss problems and work together to solve their problems. The system worked because they learned how to write simple words, enough for letters home; and I learned a great deal about their dialects through which I had a better understanding of them.

When I came to Rochester, Michigan, to teach English, what a shock it was to find that the education system—considered a very good one—had not changed much from what I had experienced in elementary school and high school. My perception was that teaching meant freedom—freedom of choosing the "right" steps possible. A shock. I learned that most of the teachers were marching to the music of tradition by using the same lesson plans from year to year and reading the same books. After all, they were the teachers, the authorities. What the teachers were willing to give me, however, was advice about what to expect and how to survive. Most teachers began their advice by saying, "Show them who is boss and use the authority you have in the classroom. Give them heavy assignments and a great deal of homework to keep them busy." It was interesting that they rarely if ever referred to the students as students but rather as "them."

I began to wonder why I left the Army because here was a system where the authorities told or ordered the students, never giving them an opportunity to make a choice. I quickly perceived that my pre-conceptions about teaching would be tested and certainly have to hurdle many obstacles. These perceptions dealt with the academic freedom, student/teacher relations in order to promote good learning and evaluation, especially self-evaluation without so much emphasis upon testing.

Fortunately, the superintendent was a man far ahead of his time and believed that a good school system should make decisions based upon democratic principles—a perception missing during my military career. He suggested several changes in the curriculum and recommended several committees that teachers could choose to participate in if they were interested; however, in the end, the choice of committee could no longer be voluntary because teachers avoided these opportunities. Although the faculty listened to what he had to say, they objected to doing something coming down from the administration, the Board of Education, or the State. The general comment was, “Why doesn’t he tell us what he wants done, and we will do it.” Although he could have told them, the moment their doors closed, they could continue down the same old path. No change. Because of my military experience, I could not understand why teachers would be so opposed to this kind of democratic change.

One of the superintendent’s ways of bringing about change so that there would be more emphasis placed upon the student-teacher relationship, particularly to show teachers the importance to meet student needs, was organizing a series of weekly inservices for the year and emphasizing the importance of mental health for students and teachers. These meetings stressed the point that whatever the teachers did would affect their mental health. Although the teachers may have developed lesson plans for the entire year, it soon became evident that even a single daily lesson plan could not be applied to all the students at one time. At this point, I began to perceive the reality of my perception of academic freedom.

Learning a Lesson: Teaching Students to Read, Write and Dance

I learned a lesson at this point because I had a class of tenth grade boys who neither read nor wrote. At the end of the first semester in 1947, I failed them and reported to the superintendent the problem. He indicated he would search for a teacher to take over the class. When I returned at the beginning of the second semester, he apologized for not being able to find a teacher and asked whether I would be willing to return to the class. He said, “You can do anything you want to except throw them out of the window.” When

I returned to the class, I suggested they should get together in groups to discuss what we could do to keep from failing again. When I asked for their suggestion, they said, “Will you teach us how to dance?” My reaction was one of horror; therefore, I said, “This is a class of English.” Their response was “You asked, and we answered.” After a moment of silence, I said, “I will.”

I could sense a change of attitude and realized the importance of listening to students about what they need and want. They had been excluded from many school activities because of their embarrassment about not being able to do what others did. I promised to teach dancing but that I would not turn the class into a gym class. Along with the dancing, I taught more writing with models and reading by working together than I anticipated. No grammar. We talked about literature. We read together and had great discussions about ideas that related to their lives. Not having to worry about remembering insignificant details for a test, they felt free and relaxed to let the literature speak to them. What is more important, they included me as part of the group.

The other English teachers were very critical because I was not teaching grammar and vocabulary or preparing the students for their next English classes. They were sure I would not last long as a teacher in that school because these students would not be prepared for college or even a job. Very critical, they were. A few of the students, however, did go on to college or vocational schools. Most of them became successful farmers. Thirty years later, one of the men, a successful businessman, tapped me on the shoulder to remind me that he was one of the boys whom I taught to dance.

With the lack of a positive reaction from the other seasoned teachers, it was a great feeling to have the support of the administration—the kind of support of which I was assured for the next fifty-eight years, including excellent Principals to help me weather the storms in educational change—men and women who had student values at heart. While working on my Master of Arts degree at the University of Michigan, Professors Fred Walcott, a proponent of cooperative learning; A.K. Stevens, a promoter of language arts change in secondary school; and Charles Carpenter Fries, an authority on American Language and usage, were all excellent mentors in helping me bring about change in educational practices.

Learning More about Choice and the Responsibilities of Freedom in Education

One of the cardinal principles in this search for freedom in education was making choices for both the teachers and the students. When talking to teachers about democratic way of teaching, their response was, “If you ask students what they would like to do, they will say, ‘Let us sleep.’” Why not? For five years, I rarely if ever had an opportunity to make a choice, and I was expected to do. I was not asked whether I wanted to teach a class of “illiterates” how to write their names or read but was told to do it. At this point, my perception was that not only teachers but also students should make choices.

In talking to teachers about having choices, their views were, “How can students make a choice when they do not know what the choice may entail, or they do not have enough background to know what should happen in an English class?” The teachers’ attitude at this point about my teaching was, “He’s just a young inexperienced teacher, but he may learn.” Although they made me feel I was not in-step, I felt compelled to find the freedom I perceived about this career.

When I gave my students a choice, and they chose dancing because of what it meant to them socially, I discovered the real meaning of the need for people to have choices. In this instance, I then had an objective to find ways of including reading and writing through this choice. Just as the students experienced a freedom through their choice, I understood how this process brought about some

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of the freedom I was seeking to fulfill my perception of teaching.

I also learned that teachers should forget tradition in order to experience the process of making choices, and that students should not be looked upon as insubordinate people incapable of making decisions. These concepts are

something teachers must learn through observing others and not having the decision made for them. I learned that the best way to get good papers was to give the students a choice of topics rather than to dictate a single topic. We may have been reading a novel or essay dealing with a specific subject, when determining a writing assignment on the subject, I would provide at least five appropriate topics from which they could choose, or they could determine their own topic relating to the subject. The papers were not only interesting but also had a specific voice.

Demonstrating and Showing Choice

Because I firmly believe that everyone is part of the whole and that each person is part of every other person in the class, the students should express themselves freely about their writing. One day, while the students were drafting papers, I decided to work on a draft of a paper I was writing for *LAJM*. I took a seat in the back of the room and during the hour wrote the introduction in shorthand. At the end of the period, the students were curious about what I was writing. They had not seen this kind of penmanship before and thought I was writing in a foreign language. I tried to explain that when drafting a paper, I wanted to get down as many ideas as possible without concern about the form. Later, I made copies of the shorthand draft for the students and then transcribed the shorthand just as it appeared so that the fragments, phrases, and words showed no coherence but only ideas. On the overhead projector, I showed them five different drafts and indicated I was ready to edit the paper. As they read the drafts, they questioned my changes and offered their own ideas. Just as I had made comments about their papers, they felt comfortable making suggestions for mine. With this attitude that we were all people with a common goal—writing improvement—we were comfortable working as one, not a teacher with students.

At the same time, I could not be in the same step with the process of evaluation. I graded papers, but only temporarily. The students knew that the first paper would have a low grade because they had trouble moving out of the five-paragraph syndrome. If the second paper improved because of following my recommendations, and the grade were higher, this grade cancelled the first one. The students had an incentive to improve because the grade of the final

paper would be the grade for a marking period. No reason for a final examination. Other English teachers had grave concerns about my system of evaluation. This process was encouraging to the students because each one had a responsibility for his or her own improvement. They had a goal of becoming better writers, not competition for a grade point. The students demonstrated a positive attitude because of the opportunity to be experimental in their techniques.

In addition to evaluation, the teachers were concerned about the teaching of vocabulary—a new list of words at the beginning of each week and a test at the end of the week. An easy way to determine grades. Most vocabulary tests were really a test of how well a student could memorize the words and definitions. Usually, the words came from lists published from the SAT or the ACT and were somewhat helpful for the students taking these tests. Although they could memorize the definitions and use some of them on the tests, students rarely if ever really understood those meanings and did not use them in their writing or conversations. Finally, I eliminated this process because a better way was talking about words and their various connotations that the students found through their reading and listening. In this respect, the teacher must be a model in the use of language and challenging words. This method is also an efficient way for the teacher to become acquainted with the current slang and its influence upon language.

Listening Together

Over the course of sixty years, I learned that tradition changed very slowly—almost like the marble tombstones in a cemetery, but they do wear away. The faculty finally learned there was strength when teachers worked together. They demonstrated this strength when the Board of Education accepted the proposal to eliminate the teaching of grammar as an objective in order for teachers to spend more time teaching the process of writing in a K-12 program. They also discovered this strength when the Board permitted the principals to schedule only four classes for those teachers who taught writing so that they would have an extra hour of preparation and reading compositions.

The height of achieving my view of freedom came when a teacher was asked to teach a section of college-preparatory composition for seniors. In her preparation, she

spent her conference period each day in one of my classes. During that time, she became a student with the rest of the students so that she could experience the value of students and teachers learning from one another. This idea grew so that in a few years when three of us teaching writing for college-preparatory seniors, we were able to plan a new program, a program that emphasized student choice. At the beginning of a semester, the students could determine with the teacher the major theme for the semester. They worked in groups to develop this theme round the arts to make a rich course. Once a group had completed a theme, the objective was to spend a week teaching what they had learned to the rest of the class.

To avoid “throwing students out of the window” was my incentive to progress. Even alone, to find ways to help students to know they were people was my freedom and my contribution to the process of developing good practices in education. For me, the challenge of bringing to fruition my perception of education made each day of the sixty years an exciting experience. Above all, every student must feel that he or she is important in the achievement of a goal. Achieving this goal confirmed my belief that teaching is listening to the joyous shouts and the sad cries; to the complaints and to feelings of success; and even to the silence; through listening, we can learn so much from the students. Listening, indeed, is the key to learning together.

About the Author

Ray Lawson (rlawson48309@yahoo.com) received his BA degree from Central Michigan University and his MA degree from the University of Michigan and taught English at Rochester High School for 59 years. He is a past president of the Michigan Education Association. As a member of the MCTE since 1947, he has served as Secretary/Treasurer of this organization for 35 years and became the recipient of the Charles Carpenter Fries Award and the Ray H. Lawson Award for excellence in education.