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## ALLAYING THE 'CONSPIRACY OF THE LEAST'

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On days that it is especially difficult to be a teacher, it is not unusual to feel much like Huck Finn does when he comes to the end of his exciting but exhausting journey: "If I'd a' knowed what a trouble it was. . . I wouldn't a' tackled it" (as quoted in Franek, 120-121). But on the days when all goes well, that reflection is tempered more by insightful understandings of how the rough road of teaching English is a less treacherous path when emphasis is put on the growth and changes we recognize in ourselves rather than on the mistakes and failures that make us want to run. Some of those understandings come from thinking about what educators can do to support each other as fellow adventurers, but many come from clarity about how teachers think about themselves, their students, and the work they do. Teachers who are vigilant to the possibilities students offer, who are willing to question their own motives and tactics, change how they do things, and consider shared authority over everything from the difficult matters of curricular choice to the sometimes uncertain "correctness" of textual interpretations will find their way more easily through the on-going maze of issues that continually need to be addressed in the English classroom.

Inherent to teaching that is authentic and meaningful is an acknowledgement that good teaching, like good writing, is developmental, recursive, and always in process. No one arrives to teach with all the answers in hand, and even the answers that are available may change. Critical to enjoying a lifetime of teaching is the realization that wisdom uncovered together by students and teachers is valuable. Placing all faith in teaching techniques,

textbooks, and tests rather than in students, open-ended models of inquiry, and community leads to seeing the structuring devices of classrooms as the object of good teaching rather than as the active helpmates of it.

In the end, a pocketful of red pens and a handful of gold stars cannot compete with a teachers willingness to recognize their own humanity in order to hear others express theirs.

### Two Teachers, Resonant Stories

We have both worked with students on the succinct language of a poem, on the crucial elements of a short story, and on how the structuring of essays contributes to meaning, only to discover that, come test time, very few of these students remembered what we expected. Despite endless hours of coaching students through writing strategies, lecturing them on symbolism, and helping them unpack the layers of meaning "hidden" in a story, our early teaching careers yielded meager results when it came to sustained student growth and pleasure. Material might be learned well enough and long enough to eek through a grading period, but language, literature, and writing remained minimal.

After much frustration, endless imaginings of ourselves as horrible teachers, and month after month of butting heads with what seemed an emerging "enemy," we both slowly came to realize that, regardless of our intentions, we were working against students rather than with them. Instead of collaboration, we expected cooperation. Instead of checking personal process, we were judging collective progress. Disruption was considered a disciplinary obstacle rather than an instructional problem and lack of motivation was attributed to laziness instead of absence of inspiration. Students who did not see the literary world through the dictate of our privileged lenses were considered limited and lacking. It is only in our matured perceptions that we have clearly understood Louise Rosenblatt's notion that "[t]he instructor's function is to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them" (64). What we now realize is that we do not only teach

## Beth's Story

Looking back over a portfolio I created sometime in 1994, a year before I actually started teaching, I came across my philosophy of teaching. As I reread what I had written, I felt pretty smug about how wise I saw myself, even before setting foot in my own classroom. While reading, I came across the following quote: "In an ideal world, English teachers would teach literature for its own sake." I now wish I could distance myself from this quote and deny having written it, but the truth is, I did write it. Clearly, I was a different person back then with a different set of goals and with a disparate notion of what an English education should entail. When I began teaching, I truly believed the English class should be solely about the literature, not about how and why students connect to the literature, much less what they might contribute to an understanding of it. Writing was not an issue, because surely they all would know how to do that. I was convinced that class should be first and foremost an academic discussion about the various aspects of literature. It was begrudgingly that I finally admitted that if I did not somehow link the literature I was teaching to the lives my students were living, my time and theirs would be wasted. Still, it took several years of going head to head with what I thought were disinterested students for me to fully comprehend the wisdom of Rosenblatt's theory and philosophy about teaching students literature. I wish I could say that singular misstep was the only snag I encountered as a novice teacher, but it was not.

As a beginning teacher, I also thought that I had to have all the answers. I felt that because of my youth and inexperience, if I did not go into the classroom knowing everything there was to know about a piece of literature, the students would not take me seriously. I would not consider teaching any text with which I was not intimately familiar. I was the teacher; my job was to anticipate and be able to answer all student uncertainties; my word was indisputable. Many new teachers begin their teaching careers with this same misguided notion. When first entering the profession, it is truly difficult to see that

the teacher's "philosophy [is] only one of the possible approaches to life, from which [our] students should be given the opportunity to select for themselves" (Rosenblatt 124). Our own experience as students has taught us that teachers are the givers of most or all correct answers, and our preparation for teaching too often encourages us likewise.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the concept of giving students any control or say so in matters of curriculum or interpretation was completely foreign to me when I first entered the classroom. I felt that if I allowed any leeway, I would be dethroned as "expert" and students would then take complete advantage of me. I totally understand Gordon Pradl's meaning when he says that "as teachers one of our greatest fears is losing control in the classroom. Thus it's easier to speak and question rather than listen" (67). It never occurred to me to take the time to get to know students, their habits, their feelings about English, or, least of all, to help them learn to follow their own questions and interests. The "right" literature and how "correctly" it was interpreted was of the most importance. I was convinced there was inherent meaning in the texts we studied, and I made it my business to know the answers to any questions that might arise as we read. As long as I could give the students the "best" literature and the "correct" readings, everything would be fine. It was only after much trial and error that I realized I needed to give serious consideration to the questions my students were asking, not on my pat answers. What I needed to value was the collaborative meaning created when offers impression and understanding.

Some time ago, I read an interview Oprah Winfrey did with Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel. "In the word question," he said, "there is a beautiful word—quest. The essential questions have no answers. The moment we have answers, there is no dialogue. Questions unite people, answers divide them" (286). My immediate reaction to Wiesel's words was that he was just incorrect. But then I began to think about this concept in terms of classroom discussions I had facilitated in the past. I realized that as soon as I would speak, most other

discussion would stop. I attributed this phenomena to some giant student conspiracy meant to get the teacher to give the “correct” answer so there would be no reason to discuss the topic any further. What I failed to note was that the only “truth” in my understanding of the situation came from my students expectations of having to uniformly regurgitate my “correct” answers onto a future test.

Janet Allen suggests that “[a]sking students how they arrived at answers, not what the answers were; asking students to develop questions, rather than give answers; asking myself [as teacher] the purpose instead of the plan help[s] all of us carefully examine our learning” (8). I understand now how this way of teaching gets to the heart of true education. I do not want students to be mindless drones following orders. I want them to be active seekers, unconventional learners. Realizing just how wrong I was about the role of questioning and answering in my classroom made me wonder what else I had been wrong about in my assumptions and concerns about teaching practices. If I had blindly believed that students were important only because they were a medium through which great literature could be discussed, what other mistakes had I made in thinking about them and their learning? How had I come to totally overlook the importance of respect for student opinion? Had I also extended my authority and robbed them of theirs?

When I first began teaching, I did not allow a moment for anything but what I knew was expected of a first year teacher. Getting to know students was not on my list of things to do. It required precious time that would have to be taken from learning the curriculum, becoming familiar with the Standard Course of Study, understanding pacing guides, deciding what literature to teach, and figuring out in detail what each text meant and how to teach it. Institutional zeal for enforced standards, inflexible pacing guides, and scrupulous accountability measures played a major role in reinforcing the importance of subject matter, the authoritarian role of teachers, and the objectification of students as individuals. Because these practices had been stressed in my teaching from the very

beginning, it is easy to see how my own mistaken beliefs about student ability and input dove tailed very nicely with institutional expectations. From the first, I believed I could plan an entire semester’s worth of literature before ever even meeting my students. I already thought students were just a necessary evil to be endured in order to get to the real purpose of teaching (subject matter), so this fool-proof practice NEVER struck me as odd. I needed it to govern and guide.

It has only been my growing years of experience and my fledgling knowledge of the work of professionals in my field like Rosenblatt, Pradl, and Allen that has finally challenged my previous judgments of what it means to teach. As a new teacher, I was totally convinced that uncertainty of something in a text, less than complete knowledge of a particular topic, and one little question left unanswered, undermined my authority completely. Somewhere along the way to becoming a teacher, I became convinced that any glimmer of doubt about what I knew, any chink in the armor of my knowledge base, would unleash chaos in my classroom and prove I was not up to the task. It was not until Janet Allen introduced me to Theodore Sizer’s “Conspiracy of the Least” that I began to realize what my thinking truly meant.

According to Allen, “[t]he agreement between teacher and students to exhibit a façade of orderly purposefulness is a conspiracy for the Least, the least hassle for anyone” (3). Of course, my initial reaction to Allen’s words was that this kind of thinking was sheer foolishness. Certainly I, and those like me (and I learned there were plenty like me), were not perpetuating the Conspiracy of the Least. We were only striving for truth and knowledge. But Sizer’s idea kept nagging at me until I realized that my visceral reaction was due to the fact that I, too, was part of the conspiracy! If I only taught material I was fully comfortable with and totally knowledgeable about, then I would be able to tell students everything they needed to know. They would not have to engage, just listen. Passive listening required the least amount of effort on their part. If my lectures could anticipate all necessary

information, there would be no bombardment of student questions about what something might mean or fragmented explanations for why someone saw something differently than I (or the answer book) did. Not having to entertain student questions meant less hassle on my part. Without realizing it, I had been propagating the very Conspiracy of the Least which had led to my own dislike of English classes when I was a student. In other words, I was doing to my students what I had hated having done to me.

While it was Allen that helped me further see the error of my ways, it was Pradl's *Literature for Democracy* that helped me see what I could do to change. But Pradl's advice was hard to follow. He advocated a democratic classroom following principles based on Rosenblatt's theory of reader-response. His method for achieving such a space threatened my safe, orderly understandings of what a classroom should be. Before I could fully embrace what he espoused, I had to do some real soul searching about what I believed was the true role of teachers. Did I not respect that students were as intelligent as anyone, entitled to opinions and different questions about issues? Did I not believe in the shared authority of all people in a community? I danced around Pradl's dilemma, recognizing it for my own: "What I had to understand was how I was contradicting my belief in democratic procedures by granting superior status to my responses and meanings when it came to the reading of literature. Yet, it was painful to give up this privilege. Indeed, I may never be able to do so completely" (14).

I now realize that because of the structure and assumptions of schools and my own understandings of who a teacher is suppose to be, I purposefully saw myself as the authority in the classroom; this is what I thought was expected of me and I had delivered. In truth, I liked Pradl's idea of being a guide rather than a classroom dictator, but I was wedded to the idea of my role of unquestioned authority in the classroom, because it perpetuated the illusion that such a dynamic ensured an impregnable and harmonious environment. In my effort to put my subject matter and my knowledge of it on a pedestal,

I totally ignored that I also chose to teach English because I wanted to teach students something valuable about their own lives. I wanted to give them a confidence in themselves that I know is important in the larger community. Learning to explain, support, and defend a position in light of other positions is a more valuable life lesson, I came to realize, than believing there is always one, correct answer. According to Pradl, "democratic teaching fosters multifaceted readings, and discussions are built on layers of agreement and disagreement" (10). This is what students need in order to be functioning, contributing members of society, and I recognized that in failing to give them this important tool I was also failing myself and the community at large.

Democracy within the classroom is a messy business. Gone is the certainty of the teacher's sovereignty, the undisputed fonts of knowledge. Students question the teacher's viewpoint—test it out against their own, and this can be threatening and scary to those who have been led to believe their word is meant to be the final one. Teachers attempting to initiate a democratic framework are quick to learn that "[e]nthroning liberty invite[s] chaos and perhaps even anarchy" into the classroom (Pradl 5), the very thing I dreaded and had worked to prevent. At times, the process of creating a democratic classroom can seem like an extreme endurance test. Who will stick it out longer, the jaw-clenched teacher or the rowdy students persistent in their questioning and uncertainty? Yet it cannot be denied that certain aspects of the classroom environment immediately become better when teachers allow themselves the luxury of relinquishing some of their authority and inviting student questions and answers. There is a certain freedom for teachers in being able to say "I am not sure. What do you think?" When students realize that literature, like life, is not about a prescribed answer, they offer up a multitude of theories and understandings of texts, reinforcing, again, Pradl's notion that "to teach literature democratically is not about the 'correct' interpretation, but about fostering innovation" (48). "Every student desires attention," says Pradl, "but this attention is really a call for being taken seriously,

for being seen as a distinct person by the teacher” (146). Teaching democratically is the only way to ensure such attention.

Embracing uncertainty as a means of growth and change in the English classroom allows students to seek, question, and explore. It takes the scepter from the teacher and passes it through the crowd. Believing that there are only a finite number of meanings available is limiting for subject matter, teachers, and students. What a liberating experience it is for all to understand that meaning can be made in community and negotiated over and over again. Not only does such understanding give students the opportunities to express what they learn, it enables teachers to make each each day in the classroom fresh and new. As teachers, we claim to detest student passivity. “Challenging students to set goals for themselves, to evaluate [their] progress in meeting those goals, to see mistakes as a necessary step in the process of learning, to understand that they [are] the critical element in their own learning [draws] students away from [a] passive role,” says Allen (156). I would add that in fostering passive roles for students we lock not only them but also ourselves in place. Allowing students to engage in growth and change requires we do the same. To do so means a deep look into teaching habits and behaviors.

### **Reflection and Response to Beth**

Though many years separate Beth’s experience from mine, so much of what she says resonates with my own early career classroom development. Did I think my students were knuckleheads when they could not write a paragraph that coherently explicated what seemed a simple poem? You bet I did. Did I blame them for lack of interest and motivation when I taught works I loved with no thought for what they might relate to and enjoy? Yes, again. If teaching English was not about our subject matter and students’ undivided attention to what I knew about it, then what in the world were we all doing? It took several Georges with their heads down, a couple of Pams more intent on combing their hair than listening to me

pontificate, and numerous confiscated notes from Betty, Bob, and Joe to realize I was somehow failing not only my students, but myself and my discipline along the way.

Like Beth, all of my preparation for teaching led me to believe I was a source unto myself. I was apprehensive about soliciting the support and help of veteran colleagues or seeking out other beginning teachers with whom I could exchange ideas and, sometimes, commiserate. No one ever suggested I should read the professional literature available; continued reading in the literary canon was all that I knew to do. I no more understood I could ask for and seek advice than I realized that other new teachers were also going home at night with varying uncertainties, frustrations, and anxieties that made for their own sleepless nights. Faltering, floundering, and, on occasion, even falling seemed to me to be character flaws or indicators of how much of a failure I was as a teacher. Only when I confided my struggles and losses to others was I able to also see a glimmer of my successes and gains. Only when I read about the concrete things I could do to change my classroom was I able to “unstick” myself from what was looking like years of calculated toil rather than spontaneous moments of joy and pleasure. It took me too long to realize that teachers, seasoned or not, need each other and can contribute greatly to each other’s ability to prosper and grow in the classroom. In sharing their experiences, teachers see ways to transfigure and refashion themselves and their classrooms.

I am still alarmed when I think about how quickly, in those first few months of teaching, I lost sight of what had brought me to the classroom in the first place. Faced with the hundreds of blank little green and white squares of my cherry-red grade book, I mistakenly started thinking that my greatest charge beyond expounding on great literature was to criticize and judge students, not promote them. Who cared if assignments were not intrinsically meaningful to students? There were columns to fill and averages to calculate that would point to the fact that I was, indeed, an adept and deliberate teacher. What matter was it that my students’ life

experiences, their diverse backgrounds, the issues of our community, and the climate of school politics were not just incidental, generic dynamics? Instructional design, curricular choice, pedagogical method, and stimulating discussion were nothing when measured against my ability to find errors and record them.

Because the initial shock of teaching left me in an uncertain state of who a teacher really is, I held on to the only things I understood and remembered from my own classroom experiences. Instead of moving toward what I instinctively knew the true aims of good teaching should be—learning how to care for the emotional and spiritual self as well as the cognitive mind, challenging student and teacher alike to new visions of self and community, scratching beneath surfaces to initiate change—I found myself buying into rather than resisting strategies for learning that my own educational experiences had taught me to oppose. I found myself alone on the mountaintop extolling the virtues of language rather than in the valley with my students exploring the lush terrain of our subject in ways that enabled unique discoveries of it. I was well into my role as a teacher before realizing that students could teach me as much as I could teach them; that they could have astounding insights far beyond my own; that they could sometimes write a passage so beautiful I would be envious; and that more often than imagined, they could unveil a truth that would change who I was. I did not know these things immediately; but when I realized them, my whole understanding of teaching changed.

Once I took my students on a silent walk. When we returned, I asked them to write about the experience. I did not expect much beyond some descriptive passages of the observations they had made of the scenery, or maybe some humorous accounts of the bugs and heat. Instead, here are some examples of what I got:

**John:** I forgot all about the hot sun and all the walking we were doing. Instead, I started wishing I could find somewhere quiet to go every week. Someplace where I could free my mind of all the B.S. that happens to

me. Out of this experience I've learned that if you are quiet, you can hear a lot of things in the world that you didn't even know existed.

**Lonnie:** The next thing I remember is the sound of the wind in the trees. I started thinking back about my grandfather, and how my grandmother used to talk about how he loved sitting under a tree in her yard listening to the wind blowing through the trees while he wrote his sermons for Sunday. And then that reminded me of when my family was whole. Suddenly, I heard the most relaxing sound I've ever heard in my life, and that was the sound of the water running over the rocks; for that little while as I sat and listened, I was at peace.

**Nancy:** I believe our sense of hearing may be the most important of our five senses. I can't even imagine what it is like to be deaf. Some of my most memorable experiences of life happened because of my ability to hear. I heard my cousin's baby take it's first few breaths of air and cry, even though the doctors didn't think the baby would live. I was able to hear the good news that my grandmother was going to live after she had been very ill, and I will never forget the joy I felt over those words. The quiet brings back memories, but the sound of those memories is all around us.

These were not "students" writing, they were distinctive lives playing themselves out on paper. What they had to offer meant something not only outside the context of our class, but also within. These were not "students" who needed me to tell them the hidden meaning of things; they were extraordinary people who in their own hurting and caring had developed enormous capacities for puzzling out life's mysteries. I hold on to these papers from my early classroom because they mark

the moment that I truly understood the meaning of a teacher's life. This was the day my reign as expert ended and my role as teacher began. I hope I can carry it with me always.

What then is the concrete advice that comes from Beth's story and my reflection and response? Where is the more practical discussion about the importance of whole language experiences, reader-response activities, and reader-writer workshops? How about some examples of successful mini-lessons, ways to teach grammar in the context of writing, and consideration of alternate systems of grading? Is it important to remain passionate about the use of young adult literature, adamant about pluralism and diversity, and concerned over issues of bilingual and second language learners? Yes, I would answer, you must care about and continue to explore all of these things. But there are important understandings of teaching that move beyond these external matters, considerations that determine if teaching transpires as a performance of labor or an accomplishment of love. One does not necessarily preclude the other, but it is only when we find a way to love what we do as we do what we love that offers the greatest possibilities for both student and teacher.

Teaching and learning is always an act of becoming, and though the rewards may not always be immediate, when they arrive, they are rich and enduring beyond any other. In keeping unflinching moral perceptions about our lives as teachers we are able to see the real issues of the classroom which require our deepest attention and contribute most to the enduring well-being of our students, our communities, and ourselves. Does this mean that skill and product does not matter? Of course not. Does it mean language, literature, and composition should be reduced to the equally limiting nature of experience and inclination? No. Our "advice" may appear simple, but is more challenging than any text, curricular issue, or standardized requirement that either of us have found. Our insights may seem a paltry sum, but, in truth, we have learned they are the treasure trove from which all good teachers eventually learn to dip. To teach well, learn to listen well. Value the unique individuals you encounter and

trust their questions and insights as much as your own. Practice patience when discussing ideas. Be courageous in your approaches and do not be afraid to take risks. Remain vulnerable to the uncertainties of the world, and remember always to be generous with the weak, gentle with the strong. Keep the world large, not small, and, when you can, reach for the possible instead of hiding in the safety of the actual. A student's life will be different if you do these things; consequently, so will your own.

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