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# Teaching as Dialogue

by Catherine E. Frerichs



In 1968, I had a master's degree, and I wanted to see whether I could teach. I accepted the first job offered to me — teaching English at Glen Oaks Community College, in rural southwestern Michigan. I loved literature, had steeped myself in it, and wanted my students to experience the same pleasures of reading and loving a subject.

There turned out to be little call for English Renaissance drama at Glen Oaks. Instead, I was teaching mainly writing courses, for which at that time I had had no preparation. My teaching was distinctly one-way: I was the person with the responsibility for what happened in class. I cared about what students said but cared more about my ability to fit their comments into the framework with which I had come to class. When it came to writing assignments, the students' job was to figure out what was inside my head, just as I had had to do for my professors.

Before long, I sensed that I was working at cross purposes with myself. In spite of my inadequate preparation, I knew I had much to offer my students, and a part of me wanted them to have it — as long as it was on my terms. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was not yet available in English, but if I had known about his ideas, I might have been able to see that I was contributing to education as “banking,” Freire's metaphor for teaching that is an act of “depositing” information into students who are only to receive it and have no say in what or how something is taught. Fundamentally, I was resisting dialogue, not encouraging it.

Throughout the 70s, I was influenced by many of the thinkers who, in one way or another, attacked teaching as banking and the insidiousness of heirarchical student/teacher relationships. Besides Freire, I read people like Peter Elbow, Jerry Farber, John Holt, Ken Macrorie, and Neil Postman (never once wondering why I wasn't reading any books by women). Writing teachers were some of the leaders in this movement, perhaps because teaching writing can be so

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personal. Usually, teachers of writing want to help students develop their own voices as writers. That process means, among other things, cultivating a more equal relationship with students so that students will feel more free to express themselves. At the minimum, a teacher who wants anything more than dead academic prose from her students learns pretty quickly that she has to pay attention to who is writing, why, and for whom.

If someone had asked me during the 70s what part of teaching meant the most to me, I would have said the process of figuring out with students what they want to say in an essay and how best to accomplish that aim. This process of dialogue remains a central part of teaching for me.

By the late 70s, I was becoming a feminist and thus adding another dimension to the way I saw myself as a teacher. I had gone back to graduate school and was now teaching at Albion College. The English Department needed someone to teach Women and Literature, and, as one of two women in the department (qualification enough, no?), I offered to do it. The writers I was teaching — Adrienne Rich and Virginia Woolf, in particular — brought me around. My friends and I tried our hands at feminist criticism and worked on articulating what a feminist pedagogy might look like, coming up with answers quite similar to the radicals of the 60s and early 70s. We associated the customary hierarchy in student/teacher relationships with patriarchy, stifling in particular women's voices in the classroom. We (with others) wondered whether there were women's ways of thinking and writing.

My sense that I had my own distinctive philosophy and style as a teacher, not necessarily bound to a particular -ism, did not emerge until the mid-80s when my research interests changed as my teaching interests evolved. I had become increasingly dissatisfied with "conventional" argument as the centerpiece in my upper-level expository writing classes, argument in which the goal was to win, preferably in ethical ways. At about that time, I happened to read Roger Fisher and William Ury's *Getting To Yes*, an introduction to negotiation, whether practiced in the family, an organization, or between nations. When my husband and I used the method Fisher and Ury describe to resolve a major disagreement over our son, I began to take negotiation seriously. Could it, I wondered, be modified for conflicts responded to in written rather than oral form, as was usually the case in negotiation? Yes, if there were ways to make the

writer/reader relationship more like a dialogue than a one-sided discussion.

Greater equality in the writer/reader relationship paralleled a teaching passion of mine ever since I had gotten past the notion that it was the students' job to read my mind. Students had the prime responsibility for their own education; I was there to guide and help them, but real learning would not happen unless they were active participants, even leaders. Yet too often, class discussions were not that different from my first attempts out of graduate school. In my literature classes, especially, there was no counterpart to the success I felt I had in enabling students to develop as writers.

A simple, not even original, technique changed my sense of what was possible in the classroom. I describe it at length here because being a part of it has provided me with some of my greatest satisfaction in teaching. I started requiring students to lead discussions. After several semesters of experimenting, I came up with an approach that has worked most of the time, whether for first-semester freshmen or graduating seniors. Depending on the course, students in groups of two or three lead discussions for about one-third of the class periods over the semester.

Students can structure the discussions as they wish; they meet with me ahead of time to discuss what they want to do, including the questions they will give the other students the class period before the discussion. I suggest resource materials they might consult in preparing themselves for the discussion. If it is clear they need help during the discussion itself, I jump in, but most of the time I am silent or participate as other students do. By the next class period, the discussion leaders receive from me a written evaluation and a grade for their work, following criteria specified ahead of time. We also talk as a class about how the discussion went.

What can happen during these discussions sometimes seems magical. Students who begin by looking at me when they talk start to look at and talk to each other. They listen and ask questions, wanting to understand what the other person is saying. They disagree. They often come up with an interpretation I had not thought of, one which, more often than not, is defensible. Because I am no longer the center of attention, I can listen more carefully. As a result, I have become more respectful of what students say when I'm leading a discussion. These student-led discussions at their best are most noteworthy for their intellectual and emotional spaciousness: they create

something that is larger and more valuable than anything any one of us has brought into the classroom. The students who lead the discussions benefit the most. They see what they have done together with the other students, and sometimes they can hardly contain themselves. Who is teaching and who is learning becomes irrelevant.

One of the more vivid examples of this spirit of dialogue at work occurred in a women's studies class. Three students, all juniors — Chad, Gregg, and Stephanie — were leading a discussion on a selection from Letty Cottin Pogrebin's *Growing Up Free*. The reading dealt with our assumption that gender roles determine sexuality and our fear that if children don't grow up with a clear idea of their gender roles, they will become homosexuals. Chad and Gregg were good friends, but neither of them knew Stephanie before the class began. The discussion was going along well: the three leaders had good questions, to which the other students responded well; the leaders had also done some outside reading so they could bring in additional perspectives. I was congratulating myself on the open-minded class I had when Stephanie said abruptly she believed homosexuality was an "abomination." It was a choice, and the way to change someone's mind about having made this choice was through spirituality. If she had a gay or lesbian child, she would love that child but also make clear that homosexuality was wrong and could be cured.

Hands, including mine, shot up all over the classroom. Gregg and Chad immediately took on the role of moderators, refraining from entering the debate themselves, even though I knew they both had strong opinions on the topic. Wisely, too, they did not call on me but allowed other students to establish the parameters of the discussion. Almost all the students disagreed with Stephanie but did so in a way that made clear they respected her right to her opinion. One student differentiated between Stephanie's right to her own views and his concern for the harm she might do to any homosexual children she might have. Toward the end, Gregg pointed out that people were working with differing assumptions about homosexuality — that either one was born with it or chose it — and that the assumption one began with would affect other aspects of one's views on the issue. I didn't say a word — I didn't need to — until the end of the hour when I thanked everyone, pointing out that they had shown it really was possible to have a sustained discussion on a controversial topic in such a way that we remained a group. If anything, it may be

that that day we became a group, our own small community.

. . . . .

I have intended this essay as a personal statement of what has come to matter to me in a teaching career that began almost thirty years ago. These ideas and values themselves evolved as a dialogue. I feel fortunate to have been able to teach courses, usually small ones, in writing, literature, the humanities, and women's studies. These courses encouraged all of us to explore ideas.

Here at Grand Valley, I approach the directing of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Center in the same spirit of dialogue that I continue to seek in my teaching. I am far more interested in helping other professors identify for themselves what they want to do in a class to enable students to learn than I am in advancing my own teaching agenda. If I am observing an engineering professor teach, or even someone else in English, I am committed above all to understanding their goals and how they want to achieve them. My own deepest measure of success in my position here at Grand Valley will be the extent to which I can be a part of creating and sustaining respectful dialogue on issues that matter. ♣