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A Reading Professional's Hermeneutic Look at *The Courage to Teach*: A Book Review

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Composed of seven chapters of approximately twenty-nine pages in length, *The Courage to Teach* explores the inner landscape of a teacher's life. Written by Parker J. Palmer (1998, Jossey-Bass Publishers), an acclaimed "writer, teacher, and activist who works independently on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change" (p. 191), this book brings new insights concerning the elusive thing called effective teaching. Using the lenses of a sociologist, Palmer is able "to take us into the deepest places from which our work takes form, and illuminate that space with insight and courage that forever changes us." According to Margaret J. Wheatly, author of *Leadership and the New Science* and other publications, *The Courage to Teach* is "for all of us – leaders, public officials, counselors, as well as teachers."

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to analyze Palmer's book to determine the nature of effective teaching as viewed through the lenses of Palmer himself, and second, to respond to Palmer's version of effective teaching using my lenses as a teacher and reading educator. Keeping in mind that Palmer is a sociologist guided by a philoso-

phy that looks at life as a systematic whole that embraces logic, nature, and mind (spirit), I will confine this review to taking a close look at what I perceive to be the central message of Palmer's book, that is, replicating the process of knowing in the community of truth and a brief examination of the six tenets that Palmer uses to support his philosophy. Hence, after I have explained this central message, I will give examples from my life in the classroom to demonstrate my understanding of Palmer's message.

Replicating the Process of Knowing by Constructing a Community of Truth.

According to Palmer, good teachers do more than deliver knowledge. Good teachers replicate the process of knowledge by knowing how to engage students in the dynamics of the community of truth. While Palmer makes the case that good teaching is always and essentially communal, he hastens to say that he is not abandoning his claim that teaching cannot be reduced to technique. He reasserts that community or connectedness is the principle behind good teaching, but different teachers use different ways or methods to create community. To explain what he

means by creating community, Palmer turns to the philosophy of Georg Hegel.

In summary, Hegel attempted to understand the entire universe by viewing it holistically through three aspects – logic, nature, and mind (or spirit). In so doing, he states that the relation between these three aspects is dialectical, and that the method of explaining each of these aspects is dialectical again. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, the term *dialectic* is defined as a method of logic based upon the principle that an idea or event (thesis) generates its opposite (antithesis) leading to a reconciliation of the opposites (synthesis). When Palmer applies Hegel's dialectics to prevailing teaching methodologies, he sees the conventional teacher-centered pedagogy with its concern for rigor as having limitations and abuses. This insight becomes his thesis in arguing that teachers must engage students in the dynamics of the community of truth. Looking again through his dialectical lenses, Palmer recognizes that while others have attempted to correct the limitations of the earlier pedagogy by replacing it with a student-centered pedagogy having a focus on active learning, Palmer again sees this new student-centered pedagogy as having limitations, abuses, and inadequacies. This second insight becomes his antithesis. Subsequently, using dialectics again, Palmer puts together the best of the two pedagogues to form a synthesis that he calls "a pedagogy of community" in which the subject "sits in the middle and knows" (p. 116, paragraph 4). This subject-centered pedagogy assumes that teacher and student alike focus upon what he calls "a great thing" in such a way that the best of the teacher-centered and student-centered pedagogues emerge and transcend by putting the essential core of, or essential learning about, that subject at the center. Thus, the so-called transcendental center of Palmer's model is the "great thing" or "truth" of the subject matter being considered at any one time.

Palmer further says that a teacher must create the space in which this community of

truth is practiced. Rather than telling students about the subject matter, a teacher must bring students into the subject by recreating a microcosm that demonstrates how the subject is carried out in real life.

Responding to Replicating the Process of Knowing

I, as well as many other reading educators, would accept Palmer's pedagogy of the community because it is very similar to the integrated approach that is used to teach reading today. Palmer's model would certainly embrace the Michigan definition of reading, the very centerpiece of the integrated approach, which states that reading is dynamic interaction of the reader, the text (author), and the context (the teacher in the learning environment) to construct meaning. Developed by Karen Wixson and Charles Peters (1984), this definition, which has become internationally accepted, could be perceived as Palmer's "great thing" or "truth" in reading.

(Palmer) sees the conventional teacher-centered pedagogy with its concern for rigor as having limitations and abuses.

To assist the reader in understanding how reading professionals arrived at this synthesis, a brief review is needed. The basal approach in reading instruction, which is teacher- and skill-centered, can easily be equated to Palmer's thesis. This approach prides itself by having been developed by experts in reading, literacy, literature, instruction, and assessment based upon a scope and sequence of skills, controlled vocabulary, and phonics practice. Hence, it is all encompassing in that not only does it provide the stories to be read and the workbooks for written practice, it has manuals that tell teachers exactly what to do and tests to determine whether students have learned these skills.

To correct the limitations of this approach, reading professionals such as Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) of New Zealand, Frank Smith

(1971) of Canada, and Kenneth Goodman (1986) of United States created a reading pedagogy that has become known as the whole language approach. This approach assumes that children come to school already knowing how the language works syntactically and semantically, that they have 5,000 to 6,000 words in their mental lexicon that they have experienced, and that they know how text and

the act of reading works because they have conversed with and watched their parents, siblings, and caregivers as they have read to them.

In an effort to make this approach operational, Roach Van Allen (1970) developed what he called language experience technique. According to the *Dictionary of*

Reading and Related Terms (1981, p. 173), the *language experience approach* is defined as "an approach to learn to read in which the student's or group's own words are written down and used as materials of instruction for reading, writing and spelling, speaking, and listening." In other words, children's own text with its accompanying spelling, grammar, and punctuation flaws (unless the students self-correct) becomes the text for reading instruction.

To put this in a classroom context, come with me to my first-grade classroom on the Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona. It is a late autumn morning in 1976, and the sun is beginning to stream in the left-hand side of the high, small paned windows that make up the south wall of my classroom. Due to prevailing classroom management of the time, my thirty-one Navajo students are seated at individual desks in traditional rows quietly working on their math assignment, and as I move about keeping them on task, I am reflecting on their reading performance in

relation to what I had read the previous evening in Frank Smith's famous book, *Understanding Reading* (1971). I had read that "reading is natural." *What did this mean?* I asked myself again and again. Could Smith possibly mean that some great mantle from the sky would float in the window and would gently settle on my students, and then, lo and behold, they would miraculously be able to read? Oh, how I wished this were true!

On one hand, having been warned about the limitations of the basal approach in my undergraduate training, I was struggling to apply the whole language approach in my classroom. At the same time, at the beginning of that school year, our principal had personally escorted each teacher in our building to our school's storeroom and had invited us to choose new Macmillan basal readers and accompanying materials for our classroom. This uneasiness was further compounded by my less-than-satisfactory experience of the previous year in applying Van Allen's language experience approach in kindergarten. Why would it not work in Chinle, Arizona when the language experience approach had worked well in my previous kindergarten classroom in Gallup, New Mexico?

As I reflected, I began to realize that it was the approach that had failed, not necessarily the teacher. First, this approach assumed that students and teacher were working from a common language base. My students' language was Navajo, whereas, mine was English. In fact, at that time, Navajo was primarily a spoken language, and as we later learned from a presentation made by the president of nearby Ganado College, the dialects spoken in surrounding 10-mile radiuses were somewhat different. The Native American college president went on to say that the elders and tribal council were not concerned with these differences. Rather, they cherished them because they saw this as one way to maintain control over their people and their culture.

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It may also be interesting to note that Navajo as a written language had only existed for about 35 years. To compound the problem, written Navajo language was still suspect because a "bella gona" (a white man) had developed a written code for the spoken Navajo language. As a result, only a few attempts had been made to prepare manuscripts in Navajo. Thus, there were no classroom reading materials other than large locally produced and illustrated alphabet cards.

Second, my students were not surrounded by the comfortable accouterments of a middle-class home. Rather they came from either a simply constructed United States government subsidized home if the family qualified, or they came from a traditional six-sided log hogan with a dirt floor, with sheepskins or blankets for sleeping, a 50-gallon oil drum and stove pipe that had been used to make a stove, a few crudely constructed selves to house basic foodstuffs such as lard, flour, beans, corn, and so forth, a second oil drum to hold drinking water, a door facing the east, and a well-worn path to a strategically placed outhouse. An earlier school-related visit to a government-subsidized home had shown me that the living conditions of these lucky owners were not much better.

Third, when a family must work at menial low-labor jobs under strenuous conditions such as herding sheep and goats, weaving cloth from the wool of one's own animals, growing corn, squash, and beans in poor high desert soil, making pottery from elements collected from the local environment, or driving the school bus 100 miles round trip twice a day, there was little time and energy left to converse with and read to one's own children.

As a result of these and other factors, I, like Palmer, found that student-centered pedagogy in isolation did not work in my classroom on the Navajo reservation. This realization then was my antithesis. However, as I worked, observed, and reflected, I began to weave together the basal reading approach (conventional teacher-centered pedagogy), the whole language experience with accompanying real-life objects and events (student-centered pedagogy), and English-as-a-second-language methodology (technique). The results paid off. Both my principal and I were delighted. My students had performed better than we had expected. Unable to contain my jubilation, I went down the hall to share the news with the first-grade team leader who supervised our nine first-grade classrooms. After hearing my news, she

Formal School photograph of first-grade students, their paraprofessional, Darlene Teller, left, and their teacher, Helen Gill, on the Navajo Reservation in northeastern Arizona. Note the happy, mischievous faces.



sternly responded, "That's good for you, Helen, but what is the second-grade teacher who has your students next fall going to do? You see, you have covered the second-grade curriculum, too."

I had assumed and had shown that Navajo children given an equal opportunity to learn to read could perform as well as Caucasian students. In so doing, I had erroneously assumed that my teaching colleagues would accept this finding. However, I have no doubt that my quiet little movement had an effect on both the first- and second-grade teachers that coming fall. The only evidence that I have is the fact that at the end of summer after I had taken a new position, the principal came to our home 350 miles southwest of Chinle to invite me back to my old position on the Navajo reservation.

Responding to Palmer's Traits of an Effective Teacher

The remainder of Palmer's book discusses those traits that make an effective teacher. These include reclaiming selfhood, confronting fear, recognizing and coping with paradoxes, creating a space for community of truth, promoting personal growth, and finally, dealing with educational reform.

According to Palmer, there is no formula for good teaching, and dependence upon the advice of experts is marginal. He contends that to grow in our practice, we must depend upon two sources: our inner ground (or being) and fellow teachers who share their expertise. In other words, to grow in our craft, we need shared practice and honest dialogue among people who do it as well as emotional support so that we will try again if we fail.

If you are an educator who has come to the text looking for definitive answers to class-

room problems, this may not be the book for you. Palmer does not tell us how to deal with the wide range of reading ability in the classroom. He does not tell us how to balance school expectations and public expectations in literacy. He does not tell us how to respond to outside influences such as federal public law, professional organization impact, state curriculum standards, and district curriculum expectations. He does not address educational issues such as classroom discipline, tenure, substance abuse, and violence. Rather he talks quietly to the teacher within. In other words, it is a book about thinking about the essential nature of being a teacher. It is a book that cuts to our very heart as Palmer speaks to the reflective part of each of us and gives us an opportunity to compare ourselves to the model that he presents.

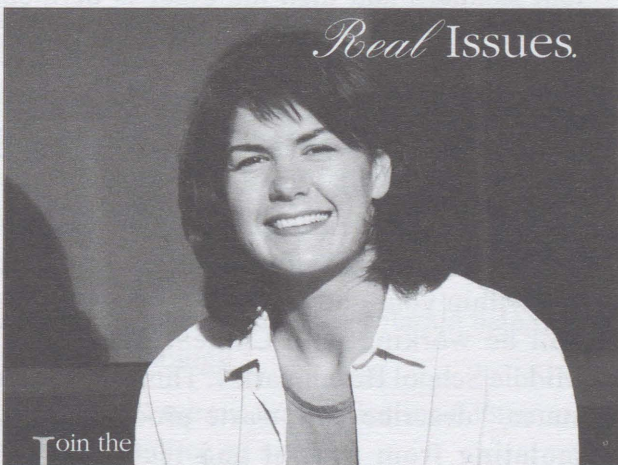
Conclusions

This synthesis of instructional approaches in reading and literacy with which I have personally grappled has reaffirmed for me that the eclectic or integrated approach to the teaching of reading is the "truth" for me. It also helped me to better understand Palmer and his pedagogy of community with its emphasis on creating a space in which this community of truth is practiced, for I have had to create many varied learning spaces over my career. As I have struggled to meet the needs of Navajo, Zuni, Apache, Hopi, Yaqui, Mexican-American, African-American, Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Caucasian, and other students in my elementary, secondary, and university classrooms across the past 26 years, I have come to understand in some measure what Palmer means by effective teaching.

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