

Making Space for Active Learning

The Art and Practice of Teaching

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Foreword

Helen Featherstone

Young men and women come to teacher education with a vision of the classroom they want to create. Sometimes this image includes bits and pieces of curriculum: The children will learn their multiplication tables by playing math games rather than by staring at flash cards; the teacher will read wonderful books aloud and in this way help the children to understand theme, character development, and plot structure. The vision also usually includes warm relationships between teacher and students, and excludes tests, discipline problems, and learning disabilities. In fact, the first year of teaching is a conversation between the vision and the realities of schools and children. Over time, novices build a practice that owes much to these unforeseen realities of schooling and also to the original vision.

Only rarely do graduates of an avowedly progressive teacher education program walk into schools where administrators and colleagues support them in creating child-centered classrooms in which they can design curriculum around their students' strengths and interests. This scenario is especially unlikely when a novice lands in a bureaucratic urban school system. When I took my first teaching job, I was given 1st-grade books for two different reading programs that were built on radically opposed ideas about how children learn to read and told to teach both of them, and no other subjects, during the 3-hour block before lunch. The vision of teaching that I brought with me to this assignment derived partly from my teacher preparation program, but more from what I had seen a few months earlier visiting some excellent British primary schools. There children chose their own occupations in classrooms stocked richly with paints, clay, blocks, books, musical instruments, sand and water tables, and writing materials. These 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds wrote in their journals each day without, as far as I could see, prompting by adults. They read to one another, they painted, they worked with math manipulatives. And they learned to read, to write, and to work with numbers.

The teachers who tell their stories in this volume have developed their visions of good teaching through work with children and also through work with other educators whom they have sought out. In particular, their close

and sensitive attention to individual children and to children's work owes much to Patricia Carini (whose wise and eloquent introduction is included in this volume) and to the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont, where for decades teachers worked together with the descriptive processes Carini developed, improving their skills at looking carefully at children's work and at children themselves as they emerge as learners in school. In response to the current emphasis on improving test scores, district and state policies have pressed teachers to adopt new curricula that constrain their pedagogical choices and take the focus off individual children and their paths to learning. In the chapters that follow, teachers examine their own successful efforts to find or create spaces in the school day for children to make choices, use their imaginations, and do work that matters to them, and for themselves as teachers to make full use of the freedom that they do have—what Chris Powers (Chapter 15) calls their “wobble room.”

Teaching in the current era of high-stakes testing and Race to the Top can sometimes feel like an exhausting tug-of-war between the teacher's vision of what her classroom could and should be and the mandates of district and building administrators who are themselves under pressure to pass on mandates from state and federal policymakers. Teaching is, at the core, about relationships in the classroom: relationships that deepen as the months go by, relationships in which the teacher is always wondering and always learning about children. Because vision, struggle, and relationships are central to the work, teaching is a rich well of stories.

A teaching story is, however, rarely *just* a story. Under propitious circumstances—an audience of curious and caring colleagues who have some experience with inquiry and progressive teaching practice—stories support and extend the thinking of both the teller and the listeners. But many teachers look in vain for such an audience. I once led a study group of elementary- and middle-school teachers who, inspired by the vision of math teaching articulated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in the 1980s and 1990s, wanted to change the way they taught math. One participant drove 160 miles on Thursday evenings in order to spend a few hours with colleagues who were struggling with the same issues she was. The group listened breathlessly to her stories, asked questions, and suggested alternative perspectives on the issues she had raised. The effect on her was, she said, “like going to church”—not always directly useful in solving problems, but consistently reassuring and thought provoking. Often she thought of a new way forward on the 80-mile drive home.

Without a group of colleagues committed to collective inquiry and to each other, teachers can stagnate and burn out. However, teachers who regularly immerse themselves in such groups can find their work endlessly generative. Chapter 6, Peg Howes's “Remembering the Child, Resisting Distraction,”

allows us to see how collaborative descriptive processes can help a teacher to see a child, a child's work, and her own practice in new and helpful ways. The Descriptive Review of Practice, which Howes presents here in some detail, addresses her questions about how she can avoid being distracted from her own core teaching values by curriculum and evaluation standards that focus on "what children should know" rather than "knowledge of individual children."

Many of the teachers you will meet in these pages have found or created teacher groups in which colleagues listen attentively to one another's concerns and stories and encourage and assist in the sort of inquiry that pulls a group into deep looking. This is a book about values and approaches to teaching that are now under fire, a book about teachers who have, through exhilarating collective work, created space for the practices that build classroom communities and honor the individuality of children. As you listen to these stories I hope you will be moved to join the conversation, reflecting on your own practice and the children who intrigue you.

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Measure Twice, Cut Once

Expanding Choices for Children

Betsy Nolan

*"Why don't you build a boat?" asked Kevin.
"Right. Like that's going to happen," I replied.
"No, I'm serious. We could build it in the garage. I'll
help you," Kevin persisted.
"I couldn't do that," I protested.
"Yes, you could. It just takes time."
"And carpentry skills . . . which I don't have."
"I'll help you," Kevin repeated. "We'll do it together."*

*A year of Saturdays and Sundays passed.
Slicks, drawknives, planes, spoke shaves, rivets . . .
Transom, stern, thwarts, knees . . .
Bevel, plumb, fair . . .
Fore, aft . . .*

Kevin and I began to build my dory in September. The Rosy Redmond was launched in June. Its construction was the single most important enterprise in my reeducation as a teacher.

Textbook learning was never a problem for me. I could memorize facts, review books, write essays, manipulate numbers, prove theorems, speak publicly. I scored 100 on my geometry Regents exam. I graduated "with honors"—and a sense of having cheated. It wasn't until I built my boat that I was able to articulate the detachment I felt from my formal education. I had lots of information and precious little understanding.

The carpenter's maxim "measure twice and cut once" had to be adapted for me: I had to measure a dozen times and have my work checked before I cut into the cedar planks pulled in February from the icy piles of wood at Condon's Lumber Yard. My success in geometry was meaningless and actually an embarrassment as I attempted to apply simple concepts to a three-dimensional task. Setting angles on saws was an unforeseen challenge. How a miscalculation of an eighth of an inch could grow into an enormous error five feet down a plank befuddled me.

Kevin, however, had the experience I didn't. He also had patience and a capacity to observe and listen. He didn't jump in to solve my problems for me. Often he would wait until I asked for help and then he would wait some more as I described what it was I couldn't do or failed to understand. He had me practice using tools on scrap wood. He showed me how the tools worked, how they were designed, and how they were maintained and repaired. He demonstrated how different types of wood and the orientation of the grain asked the tools to do different things. He watched me as I made my first awkward cuts and asked me what I thought was happening as trouble arose.

Our work was all thoughtfulness. The measure of its success was satisfaction itself. That I had a boat by June was secondary to the experience. I will never look at a set of stairs, a doorjamb, a chair, or a bookcase again without respect for the people whose hands and minds designed the jigs, operated the saws, and joined the separate parts to make a whole.

That September, my 2nd-graders found much of what they expected for construction work in the classroom. Scissors, glue, paper, paint, junk materials, tape, string, and cardboard were waiting for them on shelves that were long and wide and seemingly vast. They also found wood, hand drills, screws, screwdrivers, hinges, clamps, small saws, safety gloves, eye goggles, and a workbench.

Some of them had experience with these supplies in their kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms. Some talked about working with their moms and dads at home. They asked what the wood was for. I said it was for them to build whatever they wanted. I was going to do for them what Kevin had done for me: watch, listen, and act as a mentor when they asked me for help.

For a good part of the year their work with the wood and tools was largely exploratory. They sawed various pieces of wood, curious to know how the differences in length and width affected the saw's performance.

They clamped the wood at intervals along the workbench to see what difference such placements made. A few learned valuable lessons about the center of gravity in their own bodies as they worked with tools over and below and on either side of the bench using first the left hand and then the right until they felt the comfort and efficacy that comes with being in sync with the instrument. They loved using the hand drills to make holes. They noticed that the wood grew warm and the drill bit hot as the work got done. For a while after that, the heat was their goal rather than the hole.

After weeks of free exploration, their educated hands took the same tools and began to fashion birdhouses and sailboats, picture frames and catapults, from the bits and pieces of wood available. Once some rough projects were completed I was able to show them some simple joinery, the only type of which I had knowledge! We investigated the benefits of using screws instead of nails. Hardware-free joinery was possible using the hand drills and dowels from the corner store.

The children worked side by side in a classroom that each day, for a while, became a woodshop, and their designs and products grew more refined. They took note of who could hinge wood panels together and who could saw which kind of wood straight and true.

Each day, time was set aside for the children to engage in their self-chosen activities, including working with the wood and tools. As the school year progressed, choice time became a more critical part of our school day. The children came to regard it as the most important time of the day. We were disappointed when assemblies or other such events caused us to postpone our sessions from first thing in the morning to later in the day. The day seemed for most of us to go better if we had free choice first thing.

Not unexpectedly, the experiences embedded in our choice sessions became important frames of reference for our class and frequently came up during reading, writing, math, and other content area instructional periods. A series of lessons and guided practice sessions stemmed from the catapults the children made. We asked which catapult design was able to throw a cork the greatest distance? What was it about the design that mattered? How could we keep track of the distance the cork flew?

For many weeks a core group of boys explored how to build “the best” enclosed racetrack complete with a series of ramps for their Matchbox cars. They welcomed additional helpers as others became interested. Pockets full of small cars came to school so that they could see “what would happen if . . .”

One day some of the children took apart dried-out markers. They looked at the roll of material that had held the color for a while. Then they asked me if I had any plastic bottles. I didn't know what they wanted the bottles for, but I had grown used to tolerating a certain amount of ambiguity at the outset of one of their projects. Later on the group asked me for some plastic tubing. They were sure I had it, as they had seen it in a drawer somewhere. I supplied that for them, too. Before long, and with lots of duct tape, a laboratory had been established for the systematic dyeing of water. The colored water was transferred through tubing from one bottle to other bottles. Varied mixtures of dye and water provided all of us with a windowsill display that changed throughout the day as the sunlight streamed through the containers.

The particular lessons and demonstrations emanating from choice time could have been introduced by me had such a part of the day never existed, but that work would have been more mine and less theirs. It would have felt like a unit of instruction with an attached mandate. Instead, by watching and observing the children work with materials rich with possibility, I was able to help them with courses of study that they initiated. I became the ombudsman, secretary, and financier for their explorations. Their work was not measured by a grade, and yet they attached passion and perseverance to it in a way that made me think about what might happen if grades for achievement in language arts and mathematics were eliminated. But that's a question for another day.

Building my boat had changed me radically. Kevin patiently modeled, guided, observed, and instructed me through more missteps than successes until our goal, my boat, was built. I tried to bring something of that experience into my primary classroom not knowing what would happen but willing to see. What was it that C. S. Lewis said? Surprised by joy.