

POSE WOBBLE FLOW

A Culturally Proactive Approach
to Literacy Instruction

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Foreword by Linda Christensen



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WHAT IT MEANS TO POSE, WOBBLE, AND FLOW

In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott (1995) suggests that writers should write the books they wish to come upon. The book you're reading came about during a coffee-break conversation we were having one chilly day on the Colorado State University campus where we teach. As we walked back to our university offices from the student union, we discussed some challenges we were both facing in our courses with preservice English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. As soon-to-be teachers, our students were understandably preoccupied with the “how-to” aspects of teaching: writing standards-based lesson plans, designing meaningful projects for their future students, figuring out how to grade them fairly, and so forth. We felt confident that many of the books we had assigned in our current courses would help them with these practical tasks, such as *Teaching for Joy and Justice* (Christensen, 2009), *Teaching English by Design* (Smagorinsky, 2007), and *Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards* (Wessling, 2011).

Because we were (and are) equally committed to the “why” behind the “how” of pedagogical practices in the English Language Arts classroom, however, we also assigned a parallel set of texts that were primarily theoretical in nature, like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and excerpts from bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and Allan Johnson's *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (2001). Joined by a commitment to critical pedagogy, the authors of these texts advance the idea that teachers have a special responsibility to teach from a social justice perspective, tackling issues of privilege, problems of equity and access, and the possibilities inherent in social and civic action. These texts routinely problematize that alluring notion that there's a set of best-practice teaching methods somewhere out there that are so foolproof they should come with a money-back guarantee. As hooks points out, “engaged pedagogy recognize[s] that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (1994, pp. 10–11).

The links between practice and theory in the texts on our syllabus were obvious to us, but often less so to our students, who routinely complained that the latter set was irrelevant; they just wanted to get on with learning

how to teach. Furthermore, in their minds, teaching seemed like an apolitical enterprise, or one that ought to be if they didn't want to stir up trouble in their future classrooms. Nearing our university offices at the end of our walk, we reluctantly came to the conclusion that our attempts at cobbling together a collection of articles and chapters from various texts to help our students connect the dots between the "how" and the "why" was not only unsuccessful from their standpoint, but from ours as well. In fact, the mere separation of the texts on our syllabus was actually exacerbating the commonly held belief that when it comes to theory and practice, never the twain shall meet. Our coffee break was over, but our conversation wasn't. It still isn't.

Thus, in this book, we invite you to join the conversation as we follow Anne Lamott's advice to write the book that we have wished to come upon as teachers and teacher educators, one that embraces a dual focus on the principles of culturally proactive teaching and the thinking and teaching practices that accompany them. Throughout the book, we address in conceptual *and* practical ways the challenges present in today's teaching contexts. We fully recognize that these challenges may be daunting, especially at the beginning of your teaching career. Yet we encourage you not to shy away from them, but instead to approach them as opportunities to support the capacities of students as they navigate their ways through an ever-changing and connected world. To help you do that, we offer a framework we call Pose, Wobble, Flow, which will prompt you to maintain the continual focus on personal reflexivity and professional growth that is so necessary for acknowledging how privilege and cultural positionality shape one's practice.

THE POSE, WOBBLE, FLOW FRAMEWORK: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO USE IT

In the early 1990s, educational researcher Mike Rose traveled to classrooms across the United States to learn more about teachers who were making positive changes in students' lives, their schools, and the profession. His resultant book, *Possible Lives*, focused primarily on career teachers, but he also interviewed a handful of preservice teachers. Predictably, these interviews are peppered with the students' questions and apprehensions, as well as an earnest commitment to the profession, despite the fact that they had yet to step into their own classrooms. What is surprising, perhaps, is Rose's discovery that, though the specific questions asked by the preservice and career teachers he interviewed throughout the book varied depending on where they were in their careers, the act of questioning their practice never disappeared.

He concluded that "good teachers, novice and senior, live their classroom lives, maybe out of necessity, in a domain between principle and uncertainty" (1995, p. 283). If experience bears wisdom, then why is this the

case? After years in the profession, shouldn't teachers eventually figure out how to get it right? Maybe not. Personally speaking, we know that though our uncertainties and apprehensions differ from those we experienced in our early years of teaching, we have them all the same. What's changed is that we don't view them as liabilities, but as challenges that can further our professional growth. The Pose, Wobble, Flow (P/W/F) framework has helped us conceptualize this mindset.

These three terms function in a metaphorical sense that reflects the practice of yoga. Even as novices, practitioners of yoga assume particular "poses" (e.g., tree, plank, warrior) designed to strengthen their bodies, lengthen muscles, improve balance, and increase mindfulness through focused breathing and concentration. To progress in yoga, practitioners learn to hold familiar poses for extended periods of time and to gradually add more difficult poses to their repertoire. In so doing, they experience "wobble" as a guaranteed and necessary part of the growth process. While wobble may initially cause frustration, it also signals a commitment to increased discipline and deepened practice. Persisting through wobble produces a satisfying sense of being "in the flow," of focusing oneself so intently on the activity of the moment that time seems to disappear. Flow is also an overall aspect of styles of yoga in a different sense. For example, in *vinyasa flow yoga*, practitioners combine varied poses in a sequence (e.g., sun salutation), attempting to achieve a graceful flow of movement in the process. Repeated P/W/F cycles with new poses are necessary to improve one's strength, balance, and concentration; yoga is a lifelong practice, and one never quite arrives at a perpetual state of flow.

To extend the metaphor to teaching: Like yoga practitioners, teachers who are committed to professional growth also take up stances (or poses) toward their practice, and reflect on areas in which they wobble with the intent of attaining flow—those provisional moments that mark progress in their teaching. In the sections that follow, we unpack the meaning of each of these terms one at a time, show how they work together by drawing on classroom examples, and then make suggestions for steps you can take to enact P/W/F cycles in your own teaching. Before we do that, though, we want to point out three essential features of the model.

First of all, it is framed by a focus on educational equity. Throughout this book, the poses we highlight are centered on re-evaluating the educational needs of *all* students in order to challenge assumptions of equality in pedagogical design and educational reform. Secondly, the P/W/F cycle is not purely linear. If you've observed or been taught by effective teachers, it may seem that they have discovered some hidden answer key containing sure-fire teaching strategies, engaging assignments, and methods for effortless classroom management. Looking something like Figure I.1, their expertise appears to elevate in a steady line because they know how to move directly from pose to flow.

Figure I.1. Linear Model of Developing Expertise in Experienced Teachers' Practice

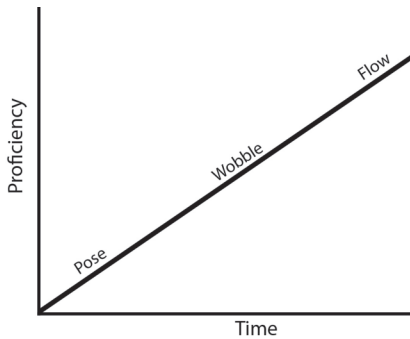


Figure I.2. P/W/F Model of Developing Expertise in Experienced Teachers' Practice

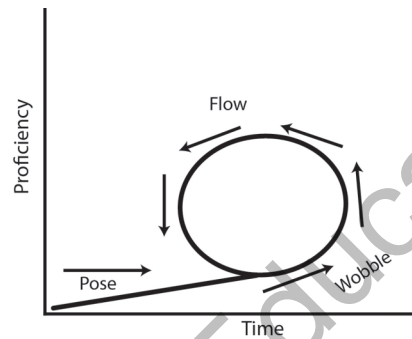
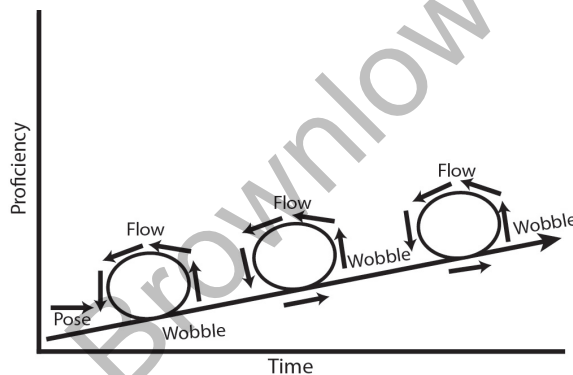


Figure I.3. Recursive Model of Developing Expertise Through Repeated P/W/F Cycles



But we can say from experience that even teachers whose practice is apparently seamless to the outside eye will continue to wobble in response to changes in their teaching contexts. Working through these wobbles continuously is an integral part of their commitment to deepened practice. In reality, then, their development looks more like Figure I.2.

As a more accurate reflection of professional growth, the P/W/F model is *not* about an endpoint; it is a framework to help acknowledge how one's practice changes over time and requires constant adaptation. It provides language for the often frustrating feelings of uncertainty inherent in the recursive process of improving one's practice. It also reflects the reality that in teaching, just as in yoga, repeated P/W/F cycles are necessary for continual professional growth (see Figure I.3).

Finally, even though the model as we've described it above often sounds individualistic, we don't intend for it to be. In fact, especially when taking on what we'll describe below as "proactive" poses, we have found that we go

through P/W/F cycles most successfully when we collaborate with colleagues who provide moral support and at the same time challenge our thinking.

What Does It Mean to Pose?

There's more to yoga than walking into an exercise studio, unrolling a mat, stretching your muscles, and balancing on one foot. Rather, yoga practitioners deliberately position their bodies in particular ways called *asanas*. The literal translation of *asana* is "seat," conveying an image of stability that enhances meditation. A yoga practitioner often pauses to focus her attention as she moves into a pose, deliberately setting her body in place. She sustains a pose in order to stretch a certain set of muscles and to simultaneously assume a particular mindset. Similarly, our use of the term *pose* in reference to teaching is meant to convey intentionality. A pose is *a stance or mindset you willingly take on as a teacher for well-considered reasons*. In this book, we recommend several poses that you can take up as a teacher, for instance taking a culturally proactive stance toward your practice and seeing yourself as a writer, a curator of curriculum, and so on.

Although the word *pose* often has a pejorative connotation (i.e., one poses in an attempt to trick, dissemble, or cloak true intentions), a more neutral definition also exists. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, to pose can also mean "to assume a posture or attitude, usually for artistic purposes." Etymologically speaking, this form of the word comes from the Late Latin *pausare*, meaning "to stop or rest," and thus is actually a closer cousin to the word *pause*. The word also conveys deliberation. To pose is to "set forth or offer for attention or consideration" (i.e., to pose a question) or to "put or set in place" (i.e., to pose a model). These definitions illuminate that in both yoga and the P/W/F model, the word pose conveys the dimensions of mindfulness suggested by the Latin root *pausare*.

We want to be clear that a pose is far more than a "best practice," which, as we pointed out earlier, is an idea that relies on the myth that some teaching techniques are so foolproof they will work with all students in all contexts for all time. Rather, adopting a pose requires considerable mindfulness, for poses focus on the "why of teaching: why teaching methods work in particular ways in particular settings" (Smagorinsky, 2009, p. 19). As such, they function as touchstones to guide our teaching.

What Does It Mean to Wobble?

The poses you take up in your career will have profound implications for the kind of teacher you intend to be and the impact you and your students will make on the world. The commitment it will take to sustain them will often lead you to wobble. Bob Fecho (2011) defines *wobble* as a naturally occurring circumstance that is not just limited to teaching and learning, but is part of everyday life. He explains that wobble is

a calling to attention, a provocation of response. When something wobbles—a wheel on a car, a glass of wine on a waiter’s tray, a child’s top, the Earth on its axis—we notice. It causes us to stare and consider. Wobble taps us on the shoulder and induces us to ask why. It nudges us toward action. It suggests we get out of our chair and do something. (p. 53)

Wobble occurs routinely in the classroom when something unexpected emerges, such as an unpredictable question that neither the students (nor you, for that matter) can adequately address, or a spat that breaks out between students that has absolutely nothing to do with the academic subject at hand. When wobble occurs, you may feel as if nothing in your teacher education program has prepared you for this, and you may very well be right. Because teaching and learning are complex and alinear processes, because the classroom is a dynamic context, and because students can be mercurial, wobble is guaranteed. In fact, “the messy realities of teaching do not lend themselves simply to the selection and implementation of curricula and methods produced by experts from afar. Ambiguities, uncertainties, and unpredictably [sic] are the substance of teaching” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 74). Recognizing that this unpredictability is inherent in teaching can make wobble easier to deal with over time, depending on one’s degree of comfort with ambiguity.

To return to the yoga metaphor for a moment, experienced practitioners not only expect to wobble, they welcome it:

When holding a yoga posture, you want to go to your edge. The edge is a place where you feel a deep stretch in your body or you feel the body working hard, but not going past that to where you hurt yourself or overwork the body. . . . try to relax into the edge by consciously relaxing the muscles that are stretching and the muscles that do not need to work in the pose. (Burgin, 2012, “Asanas: Yoga Postures” section, para. 3)

Likewise, in teaching, it’s essential to remember that although you and your students may not feel comfortable when you wobble, this discomfort is natural because you are “going to your edge.”

Fecho (2011) explains that “wobble . . . marks a liminal state, a state of transition. Where there is wobble, change is occurring. . . . That which was once *this* is moving slowly—at least at first—toward becoming *that*” (p. 53). As he points out, because wobble introduces instability into our lives, our instincts may be to avoid it at all costs, or when it does occur, to attempt to restore order, but we also have another option: We can choose to “construct meaning from an experience different from what might have been imagined” before (p. 54). In other words, when you wobble, it doesn’t mean that you’re failing. Rather, it signals that you are pursuing worthwhile poses that require learning, reflection, and professional growth. As Cindy reminds her students, “You gotta wobble if you ever want to flow.”