

Reflections on Teaching: Meaningful Scribbles

by Fay Maas

As a relatively new tenure-track faculty member, I have an image of the way that I would eventually like to teach my classes. At the beginning of every semester, I revise my syllabi and think about all of the changes that I could make. My revisions, however, seldom amount to much more than changing due dates, updating readings, and making similar cosmetic changes to my documents. My thoughts usually go something like this: “I don’t have time to sit down and think about making systematic changes in my entire course now. This is something I could work on over the summer when I’m freed up from teaching duties. And what if the students don’t like my changes? I can’t afford to get a round of poor teaching evaluations with the tenure clock ticking away. My time would be better spent working on my research.” But as I began teaching last fall, I realized that I actually had made some substantive changes in the way I teach, inching me closer to my vision of teaching and learning.

My teaching philosophy is rooted in my studies of developmental psychology and educational psychology. The theoretical approach most compatible with my view of teaching and learning advocates a contextualist and interactionist view that Tharp and Gallimore refer to as “Neo-Vygotskianism.”¹ Central to this perspective (developed by Lev Vygotsky) is the notion that higher-order thinking develops out of social interactions in which people are actively engaged in creating their own meanings.² Teachers in a Vygotskian classroom arrange collaborative learning

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experiences in which students are encouraged to assist each other.³ The idea is that less mature thinkers will benefit from the instruction that they receive from more skillful thinkers, who also benefit by the self-reflection that is required when explaining ideas to someone.⁴ I believe that self-reflection, communication, and situational relevancy are essential components of effective teaching. Moreover, I believe that these teaching elements help shape the meanings that come to be shared by both students and teachers as they are engaged in their learning community.

I'll begin with the element of self-reflection. I think that being a reflective

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practitioner has spurred many of the changes I have made in my teaching. I'm a scribbler. As I look back over my lecture notes every semester, I see many notations in the margins from previous semesters. "NO!" written next to a particular topic, for example, indicates that this was a topic I failed to cover in a lecture on that particular day. "They didn't get this," with an arrow pointing to the text was a reminder that I did a poor job of explaining the difference between experience-expectant and experience-dependent synaptogenesis. When I pull out those lecture notes, I re-read these comments. I then tweak my upcoming presentation by adding, deleting, and rearranging ideas based on revisiting my notations. After class (or sometimes during class), I scrawl new notations about the class period that just ended. Did my newly implemented changes work? Did the flow of ideas seem better? Did the students seem to understand the concepts being presented?

These reflections are rather trivial on the surface. But taken together over the course of an entire semester, they document the incremental changes I have made in my teaching. Incidentally, marginal notations such as these are the stuff of teaching portfolios, which typically contain documents you have created that chart the changes you may have made in course materials, assessments, methods, and so on.⁵ Teacher-generated documents often note the reasoning behind changes in materials or pedagogy and report whether the changes worked. Teaching portfolios may also contain documents from students such as exemplary work or teaching evaluations. I keep documents, emails, and Web sites that colleagues have passed on to me about teaching developmental psychology. Keeping with my scribbling tendencies, I also jot down interesting teaching ideas that colleagues share as we discuss teaching.

Self-reflection has served as a catalyst to modify my teaching around the sec-

ond component of my teaching philosophy: communication. Because people actively create meaning, I believe that good communication is an essential component to teaching and learning. Students should have the opportunities to communicate with one another, as well as with the instructor, about core concepts being presented. While I believe good communication to be indispensable, this belief is not always translated into action. During my first semester of teaching, my lecture one day was about genetic counseling and prenatal diagnosis. Toward the end of the hour, I provided time for the students to voice their opinions about the benefits and ethical debates surrounding these issues, thinking that this would be

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something about which my students would have an opinion. I was met with stony silence. Only a handful of students voiced an opinion and their opinions were either reiterations of the information I gave in class or not related at all to the lecture. I was terrified by their silence, so realizing I had no strategies for engaging them in a dialogue, I released them early. Several other attempts at discussions during the remainder of the semester met with limited success.

When I opened my lecture notes to begin preparing to teach the course for the second time, I realized that the reason lively interactions didn't happen was because I failed to properly facilitate them. After asking how colleagues were encouraging discussions in their classes, I tried a mix of their ideas. Now, rather than presenting questions to the entire group and expecting an interaction, I break the class into small groups and have the groups discuss a topic. The groups summarize their thoughts and write them down. Each group then passes its synopsis to another group. The task now is to analyze and synthesize the group's original response with the new responses from the other group. This summary is then passed on to a third group. Now each group has a summarization of two other group's discussions. One person from each small group then reports the synopsis that the group received to the entire class. As a class, we then verbally analyze and create a synopsis of all of the group contributions. Time permitting, I write the overall synopsis on the board or create a PowerPoint slide. This technique seems to produce a more focused, scholarly, discussion in which every student has participated at some level.

This form of discussion appears to work well with my students because it allows for some degree of anonymity. It gives them time to interact with one another, building a sense of comradeship in the classroom. And it allows them to

practice using psychological terms and psychological thinking in a relaxed, more natural communicative situation.

From my perspective, this form of discussion produces a small change in my pedagogy that is consistent with my philosophy that written and spoken communication are both important elements of teaching and learning. It allows the more skillful thinkers to reflect upon their knowledge, and it provides less mature thinkers the opportunity to learn from their more skillful peers. Most importantly, these types of interactions can facilitate higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, application, and evaluation.⁶ Interactions such as these, even if done only every few weeks, I have found, seem to improve the overall learning environment in addition to improving student participation and motivation during lectures. This semester I intend to try a new angle on creating meaning through communication by using an electronic media format for students to post their discussion responses. When we meet in class as a group, we can analyze and summarize the nature of the electronic discussion.

My reflective notations have also led to modifications in my teaching that mirror the third element of my teaching philosophy, situational relevancy. One way that I weave relevancy into my courses is by asking students to apply their experiences with human development to the developmental concepts we are discussing in class. We all have native theories of human development that we construct through experiences with our own development, our observations of others, and the portrayals of the human condition that are transmitted by the visual and print media.⁷ Our folk beliefs about human psychology are powerful tools we use to assist us in interpreting other people's behavior. They are also resistant to



change.⁸ I find that my students often resist the validity of research findings that run contrary to their own experiences. In an attempt to demonstrate the day-to-day relevance of research in developmental psychology, I wanted to create assignments that would provide my students with the opportunity to examine their own folk theories of psychology.

It was with this educational objective in mind that I created a writing assignment for a course about child development. The assignment was intended to encourage my students to retrospectively examine their own lives or the lives of children

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that they knew, and to apply some of the developmental concepts that we had discussed with the hope that students would notice how research supported or refuted some of their beliefs about development. I thought this style of paper would be a change of pace from a literature review, the usual fare for undergraduate psychology courses. The paper was due the last week of class and was intended to be a culminating project for the course. I had set up preliminary due dates for students to turn in summaries of the concepts they planned to explore. The scribbles in the margins of my lecture notes show that I had mentioned the paper and possible topics at various points in the semester in hopes that the students would begin thinking about the paper before the end of the semester. I distributed a document explicitly detailing the sections that I expected to see in the paper and what was to be discussed in each section. My grading rubric was included in this document. I told them that the purpose of the paper was to try to find connections between the research on child development and their own lives. I offered to read rough drafts at any time in the semester. In short, I thought I had made my expectations very clear.

I don't need any documentation to remind me of the outcome of this assignment. Only two of 35 students took advantage of my offer to read rough drafts. These two were really the only students who seemed to grasp the spirit of the assignment; their papers were genuinely reflective and integrative in the manner that I had envisioned. The remaining papers were at best shallow attempts to conform to the structure of the assignment and, at worst, obviously fictional experiences contrived to fulfill assignment requirements. Even though I felt that many of the papers merited Ds or Fs, I graded the papers leniently with the lowest grade being a C-. My students complained both to me in person and on my teaching evaluations that I had not made the requirements for the assignment clear.

I haven't given up on my attempts to challenge my students' folk theories. My image of the importance of situational relevancy in teaching and learning still guides me. I have modified my original assignment to consist of unannounced, in-class essays (dubbed "pop-papers" by one student) in which I ask students to relate the topic of the week to their own life experiences.


As an example, in one class I ask students to think about their own theory of love and to compare and contrast their ideas about love with Sternberg's triangular theory of love.⁹ In their responses, I expect a summary of Sternberg's the-

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ory and definitions of his concepts in addition to their own opinions about the constituent properties of love. Proper spelling, punctuation, and grammar are not required on these informal essays. Rather, the purpose is to induce the students to think and write quickly about the connections between their personal understanding of the topic and the research findings, without editing their thoughts or their writing. The following class period, I summarize the overall themes of their essays. My students are quite receptive to these informal papers that do not account for a high percentage of their final grade. My synopsis of their efforts often elicits questions and comments. When students reflect upon how their own experiences differ from research findings—or even when their experiences are consistent with research findings—it is a teachable moment.¹⁰ I find these discussions with my students to be a perfect opportunity to discuss statistics, the nature of research on groups of people, and the importance of individual differences in development.

A second way that I envision situational relevancy is related to the flow of course topics across the semester. Human development is a complex, integrative process with physical, emotional, cognitive, and social domains interacting to create the development of a whole person. When teaching development, however, we tend to teach the domains of development as though they were unrelated to one another. Each semester that I have taught a child development class, I have begun to be more successful at making the connections between these domains explicit to my students. The educational objective is to show how development is an integrative process, how one domain of development is relevant to other domains of development. Again, my marginal notations indicate places in my lecture where I remind myself to refer back to a concept that we discussed earlier. For example, toward the end of the course when we are talking about issues in emotional development such as attachment or being able to interpret the emotions of others, I

have noted to refer back to the milestones children of the same age are making in cognitive development. Having the cognitive ability to take another person's perspective enables the young child to appreciate the emotions that others may be experiencing. Realizing that objects that are out of sight still exist in the world leads children to experience the distress of separation anxiety when they are separated from their parents. My notations also include references to episodes from my own life that illustrate how the integrated nature of cognitive development and emotional development is relevant to my own development.

As I prepare for a new semester, I note again how my syllabi haven't changed much. I am once again thinking about ways to become a more effective teacher. Unlike previous semesters, though, I realize that my practices within my classroom have subtly changed in the desired direction. My scribbles are a source of data that guide incremental but meaningful changes in my teaching. I am moving toward my goal of creating teaching practices that mirror my teaching philosophy. As I read my self-reflective comments and make new notations in the margins this year, I know that I am slowly moving toward my vision of teaching and learning. I'm not there yet, but I am moving in the right direction. 

ENDNOTES

1. Tharp and Gallimore, *Rousing Minds To Life: Teaching, Learning and Schooling in Social Context*, 1991. Born in 1896 in what is now Belarus, Lev Vygotsky conducted research and wrote about how social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition.
2. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 1978.
3. Rogoff, "Cognition as a Collaborative Process," 1998.
4. Palinscar and Campione, "Reciprocal Teaching of Comprehension-Monitoring Activities," 1984.
5. Seldin, *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improving Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*, 1997.
6. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*, 1956.
7. Kuhn, "Children and Adults as Intuitive Scientists," 1989.
8. Landau and Bavaria, "Does Deliberate Source Monitoring Reduce Students' Misconceptions About Psychology," 2003.
9. Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory of Love," 1986.
10. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, 1972.

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