Mosaics of Meaning and the Learning Resistant Culture

By Thomas A. Tobin

It's the first class of a new semester, and, as usual, I'm wandering around the hallowed halls slightly lost and searching for my classroom. I feel OK about this, though, because it reminds me of similar beginnings in past years, and because it's the way I prefer things to be as I head for a new class—a bit ambivalent.

As I turn a corner and head toward another wing of the school, I notice I'm humming an old song that's been playing in the background of my mind since I woke up this morning. The song sets the pace for my feet and thoughts as I search for the classroom.

Suddenly, a brief snatch of melody and lyrics pops into consciousness and I find myself singing under my breath, "open the door and let me in." I remember this is a piece of music from childhood, but, for the life of me, I can't recall the beginning or the end of it.

Yet the song with its one-line lyric seems to symbolize not only the momentary situation of searching for my classroom, but also the basic educational process I'm about to begin—again.

Often, throughout nearly twenty years of teaching, I've experienced moments of visual and auditory symbolism that sum up my observations of the educational situation I'm in at the time.

Little by little, I've learned to pay attention to these symbols. Generally, they revolve around the classroom, and involve fantasies of students actually learning, allowing themselves to be led to something truly "new," something that results in real change, true growth.

Similarly, I envision myself learning something new through this process.

I always tell the same story on the first day of class. It's about the two etymological images, of "newness" and "leadership" that lie hidden behind the word "education."

I tell this story for several reasons. First, it gives me an

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opportunity to introduce myself, present my background, and establish my credentials. Telling the story also allows me to focus from the start on the significance of images, symbols, and their roots, since that's what etymology is all about. In addition, the story gives me a chance to emphasize the importance of defining essential terms and processes.

Finally, this story introduces and establishes the first of four basic interactive rituals or game-like patterns that constitute the learning process and learning culture. The ritual is called "symbolic interaction."

The story is short and simple. After years of my asking my professors how they define "education," one professor simply recommended that I follow the then-current trend (a la Alex Haley) to look up the roots of the word for myself.

When I did dig the roots up, I discovered more than a definition. The Latin roots led me to appreciate and understand the word in a way that I'd never previously imagined or experienced.

I often tell students on the first day of class that I feel that I own the word "education." Moreover, the word's etymological meaning has continued to inspire a seemingly unending array of practical applications and teaching techniques.

Following the basic method of analyzing Latin words in reverse order, beginning first with the suffix (-tion, "process"), then the core-root (-duca-, "lead"), and then the prefix (e-, "out"), I found that the ancient meaning of "education" was "the process of leading out."

As boring as this bit of erudition may seem, it leads to something interesting and exciting about the process of education. Initially, it leads students to ask one of their first questions of me, thus beginning our teacher-student relationship. And the answer to the question usually leads to a clearer, deeper defintion of the student role in the relationship.

Typically, as I finish translating the "e/ex" prefix from Latin, a student will raise a hand and ask, "What do you mean 'out'? Out of what? Out to where?"

And, as has happened a hundred times before, I am reminded that this single letter points to something essential to education and to learning.

The prefix-as-preposition at the beginning of the word "education," states the objective of the entire educating process, especially its basic classroom unit: to lead students out of their own intrapersonal worlds, out of the frameworks and perspectives they've developed to-date, out of the safe and secure structures they've built around

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themselves, out of the warm womb of culture that sustains and protects them, especially during their early years, out into the exciting newness of some outside world.

This single letter "e" contains a constant promise of newness: new experiences, new perspectives, new questions and answers, new definitions and meanings, new hypotheses, explanations, and theories, new problems, solutions, proofs, and practical applications. In short, this single letter summarizes the newness of every educational opportunity, every instance of real learning, every moment of true growth.

At this point, I'm reminded of a childhood chant: "Come out! Come out! Wherever you are!" because all of the exciting newness that "education" implies depends on the student's willingness to open up, to come out from within. All of this newness depends on the students' desire to be led out of their own known worlds into the unknown.

The role of teacher as leader, the role of student as follower, and the definition of learning as the understanding, acceptance, and integration of newness into our old worlds within, all follow from these root images hidden in the etymology of "education."

Using this approach, I also introduce the second of four basic pedagogical patterns of ritual and games that I use to build, or rather rebuild, the classroom culture. It's the "dramatic" or, more taxonomically, the "dramaturgical" pattern of interactionism. It revolves around our status positions and roles in the classroom and is usually defined by our public images.

I've also used other images to guide classroom interactions, both symbolically and dramatically, over the years, not only to begin a new course, but often to prepare an individual class, seminar, or lecture.

But there are two major problems, endemic to the educational process, that become acutely evident when we try to apply the kind of images I'm describing—especially etymological and idealistic images—to the daily reality of the classroom.

The most important events that occur in the classroom, namely learning events, are both invisible and uncomfortable. The hidden nature of personal change, which is accompanied by natural fears and the pain of disrupted inner structures, may explain the origins of most, maybe all, anti-educational and learning-resistant cultures in my classrooms over the years.

Alvin Toffler introduced "future shock" some twenty years ago. He describes the impact that frequent exposure to change can have on society and especially on the educational process. The result is a kind

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of social shock, the symptoms of which are similar to a physiological malady.

Leaving home every day, and entering into an environment designed to lead them out of themselves and their everyday environments into worlds of constant newness and change, might create in students a specific kind of "future shock." I call this "traumatic classroom disorder."

Others think about this phenomenon as a chronic case of classroom uneasiness. A few connect it with the word disease, but spell it "dis-ease." I recently met a professor from a nearby college who refers to the phenomenon in her research and lectures as "learning-resistance."

Teachers often create pictures of these unseen, learning-resistant processes. Such images guide and structure the approaches we take and the methods we employ to prepare for, encounter, and transform these processes into real learning experiences. Intellectual leaders, leaders in curiosity and thought, have been using imaginative images this way since time immemorial.

One day, several semesters ago, when I was entering a new class for the first time, a different refrain was ringing in my inner ears, an old, cynical cliche: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

As I confronted some thirty new students that day, another cliched image seemed to flow from the first: the Trojan horse from the *Illiad*. Every semester since then, in every class that I teach, this image of threat and conflict reminds me of an ever-impending invasion of learning-resistant norms and values into the classroom process. Like the Trojan horse, there's no keeping the danger out. It's already here from day one, hidden inside various anti-educational cultural cliches and normative expectations.

As I finally find and enter the classroom on this first day of the new school year, along with a few last stragglers, I automatically fall into the game-like rituals I've developed over the past twenty years of teaching.

Despite two bachelor's degrees, three masters degrees, and state teacher certifications at the elementary and secondary levels, I often feel only marginally competent for the tasks I'm about to assume.

Still, I try to project an aura of authority without trying to hide these feelings of inadequacy. Mirroring, to some degree, the students' own mixture of goal-orientedness and uncertainty, I begin by projecting two non-verbal messages: confidence and a tinge of confusion.

The students are expecting a lecture or a handout and review of the syllabus. Instead, I begin by playing a game.

Before I reach the front desk, I hesitate, look around the classroom, make eye contact with several of the students, smile, and then ask, "Am I in the right classroom? Is this Sociology of the Family?"

I notice which students respond to my questions, assuming from past experience that some are the same ones who will be the first to respond throughout the term, and who will establish and maintain many of the classroom norms.

Then, I move to the teacher's desk, place my briefcase on it, and proceed to open it, taking out text, syllabuses, handouts, note folders, pens, and chalk. As I perform these rote tasks, I continue making comments and asking questions. These are the same rituals I will generally follow at the beginning of class throughout the semester.

As soon as the comment-question pattern is established, and a few students have responded at least twice, I shift into the next phase of introductory interactions.

Since ritualized interactions are essential to any educational process, and since I assume a Trojan horse seige is about to begin, I take the offensive and begin by modeling and establishing several ground rules for the ongoing communications and truce-like negotiations that will constitute the classroom learning culture over the coming three-and-a-half months.

Thus begins the negotiated "exchange" pattern.

The students are expecting a lecture or a handout and review of the syllabus. Instead, I begin by playing a game. One important function of this approach is to mix predictability with the unexpected. Every class period I will combine some ritual with some surprise. For example, every class hour will begin with a review, but every review will present the previous class's material in some new and different way.

So, even before I introduce myself, I casually say to them, "Let's begin by playing a game. It's a non-competitive game with no rights or wrongs, no winners or losers. This is a word-association game where each and every response is the right response."

The "game" is actually a research technique, as I explain to them afterward, originated by a social psychologist, Dr. Lorand Szalay, in the mid-sixties, an outgrowth of Charles Osgood's "Semantic Differential," a then-popular linguistic technique for analyzing group-held meanings.

The game is a serial word-association technique that develops "mosaics of meaning" around clusters of interrelated words as they're used by socially and culturally homogeneous groups.

The one word I've focused on for the past ten years, for purposes of immediate feedback, is the word, 'student.'

I first used the technique for a class presentation at Columbia University's Teachers College in mid-'60s and regularly thereafter to begin a lecture, seminar, or a new course.

The technique's value comes from its simplicity. It has minimal experimenter effects and is easy to administer. It provides for group-specific data collection and quick feedback capacity for simple analysis. Mainly, this technique helps me quickly analyze and feed back to students their "verbal attitudes."

I focus on words that are education-related, words like "teacher" or "instructor," "classroom," "school," "learning," "grades." But the one word that I've focused mainly on for the past ten years, for purposes of immediate feedback, is the word, "student." I include it, randomly placed, among the other terms.

I write the words one at a time, at one-minute intervals, on the board, erasing the last word before writing down the next, and direct the students to write down any word or words that come to mind as they look at each word for one minute.

At the end of the task, which includes five to ten words, and takes only up to ten minutes, I can do a quick analysis of primary and secondary associations to one or more words right there in class.

Before I begin giving feedback, however, I tell the students about the game's origins in psychological and psycho-lingustic research, about the uses I made of it during my early years of teaching—and about some discoveries I've made in my years of teaching.

Then I begin to focus primarily on the word "student." I tell them about the rather sudden drop in student SAT scores in the late '70s, and about the national study in 1983, "A Nation at Risk," which tried to account for such lowered performance levels. I even mention several studies that confirm the rather low retention rate of course content by college students.

Finally I point out that I was unaware of these data when I returned to teaching in the fall of 1988, forgetting at first to use my technique, remembering it later in the term when I began to notice a difference in student attitudes and classroom atmosphere.

When I began using the technique again in 1989, what I found shocked me. When I gave this task to students in the late '60s and early '70s and again in the '80s, I could count on finding among the primary and secondary associations to "student" an important, even essential, cluster of key associations.

But this central tile in the "mosaic of meaning" that makes up students' images of themselves,

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turned up missing in 1989. And since then, of over 3,500 students who have performed the task, only four have associated the word "student" with these key learning-oriented concepts.

Moreover, the missing words are so common and basic that many students are surprised when I announce them, as surprised as I continue to be.

What's missing now, I tell the students, are words like "question" and "questioning," "asking" and "answering," and other related words like "curious," "inquisitive" and "inquiring," "wonder" and "interest," and phrases like "wanting to learn" and "desire to know."

I still find it shocking to think that students no longer associate questioning with the image or role of student. That students seem entirely unable to guess what's missing, even when I give them hints or lead the discussion in the direction of questioning and inquiry, suggests the possibility that this is more than simple non-connection. It may even be a culture-wide phobia.

Students in this class today seem to accept that hypothesis, so I ask them, "What are you afraid of?" To their credit, several students reply: "of asking the wrong question!" or "of not knowing the answer!" or "of sounding stupid!"—responses instructors everywhere

hear all the time.

In 1989, in the spirit of a then-current trend toward TV-bashing, I hypothesized that the media might have something to do with this near-phobic fear of questions and questioning. So I watched a lot of TV, and by the time the fall term rolled around I was convinced of one thing. The media may not be the main source of "interrogatory fears," as I began calling them, but the media, with their negative image-making, certainly are one of the important, indirect influences.

"What are the images of questioners and questioning that we see everyday on television?" I ask my newest class of students. "Or, more precisely, who's asking questions on TV these days?"

I've asked these questions of nearly every class I've taught for the past decade and received the same answers that I get from today's new class. "Talk-show hosts" is invariably their first reply, followed usually by "news interviewers." Both kinds of questioners, the students admit, present questioning as primarily a negative process that often leads to exposure, embarrassment, or just plain 'bad news.'

In television dramas, the image of the questioning process is often preceded by violent, deviant, or vicious behavior. Questions are

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asked by the police, lawyers, or judges and generally lead to various forms of punishment.

In sitcoms, comedic questioning is often used cynically or satirically, or to ridicule or poke fun at virtually everyone. Any other examples of questioning or interrogation, if more than merely informational, if actually sequential or analytical and therefore "intelligent," are often connected with loss or catastrophe.

In general, TV images of questioning are dominantly, almost domineeringly, negative. They reinforce the feeling that questions cause problems and get you in trouble.

Add to these images the negative names students call anyone who regularly asks questions or gives answers in the classroom, derogatory labels like "nerd," "geek," "brown nose."

Flip the coin of classroom image from tails to head, from the negative or down-side images to the more popular, positive image of the student, and what do you generally see? Any heads-up image these days, and for the past several decades, is predominantly an image of "cool." It's still the most generally recognized image of youth.

And, basically, it's not cool to ask questions or engage in anything like a long inquiry process. It is OK to ask simple yes-or-no, close-ended questions. That's because, I believe, they contribute to opinionating, and it's always OK these days to opinionate. Being non-curious but judgmentally opinionated is cool.

It's no wonder that the non-asking and non-answering of questions has become a deeply held value in the hearts of students and a normal expectation in the classroom.

This "norm of non-questioning" has seldom been recognized and researched over the past twenty years, but I believe that it's the master key that unlocks the Trojan horse and allows learning-resistant culture into the classroom.

Having gone through the game and the feedback session, I spend the rest of my first class reviewing the syllabus. In other words, I finally shift from the unexpected to the expected. But even syllabus review I present somewhat differently.

To further establish the third interactive pattern, "social exchange," in the class right from the start, as I hand out the syllabuses, I suggest that they are contract documents and that we're going to end the class with another game: "Let's Make a Deal."

The syllabus follows the standard format of course description, with objectives and so on, but with each section I offer some options for negotiation. I introduce each topic with the comment–question sequence, again communicated

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I provide the students an opportunity to consider each offering, suggest alternatives and possible compromises. But under each heading are also certain non-negotiables, and they always revolve around education as leadership and newness, learning as personal change, and questioning that includes a mixture of asking and answering in every class-period.

For example, the first course objective requires that "Students will practice asking and answering questions during every class." The negotiable side allows some questions to be written, others spoken.

Another non-negotiable item is that questions and answers always must be expressed in complete sentences, to counter the learning-resistant norm of one-word replies that seems to prevail these days.

One further negotiable option is based on a learning-resistant sub-norm whose acronym is GSI ("grade superiority-inferiority"). From the beginning, and throughout the term, I encourage students to negotiate for more points both through regular test items and so-called "extra credit." I also provide them with optional "upgrading procedures" that allow them minimally to pass the course, and maximally to raise their grades, by demonstrating to me that they've actually learned, not memorized, material they've failed to grasp earlier.

But the grade percentages and procedures for both active and passive participation, based on specified questioning procedures, are non-negotiable.

The three patterns of social interaction that I integrate into all my classes and courses, from the first day on, are based on the three schools of micro or interactionist theories in the social sciences: symbolic, dramaturgical, and exchange interactionism.

But there's a fourth school that is both broader and deeper in its theoretical principles, actually subsuming the other three within its more comprehensive structure. Its name explains its approach and implies the extensiveness of its explanatory tenets. It's called "ethnomethodological interactionism."

Essentially, this school of thought assumes that people interact on the basis of a logical method in all culture. The theory simply states that cultural rules regulate all our interactions, including classroom interactions.

What's most fascinating about ethnomethodologist researchers, besides their name, is that they often test their theories by breaking cultural rules and then by observing and occasionally altering

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the reactions of the group members they're working with.

That's what much of the first class of the new semester is about: breaking the rules that dictate norms of learning-resistance in the classroom. It's all about exposing the Trojan horse, playing follow-the-leader into new, often uncomfortable, but always exciting new areas of interest, and negotiating for control over one's own learning.

Thus ends another beginning. Each of these new beginnings was, is, and always will be exciting, hopeful, filled with promises made by both sides of the teaching-learning relationship. I can see it in the faces and body language of most of the students. I can feel it in my own flow of emotions.

I also recognize, in some of the nonverbal messages peeking out from behind student masks and defensive body armor, twinges of fear and even dread mixed with the hopefulness and new expectations.

This time, a roomful of individuals faced me throughout this first hour and twenty minutes of introduction, stage-setting, language-building, contract-making, and culture-creating. I can already envision the possibility of a learning-oriented tribal classroom-in-the-making. I know there will be times during the semester when the images will become blurred and I'll lose that vision. Like a faulty light, it will flicker and seem to burn out.

But now, today, back at the beginning once again, I reached out to grab hold of that synthesis of images, to grasp it even as we're mutually and reciprocally piecing it together again, for the first time, from all the many learning possibilities we can only begin to glimpse now, around and ahead of us.

The end of a beginning is always another vision, which is the primary lesson I've learned from all these years of starting another, and another, and another new course.

How I arrived at this insight, and how to move not beyond but with it into a semester-long struggle between learning-resistance and curiosity, between fear to know and desire to know, was a long, multi-dimensional, multi-functional analytic process.

But once the puzzle began to be pieced together, then the ever renewable vision began to come together into a intelligible pattern that not only seemed to be good scientific theory but also to make good common sense.

As the thirty-plus students file out at the end of the class, I know that three of them won't be back, but will transfer to other sections of the same course or to another course altogether. Three others will

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drop out. They'll just stop coming at some point, usually right after one of the quizzes or the mid-term.

Lastly, three of the remaining students will evaluate my performance as average or below average and will complain in the "comments" section of the evaluation.

The rest of the students will give me and the course high ratings, but not before they've struggled through the transition or, for some, the transformation from learning-resistance to a pro-learning classroom culture.

This is what I call "the triple ten pattern." I've never asked whether other instructors have observed it, but it's been relatively consistent over the past decade.

What I interpret this to mean is that the imagery I use in the first class and my overall approach to treating the problem of learning-resistant classroom cultures seems to have a 70 percent survival, if not success, rate. But what about the other 30 percent? One last story doesn't really answer the question but offers some hope.

One student happened to be assigned to my class a couple years ago and, halfway through the first class, got up and "left in disgust," as she told me later.

Not finding room in any other sections, she had to register for it again the following semester only to find herself once more assigned to my class.

As soon as I walked in, she walked out. The following school year, she decided to try again, only to discover that I was the only one teaching it that session.

Influenced, she later claimed, by the "three strikes" image, she decided to stick it out. Despite many differences and heated discussions, she opened up, frequently followed my lead while finding ways to occasionally lead herself, and ultimately rated the course as one of the best she'd ever taken.

In the comments section of the course evaluation, which she purposely showed me before turning it in "anonymously," she had written: "Because of this course, I've lost a lot of my cynicism about learning, about education, and especially about teachers."

An indirect, almost backhanded, compliment, it still seemed like high praise to me, and demonstrated a change that was mainly a shift away from closure to more open-minded images. For a teacher, that's more than survival, that's success. ∎