

Reflection, Writing, and Transformative Learning for College Teachers

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Abstract

Transformative learning is facilitated by teachers who are student-centred and passionate about the subjects they teach. When teachers write about their teaching the results can be inspirational. This essay reports on a set of such writings. The writing of others can also serve to inspire teachers to do their own writing about their teaching. Opportunities for this occur in the normal course of a professional life. It is suggested that these opportunities should be seized not just for their operational ends (such as promotion) but also for expressing deeply felt engagement with teaching.

Keywords: reflective writing, subject expert teaching

Introduction

Let us suppose that we want to be teachers who involve our students in transformative learning (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012, p. 571). Such learning is facilitated by teachers who are student-centered (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and passionate about the subjects they teach. Effect is the key here. To maintain the love of a subject and of teaching it we need to have ways of starving off ennui and the effect of so many pressures that impact college teachers. As a result of those pressures we can lose the love of our subject and become more mechanical. We can also, for example, become more research focused. We can gain grants that provide us with teaching relief or become administrators (permanently).

How do we become and remain the kind of teacher who stimulates, facilitates, and catalyzes transformative learning? To do that, we must become, and remain, reflective (Brookfield, 1995) through our life-course as teachers.

In this essay, I will look at teachers' writing as a way of accomplishing these goals; namely, the goal of remaining focused on what matters in our teaching, clear objectives for students, providing transformative learning experiences which change our students' view of the world, and encourage a life-long joy in learning. I will start with an illustration of the way a number of gifted subject-expert teachers have reflected on their teaching of their subject as a source of inspiration for transformational teaching, in turn, inspiring other teachers by their writing. Then, I will turn to ways in which any teacher is provided with opportunities to do likewise.

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Background and Method

A colleague and I worked together on a textbook (Kuiper, 1996) because we both taught large first-year classes where the available textbooks in our field did not adequately cover the learning strategies and outcomes that we considered important. My co-author died at a tragically early age, and I thought a suitable memorial to his committed and exemplary teaching would be to edit a book in which teachers reflected on their particular approaches to teaching the sub-disciplines of our shared subject. The contributors' writings are inspirational in that they are a result of personal commitment to the subjects they teach, and to inspiring their students. In turn, that is inspiring to colleagues, to their own commitments to their subjects, and the education of their students.

The participants who were invited to contribute were all subject-experts in their field with extensive research records. Seven had doctoral training in the UK and ten in the US. Nine were women and eight were men. Almost all of the sub-disciplines of the discipline and its associated areas were covered.

For the purposes of getting people to write about their teaching, the brief was simple and without the constraints these writers face when writing research papers—it was open-ended. Write about teaching your sub-discipline. What do you think is important? What turns you on? What turns students on? There was no page limit, no style sheet. There were no models. As an editor, I gave no advice, not even when asked.

After the book appeared, it seemed worthwhile to analyze the themes that emerged from the teachers' writing so as to understand what this group of internationally well-known scholars thought about their own work in the classroom. To that end, discourse analysis was employed (Brown & Yule, 1983). The next section contains the result of that analysis.

Results

Themes in the reflective writing of the seventeen subject-expert teachers that emerged from discourse analysis showed that subject-expert teachers are aware of many of the major factors in teaching transformatively, as well as other factors which impact teaching. Themes mentioned included: graduate attributes, learning outcomes, fitting the subject into the curriculum, course planning, textbook selection, practical work, assessment, student engagement, making learning enjoyable, competition for students among disciplines and generating research from teaching. Most of these concerns were emergent, coming from the participants' self-reflection on their teaching practice rather than having been formally acquired. No one mentioned formal training in teaching as a source of their reflections, although some of the contributors had received formal teacher training. Furthermore, each contributor had his or her own approach. No one contributor mentioned all of the themes to be documented below. More will be said about that later. In the following account, the contributors speak for themselves. The contributors' comments are presented as illustrations of each theme, as is the practice in discourse analysis:

What graduate attributes and learning outcomes need to be addressed?

“We have to ask where we want the student to end up.”

“If students are used to thinking about potential objections and presenting arguments based on evidence, this should stand them in good stead.”

“We need to build students understanding of how science progresses.”

“I have very real concerns for linguistics as a discipline and I want to make sure that I am doing my part to ensure its survival in our universities.”

What methods and motivations should be pursued?

“I believe that the degree to which one can engage the students, and keep the classroom lively and interesting, has a direct effect on the students’ learning.”

“Students love the sense that they might uncover a gap in theoretical coverage.”

“Historical linguistics being what it is—there are many ways that topics can be ordered for presentation.”

“Socratic learning requires a lot of energy from everyone, including the instructor.”

“As things stand, language teachers in training usually hate their linguistics courses, and, moreover, are totally ‘spooked’ by them.”

The writing also reveals that gifted subject-expert teachers share many personal attributes. Good subject-expert teachers are sharers. Almost all the chapters show an others-directedness and a keenness to share teaching expertise with others.

“Improvise as you teach. You will have to, because who knows what ideas or solutions will emerge from the discussion?”

“... if you love your subject, and you love teaching, and you care about your students, it will probably work pretty well.”

“I had the very great good fortune to inherit this unit from a colleague.”

Good subject-expert teachers teach and write, as individuals. Being unburdened by style, length and content requirements, the subject teachers write as themselves rather than as subject-experts. All of the chapters are written in the first-person singular. Hence, the writing is more creatively anarchic than in journal articles.

“In this chapter I present a personal view of the teaching of psycholinguistics, a view which will inevitably be influenced by how I currently teach the subject, as well as by my personal history.”

“... some of my own biases will leak out.”

“Not only do I believe that suprasegmentals need to be taught, as well as segmentals, but, in fact, I have argued for years that the latter are more important.”

“In fall, 1997, I was ready for a change in the life of work.”

“... these pale before producing uvular fricatives or ergative case in a “normal” stream of speech ...”

Subject-expert teachers must master disciplinary specifics. They know that all subject areas present their own pedagogical problems that, as subject-expert teachers, they must solve. However, the challenges of teaching a particular sub-discipline only gradually manifest to a beginning teacher. So often, you must find your own way to solve these pedagogical problems.

“Students seem to best develop an understanding of the component parts of speech when they are actually able to hear them separately.”

“What happens in phonology, and why, seems to me less mysterious than what happens in syntax (a field that I know less about), and much less mysterious than what happens in morphology (a field that I know more about, but still do not understand well).”

“One point which it is difficult to communicate to students is the problem posed by unique morphs.”

“Two of the most challenging concepts to teach Socratically are the difference between description and analysis, and between analysis and theory.”

Subject-expert teachers are also well aware that their teaching is subject to local constraints. Every nation, state, and institution frames and constrains teaching a subject in its own way. Such constraints are not always recognized, but recognition comes with moving to other education systems and institutions.

“For reasons peculiar to Edinburgh’s degree structure, students doing a joint major in any modern language and linguistics have to spend their third year abroad.”

“In New Zealand, it is best to assume that students have no background knowledge at all.”

“In Moscow, it is unusual and difficult to take courses outside the established curriculum of your major field.”

“My university likes to brand itself as a research-intensive university ...”

Most importantly subject-expert teaching is affectively engaged.

“They (school classroom teachers) are merely swept along as the bandwagon rolls through without any solid basis for doing what they are being told to do.”

“Another of my biases is the privileging of good ethnography.”

“Phonetics is my favorite subject to teach.”

“We owe it to [our students] to articulate how our classes will help them go on to greater (and, yes, more lucrative) things.”

In being affectively engaged, subject-expert teachers are good learners. They pick things up from others. They learn from their mistakes.

“I was slow to appreciate how challenging this situation is for students.”

“The importance of teaching differently for different audiences was all too apparent when I had an unsuccessful experience teaching an undergraduate course in formal semantics at Leipzig.”

“I used an excellent problem on sorting loanwords from cognates, which I adapted from one constructed by Calvert Watkins.”

Discussion

I have shown by quoting their own words, that subject-expert teachers have a range of attributes and approaches that make them motivated, and motivating, teachers. These attributes and approaches can be set against the desiderata for transformative learning and teaching. They measure up well, I think. Mostly, though, committed teachers do not get to write chapters in books reflecting on their teaching. They do, however, get opportunities to write reflectively in the normal course of a teaching career. Every college teacher applies for teaching positions, quite often, more than once. Both in the letter of application and in associated statements, applicants have an opportunity to reflect on their personal commitments as subject-expert teachers. While such statements are circumscribed by the position description of the position for which the applicant is applying, they always provide opportunities for making the kinds of statements the teachers in the previous section of this paper made.

Some teachers write diaries or construct portfolios. These can have multiple purposes. They can be purely personal records, but can also be used for qualitative research (Symon, 2004) and for academic promotion. In each case, such diaries and portfolios can be used reflectively to empower a teacher to maintain himself or herself as a creative and positive-orientated individual.

This is also the case with tenure applications. While evidence of successful teaching is important (student evaluations among them), personal commitments to teaching are also significant. If after five plus years, a teacher shows that they are a worthwhile colleague, he or she should then affirm the affective orientation to the students and the subject being taught. Again, this is a form of reflective writing, although it has an operational aspect. My experience is that an application that shows a creative and positive effect towards both students, and the applicant's subject, has a better chance in the academic competition than an applicant who goes through the motions and says what he or she think their readers want to read.

While such writing is personal, it can also be collegial, especially if the institution is lucky enough where mentorship and friendship, rather than competition, prevail. Many people show their job applications to a colleague or friend and get collaborative feedback. In institutions where mentorship is encouraged, a mentor can be a great help in making useful suggestions to improve the writing of job and tenure applications.

Beyond the personal, there are always co-operative opportunities to write, and thus reflect on one's teaching. Take the humble course outline. No course outline is written without reflective work having gone into course planning. This planning usually takes place with others and within the constraints of a curriculum. If a teacher, in a course outline, relates the reasons why the course has the form it does (even if that section is brief), it can be engaging for students and lead them to expect that the course will have a transformative goal.

Co-operative curriculum review and development, likewise, gives opportunities for co-operative reflective writing. Involving senior students in this process can be creative for everyone concerned. Why are we teaching this material? How should we teach it? What is the best way to engage students? What are the students going to find most difficult? Such questions can only be answered by serious reflection.

Sometimes a whole degree will be reviewed, and the opportunity to write position papers advocating changes of various kinds will result. Each of these gives an opportunity for creative reflective engagement with subject matters and with graduate profiles.

All such processes have the potential to be transformational experiences for those involved. Instructors need not to teach the same material in the same way for the whole of their professional life. It is sure that if this is the goal, then ennui will set in. The dark side will beckon. Not only should there be transformational teaching, there should also be transformational teachers who are themselves constantly engaged in transformational activities, for, without transformed teachers, there can be no transformational learning. I have suggested that, with reflective writing, even under the constraints of mundane activities such as applying for jobs and writing course outlines, creative opportunities to reinvent oneself as a teacher occur.

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