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RELATIONAL PRACTICES IN EDUCATION:

TEACHING AS CONVERSATION

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One of my mother's favorite stories about my childhood revolves around my first film experience. She took me, with my older brother and sisters, to see *Sleeping Beauty*. While my siblings were completely engaged with the film, I squirmed and sighed big sighs of discontent on my mother's lap. When the film was over, instead of quickly scrambling out the door as expected, my mother describes me as "coming to life." I was finally fully engaged; the audience was applauding and, by applauding too, I was able to “do” something. She, of course, has managed over the years to turn this story into an illustration of my need to be involved, a participant of any activity. And after suffering through years of believing that this maternal observation was, in some way, a slightly veiled insult to my character, I have finally come to recognize the wisdom of my mother's story.

I believe that this story has a good deal to do with the topic of teaching and learning as relational (collaborative)[1] practices. I often think of that two-year-old child when I look around my seminar table at my students’ faces. How often am I guilty of conjuring up a bright and fanciful “show” in the classroom only to realize that I am putting my students to sleep? How often do I make unilateral decisions about what is important and “should” be integrated into their

[1] I use the terms “relational” and “collaborative” interchangeably throughout this text.

lives? Am I allowing them into a process of learning when I pre-figure not only "what" they should learn but "how and for what purposes"? Am I guilty of assuming there is one set of concepts or topics they must know, and deciding, myself, what will count as the best way to convey them? In these reflective moments I wonder how I might engage them, metaphorically, in lively applause throughout our time together, rather than postpone such active collaboration until the class's grand finale.

I would like to propose, therefore, that we bracket the metaphor of teaching as a technique or method for conveying knowledge and consider the potentials opened by approaching teaching as a form of collaborative conversation. As will become clear in my argument, a relational approach to education requires that we abandon the idea that knowledge or information can be conveyed from one mind to another and, instead, I will describe knowledge as constructed in our conjoint activities with others – in what people do "together." Here, conversation suggests a "turning together." We require (and need) each other to accomplish conversation (the turning together). Thus, conversation is a relational practice and, by extension, teaching as conversation —the collaborative process of learning—is also a relational practice. It is a relational practice where participants, both teacher and student, engage in a process of making meaning together. Simply put, meaning is not the possession of one person. It only emerges in the interplay between people. We literally "make meaning" as we engage with others. From this stance, "meaning" is not transmitted from one person to another but emerges from their joint actions. To give meaning to a learning relationship, for example, requires coordinated actions of all participants. To know the meaning of good or bad, I must participate within a community where such standards and meanings unfold from what people do together. My own two-year-old attentiveness to a lively film did little to engage me because, at that time, I

did not feel I was fully participating in the central activity. When I finally could join in with enthusiastic applause, I fully appreciated the event. It had meaning for me. It was enlivening for me to realize I was part of making meaning in that moment.

How many of my students, I often wonder, feel as I did in that theater 50 years ago? How many are watching, listening, attending but not really "engaging"? In my attempt to articulate how I understand and perform collaborative educational practices, I will shift between conceptual discussion and visceral illustrations of those practices from my own teaching experience. Some of my illustrations will be in the form of reflections on the interactions I have with those in my classrooms. My hope is to invite you, the reader, into an on-going inner dialogue where I continually try to challenge my own tendency to fall into my professional "competency trap"[2]—a trap of being the expert who ignores the expertise of those with whom I am engaged.

As professionals—whether educational, therapeutic, medical, artistic, or any other kind—we expect ourselves to be experts; and those with whom we work also expect us to be experts. After all, it is our expertise that grants us the identity of "professional." I find that embracing a collaborative professional stance requires a critical examination of our expert positions. It ironically requires that we suspend any uniform or proven method of professional practice and, instead, entertain what sorts of actions might help construct us as effective professionals in the very specific relationships and contexts we find ourselves in at any given "interactive" moment. This requirement is ironic because it undermines any standard notion that, once trained or armed with "experience," we can act with professional authority. Only when our attention shifts to the

[2] Frank Barrett (personal communication) talks about jazz musicians who play the same riff as they improvise because it has been successful in the past. This repetition, he argues, gets in the way of the creativity of

interactive moment can we question the relationship between education and expertise. This chapter scrutinizes the cultural belief that education and experience yield professional expertise. I will try to illustrate the ways in which the collaborative activities of professionals and clients (teachers and students, in this case) stand as resources for successful learning. In other words, our focus shifts from learning "that" to learning "how." This requires collaborative efforts among all participants.

Distinctions between the Tradition of Education and Education as a Relational Practice

There are many illustrations of "alternative" forms of education. Despite a wide array of experimental programs and schools that employ various strategies—each departing in many ways from traditional education—teaching, learning, and education overall remain within the dominant individualist discourse of our culture. We need only look to the common and expected practices within education. The focus is on individual students and their individual comprehension, ability, and performance. Standardized tests help us gauge how each individual "measures up." These educational traditions emerge when the unquestioned focus of learning is on self-contained individuals (Macpherson, 1962; Sampson, 1993). We channel our efforts in education to the sole learner and we judge knowledge and ability only of singular persons. When we look into the dominant activities that constitute what we call "education," we see forms of practice that are conducive to "conveying" knowledge, thereby providing mechanisms to support our already existing structures—specifically, our educational system and the political and economic aspects of that existing system. This tradition is predicated on the hope that education will serve as a "stabilizing" institution creating the sorts of people who will "fit" into

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improvisation and, instead, creates a "competency trap" that inhibits generative possibilities from emerging.

our already existing world.

Institutionalized education should bracket the constructive possibility of education. The institution of education should be recognized as transformative – an institution that creates the world. We should educate children so that they can learn not only how to "live" in the world but how to "create" the future. We should educate adults so that they can provide children with resources for engaged citizenship. Yet, when we treat teaching and learning as a domain where knowledge is delivered or dispatched to the "unknowing mind," we imply that one "mind" has knowledge while another does not. My argument for the relational construction of knowledge and a concomitant transformation in educational practice draws support from Lois Holzman's argument in her book, *Schools for Growth* (1997):

> . . . a model of human understanding that is based on knowledge, that is, on knowing x about y—is education's chief structural defect. Like other societal institutions in Western culture, schools are committed to the philosophical position that human life and growth require some way of knowing the world. This belief, thousands of years old, has rarely been challenged; indeed it is taken to be as 'natural' as our upright stance….
>
> …Might it be that centuries-old philosophical biases about what it means to understand, to mean, to learn—to be human—have as much to do with how schools run as do politics, economics, and pedagogy? Might it be that the "overidentification" of learning and teaching with the production, dissemination, and construction of knowledge is at the root of school failure, teacher discontent, and school mismanagement? (pp 5-6).

Holzman's argument hinges on a movement away from epistemological issues (i.e. issues of what knowledge "is" and what learning and teaching "are") and towards "embodied activities." Embodied activities refer to the visceral ways in which we move others, and are

moved by them, in conversation. This refers to more than the verbal or non-verbal aspects of our interactions. It is about those bodily experiences that also shape and are shaped by our relations with others. I share Holzman's sentiments and would like to focus my own argument on how refiguring teaching—and consequently learning—in collaborative conversation might open new forms of practice. Might we find, if we play with the notion of teaching as conversation, that we can easily draw on the resources we have readily available for conversation, and thereby transform learning from something "one has to work on" into a very common, everyday endeavor – an activity with which we all have some degree of expertise? That is, can we invite others into generative and transformative conversations where we can create what counts as knowledge together?

There are several implications for learning and teaching when we speak of knowledge[3] as emerging within communities of people working together. There is no uniformly "right" way to learn or to teach. There is no universal codification of knowledge. Knowledge will vary from community to community. Various schools of therapy, as well as various psychological theories, for example, will generate different understandings of what counts as knowledge and concomitantly, what counts as an adequate demonstration of learning (or teaching). These judgments, in turn, will have serious implications for professional therapeutic practice. And the conversations that take place in different learning contexts will vary, thereby expanding what counts as knowledge, as effective learning or as good teaching.

Thus, education is not defined by a specific formula. With no predetermined formula to follow, how might we proceed in the "doing" of education? Can we begin to consider forms of

[3] I want to note that I use the terms "knowledge" and "meaning" interchangeably here. When we create meaning with others in our interactions, we are in fact creating knowledge or "ways of knowing."

teaching as relational performances (e.g. conversations) engaging both teacher and student? When we do, teaching can become a joint activity where new resources for action emerge. How can we engage in the activity of "teaching" so that we approach it as a form of practice—an activity and a conversation—rather than a technique for conveying knowledge?

One brief example may help clarify my point and will illustrate the difficulties we encounter when we give ourselves over to professional expertise. When I began teaching undergraduate students, I was only a graduate student myself. Given the nearness of my age to my students' ages, I was even more inclined to act "professionally" so that my students would see I was worthy of my teaching position. Yet, the more I acted as I imagined a "qualified" professor would act, the more alienated I became from my students. In those days, a "good" class consisted of one in which I felt I had successfully "delivered" the necessary information to my students and where they documented my success, as well as their own, by producing a set of scores on tests and papers that neatly fit into the tried and true bell curve. I carried this model for teaching with me as I started my position as an assistant professor.

These early teaching relationships are so markedly different from my teaching today. Rather than place my focus on the content of my courses, I am now more centered on building a sense of community in my classrooms. I enter into each course wondering how the students and I will "connect" so that together we can create a sense of learning, of knowledge generation, and of personal and social transformation. How do I account for my shift in focus as a teacher? I realize that my own learning and competence are enhanced when both the teacher-student relationship and the content of a given course are, in some way, connected to me. Additionally, as a teacher, I find myself excited about my courses when I am teaching material that excites me. I find that when I am excited about a topic, my students can share in my enthusiasm. However,

my enthusiasm can be distancing if it is “serious” enthusiasm. I find that the use of play and humor, as well as an ability to laugh at my own overly zealous attitude, invites students into collaborative learning with me. For example, I usually begin my courses by introducing myself to my students. Instead of giving them the “standard” information about who I am, I tell them that they will probably come to find me a “little bit crazy.” I explain how passionate I am about the course material. I tell them that because I am so excited about the topic, I choose to read about it in bed, on the beach, during my free time, etc. But, I add that this is not why I think they might come to see me as crazy. I tell them that they might think I am crazy because I assume that they too are deeply passionate about the topic and the material. I imagine that they are eager to dive in to some fascinating readings and discussion.

This conversation is fun because university students often select courses based on the time and day the course is offered. For many, the topic is secondary. At best, the topic is of interest; but rarely do students define themselves as passionate about academic material. By poking fun at myself and suggesting that I imagine them to be like me, we are able to give meaning to enthusiasm together. It is no longer threatening or distancing but something we “might” view as sharing in common.

This combination of connection and excitement describes the highpoints in my professional experience; it also describes the process of collaboration. I will give illustrations of how I have tried to construct these collaborative opportunities later in this chapter.

From Technique to Conversation

The collaborative or relational orientation I want to discuss emerges within a social constructionist discourse (Gergen, 2001; McNamee and Gergen, 1999). Social constructionism, as a discursive option, assumes that meaning is not private or locked away inside an individual.

Rather, it suggests that meaning emerges in the joint activities of persons in relation. To talk of meaning as relational requires that we replace our emphasis on individuals and their internal motivations, intentions, and perceptions with an emphasis on the "coordinated" activities of people engaging with one another (i.e. people "conversing" with one another, where "conversation" is used in the most general sense to encompass all forms of bodily and verbal engagement). For example, when I decide to make a friendly gesture towards you, perhaps in commenting on how nice you look with the "intention" of having a warm conversation, it really does not matter very much what I "intend" or plan to do if you respond cynically or sarcastically or even defensively to my gesture. It is "my" action and "your" response that grants significance to what we are doing. Thus, my action alone conveys no predetermined meaning nor do your responses control the meaning of our actions. While we might be interested in understanding another's "intentions," such understanding fails to alter the meaning of what has just transpired "between" us. Meaning is relational and evolves from the accomplishment of participants.

When we refigure teaching as a relational phenomenon (i.e. as conversation) and not as a private, individual ability (where some have more knowledge to impart or convey to those who have less knowledge and where some techniques or methods for teaching are more successful than others) we begin to attend to different features of teaching. Specifically, our attention is drawn toward the "process" of teaching as well as the teaching "relationship." We are less focused on the "proper" or "best" way to teach or provide information. Our focus, instead, is centered on the multiple ways in which teaching can take place. Further, our focus is centered on the participants engaged in the immediate moment and the wide array of both common and diverse voices, relations, communities, and experiences that each participant brings to the current learning context.

This is consistent with my earlier description of my evolution in teaching. Once I gave up my attempt to act like the expert professor, I focused my concerns on creating a learning environment where all voices could be heard. To do this, I had to throw away my objective determinations of students as being either "intelligent" or "less academically inclined." I had to give up my expectation that the only way to evaluate my own abilities as a professor lay in showing the nice bell-shaped curve of my course grades. These were radical moves. How could I argue that I was a competent educator if all my students (with all their varying reading, writing, testing, speaking, and creative abilities) were evaluated with top grades? I had to embrace the multiplicity that confronted me each time I gathered with my students. Could one person's critical and analytical abilities be on a par with another's immediate ease at seeing how course material could help in her daily relationships? How could these varying aspects of learning be compared, weighed against one another, and adjudicated so that, in the end, we all would know who "really" had knowledge?

The Need to Improvise

Emphasizing the teaching relationship and the multiplicity of voices, relations, communities, and experiences present in any learning context highlights not only the variation in what counts as excellence and what counts as knowledge, but also highlights the need for improvisation in education. Just as the jazz musician who improvises "in the moment" must be attentive to his or her fellow musicians, teachers and students (all learners) must be attentive to each other in order to improvise. The difference between an engaging seminar and a boring lecture is the ability of all involved to coordinate their activities together. I am reminded of the many seminars I am asked to give on a guest basis. In these contexts, I rarely know the participants and I am not there long enough to build an on-going relationship. I spend significant

time preparing material that is responsive to the specific invitation I have received. Yet, once I begin to work with a group, the seminar takes it own shape. While I have more material to cover than time to offer it, I never know what will be used, what will be discarded, and what will be invented in collaboration with the participants. Traditionally, this might lead one to such self-deprecating evaluations of disorganization or lack of discipline. But there is a vast distinction between those moments of disorganization and moments of collaborative teaching and learning. One can only be disorganized and undisciplined against the backdrop of a correct structure or a correct set of knowledge. Being responsive to those I am working with, on the other hand, requires movement through our conversation in ways that create opportunities for our transformation. Delivering the information that I prepared in advance would be dismissive of the relationship we create in the moment of learning. Further, it would be dismissive of the questions, concerns, and specific interests of the participants. As I prepare, I can only imagine our relationship. And I have never yet "adequately" imagined an unknown relationship!

What Counts as Knowledge

For the constructionist, what counts as knowledge emerges through a process of coordination. Over time, as people come together and coordinate their actions, they develop rituals and patterns. These patterns generate standards and expectations which give way to broader belief systems complete with their unique moralities and ethics. If we recognize that this process of constructing knowledge (what counts as truth) is taking place in all human engagements, then we should be able to see the potential for multiple and diverse standards, realities, and truths. What counts as knowledge to some will not to others. This stance is quite different from our traditional, individually focused approach to education.

As an illustration of what "counts as knowledge," my university, like most, has a separate

program—the Honors Program—for students who maintain a high grade point average. Eligible students are allowed to take advanced seminars where they purportedly cover material that is more academically demanding. Since these courses are very small by design, they are very costly to the University, which prefers the economic strategy of aligning one professor with three-hundred students. Therefore, for purposes of economic gain, Honors students are allowed to enroll in regular seminars and contract individually with professors for advanced supplemental work.

I have many of these students in my classes. They are the ones each day who have done all the reading for a given class, prepared any written assignment, and are always ready with factual information regarding the material being discussed. What is interesting to note, however, is how difficult it is for these Honors students to go beyond the text. When asked to contemplate how the material we are discussing might relate to a completely different context, or how it might inform their own lives, these students have little to say.

Additionally, when asked to collaborate with others in preparing course work, these highly evaluated students show disappointment fueled by their fearful anticipation that their collaborative efforts might be less than perfect, ultimately preventing the Honors students from achieving their typical outstanding evaluations. To remedy this situation, Honors students who are required to work collaboratively tend to take charge and do most if not all of the work themselves thereby gaining greater assurance of a positive evaluation while inadvertently sabotaging the professor's effort to nurture collaborative practices.

These students are not, in themselves, a "problem." Rather they are victims to the institutional structure of higher education. Higher education has defined what counts as intelligence. Learning the facts that are provided in textbooks and lectures, and being able to

identify these facts on tests, in papers, and in classroom discussion are what garner many students outstanding grades and their resulting identities as Honor student. And yet, the ability to improvise and go beyond the text is thwarted as is collaborative practice. Solo performance is rewarded while group activities are ignored at best. Yet the complexity of corporate life, global interests, and community investments today demand precisely the ability to work with others, to be responsive to the moment-by-moment interruptions and changes in plan, and to collaborate in working toward an unspecified future. This is but one example of the way in which traditional images and descriptions of learning impair our ability to be the sort of professionals we hope to be——ones who are responsive to the moment. The very structure of a university's Honors Program actually can inhibit collaborative learning.

Kenneth Bruffee, author of *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (1999), suggests that conversations among teachers and students "create" knowledge. He describes the difference between an individual conception of knowledge and the notion of socially constructed knowledge in higher education. He says,

> Traditionally, professors believe … that their job is to 'reach' students and fill their minds with what they believe fills their own. They ask themselves questions such as: What's going on inside my students' heads? How can I get in there and change what's going on? What's the best way to impart to them what I know? (p. 72-73)

He goes on to describe professors who adopt a social constructionist understanding of knowledge. He argues that social construction

> … implies that teaching is an entirely different enterprise. Instead of thinking about what to put into their students' minds and how to put it there, professors

> think of teaching as helping students converse with increasing facility in the language of the communities they want to join, and they think about doing that as creating social conditions in which students can become re-acculturated into those communities (p. 73).

In what ways does a collaborative social constructionist understanding of knowledge and teaching refigure educational life? Practices emerging from a relational and collaborative sensibility differ from individualist practices. Is there something to be gained from developing relational forms of practice? Once we move from inside the self-contained person to the realm of performance—what people do together—entirely new questions emerge for examining education. Teaching and knowledge are dislodged from the private sphere of persons and described instead as achievements of joint performance. This move encourages us to question the hierarchies of competencies or knowledge that are left unexamined in most contexts. Specifically, why are some forms of knowledge more respected and valued than others?

Why is it deemed better for a student to get the definitions, dates, and formulas correct instead of engaging in reflexive critique? Why is the learner who has had a transformative experience in a learning context less competent (intelligent) than the student who has all the correct answers on tests? To be a competent person takes on a very specific meaning within our dominant tradition. First, there is an embedded assumption that, equipped with the proper reasoning abilities, a person will behave in an expected and appropriate manner. Within traditional education, we can expect to identify those who are intelligent or competent (or "knowledgeable") by virtue of their behaviors (what they do and say) which we mistakenly presume to be reflections of their inner reasoning abilities. Furthermore, if we know what constitutes an intelligent person, we can manipulate both environment and person to insure

production of a good individual. We standardize curricula and tests; we make invisible the politics of topic and method selection for each academic level because those choices, we believe, have greater potential to produce knowledgeable, competent students. This in fact is what the institution of education is all about: promising the delivery of intelligent and good citizens to our communities.

This latter feature can be seen in virtually all of our educational settings. Even educational contexts outside of academia, for example post-graduate training programs in therapy, strive to mimic the "rigor" of our educational system. And when they do, these programs are duly rewarded with academic certification. In turn, those who have trained in such programs secure more prestigious professional positions, are sanctioned to charge a higher fee to clients, and are able to take third party payments. The educational stamp of approval has little to do with living collaboratively with others or performing one's job with competence and has everything to do with issues of political economy.

Limits to Individualism

The limits to individualist discourse have been discussed at length elsewhere (Gergen, 1994; Rorty, 1979; McNamee and Gergen, 1999). Rather than reiterate these arguments, I will summarize some of the constraints of this way of talking.

Self-focus and self-interest. When we locate all reasoning abilities "within" individuals, a person's success or failure in a particular learning context is dependent upon his or her own abilities. When the self is our priority, participants in a learning context focus their attentions on their own success, their own achievements, and their own movement up the academic ladder. The emphasis on the individual builds competition and self-interest into the educational endeavor. While competition might be useful in many situations (including many educational

situations), it might not "always" be the most productive path for learning.

Little to no concern for community. If my educational history is imbued with a concern for me and my achievements, I might be less inclined to utilize participatory forms of action, relying instead on my well-rehearsed mode of self-sufficiency. This form of relating might serve me well but might deplete the resources or opportunities for my community, my work place and profession at large, my family, and so forth. There is little to no concern for community.

Neglect of alternative modes of learning. Individualist discourse and its associated notion of what counts as rational, real, and appropriate disregards potential modes of teaching and learning that might be fostered in diverse communities and contexts. A simple exploration of the "acceptability" of alternative forms of education (Holzman, 1997) calls attention to the very limited range of educational options. Some forms of education, such as the Reggio Emilia Model (New, 1998) or the Montessori Method (Montessori, 1964) find their origins in Italian culture where emphasis is placed on family, community, and collaboration among children and adults. In the North American culture, these and similar educational innovations are the exception and not the rule. We can ask what sorts of values, ethics, and moral codes are being obliterated by limiting the availability of these alternatives within the broader institution of education with its priority on the ritual of self-celebration.

From Teaching Individuals to Teaching Relationships

My aim is to illustrate how individualist and relational discourses in education are metaphors, each inviting different forms of social life. Within individualist discourse, cognitive or behavioral metaphors are central. If all activity emanates from one's cognitive abilities, then mind becomes the focus of attention. Alternatively, if social life is guided by behavioral responses, then behaviors alone become our focus. We see this in most learning contexts where

an appropriate demonstration of learning yields some form of positive reinforcement—good grades, extra credit, gold stars—all attempts to "condition" our behaviors to fit in with expected norms. For collaborative practitioners, the relational metaphor places our attention on conversation, joint action, performance, and thereby improvisation. The effort is one of understanding language not as a device used to represent reality but rather as a necessity to construct reality. Wittgenstein (1953) offers us a use-embedded account of language. To him, we "do" things with our words—that is, we "make" realities. Words and their meanings are secured by participation in specific games of language. Thus the central question: what can we "do" differently when we talk of teaching as conversation?

It is important to note that the transition to a conversational and "performative" metaphor positions the teacher differently than any of the individualist metaphors upon which we currently draw. With the metaphor of teaching as conversation, the expertise of the educator becomes his or her ability to "keep the conversation going" in Wittgenstein's sense. Harlene Anderson (1997) echoes this view of the teacher or the professional when she describes the notion of the therapist's expertise. She states that "A therapist brings expertise in the area of process: a therapist is the expert in engaging and participating with a client in a dialogical process of first-person story-telling" (p. 95). She goes on to describe the therapist as an expert in creating and facilitating the dialogue space and practice. She says, "A facilitative position promotes a process that keeps all voices in motion and contributing" (p. 95). Additionally, the expertise of the therapist is illustrated in her position of "multipartiality" (p. 95).

How do these forms of "performative" conversational expertise translate into a teaching and learning context? How can we engage with others such that the learning process is open to the multiplicity of worlds that are present in any one learning context? How can students and

teacher engage "together" in coordinating their many voices, their many realities, their many ways of knowing?

Learning as "Making a World" versus Learning as "Knowing a World"

With our history of education, it is a bit absurd for us to assume that we can simply enter into an educational context and automatically create a relational, collaborative learning environment. Learners "expect" educators to assess their "individual" abilities. They expect that the focus of most educational contexts will be on cognitive abilities such as comprehension, expansion, and innovation. Academic administrators also harbor the same expectations. Learning spaces are primarily designed to facilitate individual learning, individual work, and individual evaluation. Most often, we seat learners at separate, individual desks. Chairs and desks face the same direction—forward, focused on the teacher.

Given these features, it is necessary to foster a different environment if we want to engage in relational practices in education. We cannot expect it to develop automatically. For example, we should not assume that seating learners in working clusters around a common table should automatically yield a collaborative learning environment. Crafting a collaborative environment can be achieved in a variety of ways. What I offer here is not intended to serve as a recipe for relationally engaged education; rather, I urge you to view any specific activity suggested here as one among many ways to engage "relationally" with learners. It is not so much an issue of what we "do" as educators but "how" we do it. In the present context, the "how" is relational. Being relational suggests inviting participants into the very process of collaboratively constructing how learning will take place, what learning will take place, and what standards will be used for evaluating that learning. Opening each of these conversations to all involved privileges the multiple standards for learning and teaching and determines what counts

as knowledge.

Four Resources for Collaborative Educational Conversation and Relational Learning

I would like to suggest four interrelated resources we might draw upon to invite others into a collaborative educational conversation with us: (1) avoiding abstract principles, (2) privileging narrative forms, (3) fostering community, and (4) blurring the boundaries between the classroom and everyday life. These four resources are not discrete. In fact, they could be more fruitfully viewed as facets of the same stone. Their common resonance can be found in their attention to language, stories, and relationships. As an elaboration of these features, I would like to expose the nuance with which I attempt to create a relational learning environment in my own classes. These illustrations to speak to the engaged tenor of the relational, collaborative learning environment. They are, simply put, various ways of creating the conversational space where different and generative conversations can take place. To me, this is the very nature of education, learning, and the collaborative construction of knowledge.

Avoiding Abstract Positions

Education in general privileges abstractions. My interest in my own teaching focuses on what might be gained in a learning environment by exploring the very situated narratives of participants engaged in an educational context. In other words, rather than begin a course by listing the principles, as in my own case, about human communication or psychology, I find it engaging to initiate inquiry among students about their own personal understandings of communication, psychology, or the specific topic of the course. Can we begin our collaborative conversation by privileging what learners bring to the educational context? Can we assume that from the very start of our relationship, students also have value to contribute? Traditional education, we should note, tends to operate on the principle that learners are present to "gain,"

not to give, and the commodity they want to gain is "knowledge." In a collaborative educational context, knowledge is neither given nor gained; it is "jointly constructed."

Sometimes, for example, I ask students to identify silently a difficulty they experience. I next ask them to think about what they would need to do in order to teach someone else to act "as if" she or he had this difficulty. What would the other person need to do? What would they need to say? How would he or she react to specific situations? What would convince us that the other had the same difficulty? Once each person has thought through this set of questions, they are paired with another. They go to a private space and "teach" each other to "perform" their difficulty. When the group re-convenes, each pair performs the difficulties they taught each other while the rest of the class "guesses" what it was they were enacting.

For example, one student might say that she is shy. This is her major "difficulty" in life. She then might list the following things that someone would need to do in order to demonstrate *her* shyness:

- Never look anyone in the eye
- Move back and forth on your feet when you are talking with another
- Wrap your arms around yourself whenever anyone asks a question
- Always have a hint of hesitancy in your voice

This may seem like an unusual activity, but I use it to illustrate the often-abstract idea that our problems, our characteristics, our traits, and our personalities are not really "inside" of us but, rather, are brought to life only in our "collaborative" engagements with others. For example, one cannot just portray shyness. If shyness is the difficulty identified, the question becomes how can one who suffers from shyness teach another person to replicate (i.e. to "do") it as it is demonstrated. The performance of any quality or state of being is always "responsive" to

others. Thus, in my students' performances, they usually find that no matter how well "trained" they may be by their partner, they are not prepared to respond to the spontaneous questions or comments of others in the group. Each student has been "taught" his or her partner's difficulty by the partner. Yet when it is time to perform the difficulty in front of the entire group, each trained student must now "improvise" his or her response to the audience's questions and comments. This simple activity illustrates nicely how one cannot simply "have" a problem or difficulty. One needs others to construct collaboratively the reality of the difficulty. If we are not responsive to others and if they are not responsive to us, we fail to "produce" what we intend and are left creating something entirely different. Therefore, in the case of shyness, someone in the larger group might say, "You look excited because you can't stand still or focus." Another might offer, "You have a difficulty asking others if you can use the bathroom!" This is one small illustration of how I aim to avoid speaking from abstract positions. As we can see, the shift from individual problems to collaboratively performed problem "scenarios" is easier to grasp in situated activity than through abstract discussion.

Privileging Narrative Forms

One very effective way of avoiding abstractions is to locate the topic of learning within a personal narrative. Stories told by participants (both teachers and learners) in an educational setting provide many things. First, giving voice to all participants' personal interests in the subject matter at hand underscores the wide array of perspectives that different people bring to the same subject. As well, don't all who populate our courses come with a wealth of information about, for example, what is normal or abnormal behavior, what counts as effective communication, what works best in organizations or in families or in couples to help them develop and grow? Inviting these stories from all members gives voice to the complexity of

social life and thereby opens new resources for engaging in that life.

As mentioned earlier, I always begin my courses with stories about my own interests and intrigue in the topic. I tell about my curiosity with the subject matter from the standpoint of my everyday life as opposed to the standpoint of pure intellectual pursuit. But the scholarly is always eventually integrated with the very local coherence that my own significant life stories lend to any set of material. I find that students become much more engaged in their education when they realize they have the conversational resources to make academic material familiar. They too have stories, both lived and imagined, about the academic issues they confront in their education. To give voice to these stories and to make them a significant part of learning is to approach teaching as conversation. Stories create knowledge. The lessons that emerge within a story are not separated into some set of abstractions; rather, they are embedded in the very common activities of those present.

When we can begin with our own stories, we create a space where different conversations and different forms of "learning" can take place. I can invite you and others into my story. You might not like my story, but you cannot tell me it is wrong. You can ask me questions and even encourage me to see the same details in different terms. But then my story ceases to be mine. It is ours. We are already collaborating in the process of understanding (i.e. of knowing). I encourage participants in my courses to offer their stories for others to investigate. I explain that the investigations are not judgments but are curiosities. The questions others ask, the observations they note, might provoke new understandings.

Harlene Anderson's "as if" activity (1997, p. 235) serves as a wonderful illustration of the use of narrative as well. By giving voice to all participants' questions and comments about another's narrative, we open possibility for new meanings to emerge. As Harlene says,

> We often forget that we and our clients carry other people's voices around with us and that these voices become part of who we are, part of our thoughts and actions . . . The [as if] experiential activity and discussion provide a chance for all participants to experience making room for an other and its relevance to dialogue. Silently listening enables both 'as if' members and presenters to hear differently than when listening and speaking simultaneously. That is, when the 'as if' members are prohibited from asking questions, sharing ideas, or making suggestions, they sense the difference between listening to what a presenter wants them to hear and what they think they should hear. . . . The 'as if' voices do not offer new 'information' for the presenter; this is not the intent. The newness and future possibilities come from the fluidity of the ongoing, back-and-forth interactions as each conversation (within and outside the consultation room) becomes part of and leads to others" (p. 241-2).

Fostering of Community

Sharing personal narratives also fosters the development of a relational community among the group. In place of a teacher "conveying" knowledge to individual minds, we have participants creating together what will count as knowledge. What is significant to some may not be to others. But does this mean that this student should "fail" or that the teacher has not adequately done his or her job? If we use the metaphor of conversation to talk about learning, we might begin to open up the notion of "success" such that all participants are seen as achieving a mastery of the topic in different ways. The mastery is not uniform or universal. It is multi-vocal. One student learning to write more effectively while another learns how to handle personal conflict and yet another learns to distinguish between different philosophical schools

might be well considered as effective learning.

Blurring the Boundaries between Classroom and "Life"

Constructing a community of learners through the telling of personal narratives also provides relational resources for students to dissolve the boundary between "their education" and "their lives." In dissolving the boundary, students take their classroom conversations beyond the walls of the classroom. I find that my students report talking with family, friends, roommates, and co-workers about course material. They do so because it has been made "familiar" to and by them. They no longer need to struggle with abstract concepts and theories. The theories and concepts they are confronting are "practical" theories and concepts. They are "generative" theories (Gergen, 1994). The course materials create the world rather than represent the world. This is a vitally important shift in the classroom, particularly if we accept that education is about the continual construction of citizens and citizenship.

In addition to the informal blurring of inside-outside classroom boundaries, students engage in significant course projects, activities that allow them to illustrate how the educational situation has meaning beyond the classroom. My own students have designed and facilitated dialogues about alcohol consumption and campus restrictions. One semester, we collaboratively decided that the major project for our course on transformative dialogue in communities would involve designing and facilitating a dialogical experience for a local group who were experiencing conflict. While students were struggling to identify groups to work with, our campus had what the national media labeled as "riots." (We have come to refer to these recurrent situations on campus as "celebratory disturbances"!) The disturbance occurred when a fraternity party grew in size and local neighbors alerted the police. Hundreds of inebriated students were met by police in riot gear, armed with pepper gas. Many arrests and injuries fed

the situation. On Monday in class, my students—the same ones who had been studying how to move beyond conflict toward transformative dialogue—engaged in a heated discussion about the Saturday night events. Most students blamed the police, the neighboring residents, and, of course, the university administration. Their feeling was that these groups simply did not want university students to have any fun. As I listened to them talk, I began to see their passion for this topic and suggested it as a perfect forum for their class project. They jumped on the idea and organized multiple groups, each comprised of a diverse set of participants from the university and from the community and included students (from both inside and outside the fraternity system), parents, local bar owners, town residents, police, university administrators, faculty, etc. The students collaborated in organizing, designing, and facilitating multiple dialogue groups. The impact was astounding. Participants wrote moving notes to the students telling of the learning that took place during these dialogues. For their part, the students reported what they observed:

- the (mean) Chief of Police crying and explaining that he just did not want to hold another dead body in the street;
- the (out of touch) administrator who described his own wild university days and what he learned from those experiences;
- the bar owners who were glad to make the money selling beer to students but feared a loss of livelihood and an impending threat for their families should their license be revoked for selling beer to minors.

The stories were palpable. Participants took issues that students viewed as being “black and white” and introduced an enormous amount of grey.

Since this project, other classes have followed with similar dialogue groups. These

dialogues have brought diverse constituencies together in a way that avoids the simple black and white understanding of what is “right” or “wrong.” The complexities of the issue are voiced. These dialogues do not magically alter the way university students celebrate on weekends. Nor do they change policies and procedures by official bodies. What they do accomplish, however, is initiation of a “different” conversation and thus a different “relationship” among participants. Since these dialogues began, more and more students are invited into the policy-making discussions at the University. Most significantly, students here hosted a national gathering of universities convened for purposes of talking about “celebratory disturbances”—a challenge confronting campuses across the nation.[4]

My students have provided several other illustrations of this sort of learning. By challenging themselves to find a group to work with, they collaborate with not only their classroom peers but with a group of participants with whom they have chosen to craft a dialogic process.

An Example: Creating a Conversational Space for Learning and Engaging Relational Partners in a University Classroom

In an attempt to emphasize the need to create the conversational space where different conversations can take place and to further illustrate the four resources, I will draw on my experience as a university professor. I will describe some of the ways in which I enter into my courses, inviting my students to collaborate with me in the construction of our knowledge and learning. My hope is that my description of the university classroom will be valuable and applicable to a wide range of learning contexts. I use these practices in diverse learning environments myself – beyond the university classroom.

[4] See http://www.unh.edu/studentsummit/summary.html for a summary of the national student summit.

Acknowledging that collaborative learning cannot be taken for granted in a traditional context, I attempt to engage my students in my first meeting with them in a process of building relationships with one another and with me as well as building commitments as relational partners for the duration of our course. Thus, I invite them to collaborate in creating a very different learning context. One way I do this is to ask them to work in partner dyads or triads, first sharing stories of the best functioning groups or communities with which they have been engaged. Once they have shared their stories, I ask, "What strengths, values and talents does your story remind you that you have?"[5] After sharing their strengths, values and talents with their partners and making a composite list, I ask, "What characteristics of communities or groups does your story illustrate?" In other words, what are the features of a great community based on their own stories? Again, partners generate a list of features. At this point, I ask them to report to the entire group the lists they have produced of strengths, values and talents they most appreciate in themselves by virtue of their reflections. I ask them not to identify who in their small group is associated with each item on their composite list. They also share with the entire group the central features of a wonderfully functioning group or community. This reporting generates a lengthy list of qualities, with much overlap and great variation as well.

With these features, values, and talents listed for the entire group to see, I ask, "If we, as a group, were to be like your 'best community' experience, what would be happening? What would we look like?" This question, again discussed in the original dyads or triads, yields a long list of images. Students frequently identify images such as the following:

- Everyone will know each other's name
- Everyone will feel comfortable to say what's on his or her mind

[5] I designed these questions using David Cooperrider's model of *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, 1995).

- We will be working together for a common goal
- We will be open minded
- We will be genuinely interested and demonstrate a sense of caring about each other
- There will be no cliques
- We will use common communication links (e.g. email)
- We will engage in open discussion
- We will foster a sense of individuality balanced with togetherness
- We will be comfortable with each other
- We will create relationships outside of class as well as inside
- There will be a high level of participation

After posting these images for all to see, I ask a final question: "What will WE need to DO to make this happen?" I see this as a moment when all participants in the room begin to envision their centrality in making our learning environment successful, worthwhile, and collaborative. Common responses to this question include:

- We will not hold back
- We will lead by example
- We will learn everyone's name
- We will be respectful of what everyone says even when we disagree
- We will create our learning goals together
- We will stop thinking "factually"—be more open

Finally, to facilitate students' abilities to see their own part in making our course a success, I ask each student to write down three things that each is willing to make a commitment to do in order to contribute to our success. By the end of our first meeting, students already have

a sense of their responsibility to co-construct a relational environment where together we can create meaning and knowledge. As a group, we have collaboratively constructed a very different sort of learning environment and one unique to the participants. It is a context where we are all relationally responsible (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) for what we learn, how we learn, and whose standards are used to assess our learning.

With a beginning sense of ourselves as a learning community, each contributing to our success or failure, we begin to talk about the content and structure of the course. I suppose some might say I am lucky to be teaching "about" communication. The very topic of my courses neatly blends with the relational context we establish together. However, I feel that regardless of the course content, learning is enhanced by a collaborative, relational sensibility. When participants feel connected to one another, an ability to ask questions in a way that make us vulnerable is eased.

With a budding sense of community then, we begin to discuss the contours of our course. What will we cover? What will be required? I have tried, on occasion, to invite my students into crafting the answer to these questions together. One semester while teaching a seminar on organizational communication, I proposed, "We are all here, I presume, because the topic of organizational communication is interesting to us. If that is the case, then what would you like to know about it? How would you like to explore this topic? What would you like to do to demonstrate what you learn here?" I gave the group two weeks to work together to design a proposal. One of the options I made clear to them, as a viable proposal, was to say, "You are the professor. We want you to make these decisions." But I did not assume that I should.

During other semesters, I have offered a course syllabus as a way to "begin" our conversation. I tell students that this is my invitation to them. They are encouraged to amend,

edit, delete or add to the structure and content of our courses. The general response to these suggestions has been for students to ask me to determine the readings and the requirements (papers, exams, presentations, and so forth). However, by the middle of the semester, students begin to propose alternatives. I am always open to their proposals as long as they participate in the dialogue about how their proposal will illustrate "what" learning has taken place and "how" it should be evaluated.

It is interesting to note that not every detail is usually "up for discussion." Often, I find students prefer to have their professor make certain decisions. They also often request a "formal lecture" as opposed to an open discussion. All of these decisions emerge in the give-and-take of open dialogue. There is nothing inherently wrong with formal lectures or with hierarchical decision-making. The important point here is that these more traditional educational practices have been "collaboratively" agreed upon. Such a collaborative process yields a very different result than, for example, giving a formal lecture because that is the way a "good" teacher teaches.

This is one way I attempt to create a set of collaborative relationships and a conversational space in a learning context. I might also open discussion about the various reasons for participants' presence in a particular course since assuming that all learners are present for the same reason limits the range of dialogue and transformation that can transpire. Or, I might begin a course by inviting students to talk about the diversity of perspectives, rationales, identities, and standards they each bring to the classroom community. Identifying and sharing diversities begins to invite and celebrate difference as a richness and a resource rather than as a stigma or deficit.

Teaching as Conversation

The metaphor of "teaching as conversation" is useful because it makes the ritualized practice of education familiar in a different way. It shifts teaching and learning from a focus on a method for conveying knowledge to a process that is attentive to the ways in which participants create meaning together. It allows us to celebrate our collaborative activities. As we engage with each other, we not only create a sense of "who" we are but also a sense of "what" is valued. We create—we perform "together"—a world wherein a lived reality can emerge. And this reality will very likely differ from others that we, ourselves, populate. This reality will differ from the realities of others in the very same learning context. The metaphor of conversation provides the opportunity for us to engage in self-reflexive inquiry about the resources for action that are not being utilized but that might aid in creating new ways of going on together. If education is conversation, then we are free to pause and ask ourselves what other ways might there be to talk about the topic, the issue, or the problem. How else can I invite others to collaborate with me in creating "knowledge?" Conversation as a metaphor enhances self-reflexivity by legitimizing it. In so doing, we open ourselves to listening, reading, talking, and writing in more "generous" modes while remaining open to the relational coherence of diverse ways of acting. We thereby avoid speaking with a sense of certainty that the world is or should be one way. And in so doing we open possibilities for collaboration and the coordination of multiple ways of being human. In other words, create new ways of "going on together."

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