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Cover Page Footnote

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An Unspoken Trust – Violated?

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“I never expected someone to read this!” one student groaned aloud. Others in the room nodded in agreement. One said that he was uncomfortable, his stomach was tight, and his heart was beating fast. Another added, “I’m not ever going to put my feelings in my writing again, not if someone might read it!” Another grunted, “It’s not fair.” These students were part of my first-year writing class, and their responses were ones I expected. You see, on one particular day, I wanted to teach my students a lesson. The lesson learned, though, was not necessarily the one I had planned.

One morning, I asked students to freewrite for fifteen minutes about their experiences with writing the essay they had just completed for class. I had explained to students earlier in the semester that freewriting, according to Peter Elbow, is “writing whose goal is not to communicate but to follow a train of thinking or feeling to see where it leads” (270). I had also said that freewriting is not “a published communication intended for an outside audience” (Lindemann 111). After waiting patiently as students wrote, I asked them to switch seats with another person, read that person’s freewrite, and respond in writing to what they read. After five minutes, students returned to their own seats and began to discuss how they felt when they realized someone else would read their freewrites, when they realized that I manipulated them.

The responses shared above were ones I anticipated. I hoped, in fact, that students would find themselves uncomfortable and nervous so that they would acknowledge that writers have emotions associated with writing, emotions they might not even expect in every situation. I wanted my students to realize that they may feel protective of their writing, an issue important to discuss in a classroom dedicated to peer response and workshopping essays. And it worked. Students absolutely got the message I wanted them to get. However, what I did not expect were the pangs of guilt that I felt after manipulating my students.

When I asked students to engage in the freewriting activity, they believed that the exercise would be what I said it would be: an opportunity to think and feel on paper or computer screen in private. They trusted me to tell them the truth, and I violated that trust. True, for a very good reason. But the fact remains that I manipulated my students, and I felt guilty about that. Like Parker Palmer, I too believe that “[w]hen a class that has gone badly comes to a merciful end, I am fearful long after it is over—fearful that I am not just a bad teacher but a bad person, so closely is my sense of self tied to the work I do” (36).

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I'm not going to belabor this issue, though I imagine that with the guilt I feel, I could fill ten to twelve pages with angst and self-doubt. While that might be beneficial to my own emotional healing, what's more important is how this episode highlights issues of ethics and teacher identity on which we should reflect. Considering these issues—the connections between our values and our jobs—would benefit all of us who teach.

To start that reflection, I ask the following questions: Why did I react the way I did? Why get so upset over misleading my students? It's possible that my response to my experiment is related to what Madeleine Grumet calls a "feminine version of the Protestant ethic," one that reflects an appreciation of "patience, obedience, self-abnegation, and loving-kindness" (52). Teachers are supposed to be trustworthy individuals, bastions of the community, morally superior human beings who do not lie to their students. Female teachers, especially, are expected to be "good girls," ones whom parents and administrators can count on to do the right thing at all times. Moreover, students are conditioned to trust the teacher, to view educators as benevolent people who choose to spend their days with adolescents and young adults because of the love their subject or teaching or kids, not the money or the glory or the power.

Furthermore, Robert Yagelski reminds us that "the image of the teacher as idealist, as hero, as iconoclast, is well-rooted in American culture" (41). Teachers are expected to be truthful and to treat students justly. We need not only look to television (*Boston Public*) and the movies (*Mr. Holland's Opus* or *Dead Poets' Society*) to verify this ideal; we can also look at many of our own assessment practices. On the evaluation forms given to my students at the end of each term, for instance, there are questions about the instructor's "helpfulness," "patience," and "impartiality," suggesting that the university (or at least my department) values these qualities as indicators of one's effectiveness as a teacher. Students are asked to assess the teacher's ethics in addition to the teacher's ability to organize and present materials; our values, then, are incorporated into our teacher-identities whether we want them to be or not. And the expectations that we bring into the classroom, as well as the roles that we adopt in trying to meet those expectations, are connected to the ethics of our teaching.

There are a variety of models of the student-teacher relationship, each of which distinguishes a specific role for the teacher. Some of the models position the teacher as a pseudo-parent, responsible for students' success and for setting up classroom activities to lead students to make specific decisions about writing; other models view teachers as partners with students in inquiry. If students and instructors are working from an ontological system of education, one in which knowledge is passed down from generation to generation, then students would expect the teacher to direct them consistently toward an unvarying set of beliefs or facts (Knoblauch 129). Students who act within the limitations of this system are not expected to question the nature of things or attempt to create knowledge through discussion or self-discovery; rather, they accept what the teacher offers as true, rational, and not likely to be modified.

The power in the situation described above resides with the teacher, but it is the students' belief that the teacher will use that power for the good of the students—the pre-determined good that is the same for all students—which allows the system to work. It is students' willingness to buy into the system that authorizes the teacher to act in any way he or she chooses. The freewriting exercise I

developed was not designed to lead students to a single unchanging fact or belief; rather, I planned the experience to encourage students to explore their (diverse) beliefs about writing and emotions associated with writing. Nevertheless, while I encouraged students to be active participants, I typically position myself as an expressivist teacher, one who acts as facilitator or planner to set up opportunities for students to explore language, with the goal of self-discovery through collaboration (Berlin 16). In this instance, I set myself up as the authority in the classroom.

Let me give a bit of background about my writing classes before moving on. I use a series of writing workshops to promote students' authority as writing experts; I bring in my own writing to share my identity as a fellow writer; and I employ student-designed rubrics and self-evaluation to encourage students to take responsibility for their growth as writers. The lesson that I planned for students on this specific day, though, changed my role in the classroom from facilitator to director/authority. And, though I was oblivious to this shift in roles, my students were quite aware—as Jeff Smith says they always are—of “who in the room has the power, ultimately, to set rules and requirements if she so chooses, and who doesn't” (306). It is this discrepancy in identity that led to my feelings of guilt about the incident: not the students' responses to the incident but my own. And it is this issue—paying attention to how we perceive ourselves and how we connect our values to our everyday actions—that I wish to highlight in this essay.

In his “Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics,” Smith asks a useful question: “[A]re we obliged to enact our values [. . .] in each moment as opposed to pursuing them through means which may, at least temporarily, seem at odds with them?” (310). I believe we should allow our values to guide the decisions we make as educators; we should pursue actions in our classrooms that allow us to enact our ethics on a daily basis as much as possible. Perhaps, more importantly, we should reflect on our actions each day, considering how what we value is manifested in our choices as teachers. It is the consideration of our actions—as much as the actions themselves—that contributes to our growth as ethical professionals.

We should reflect regularly on our teacher identity and its relationship to our ethics, asking ourselves questions such as the following: How do we perceive ourselves? What image do we offer students of ourselves as teachers? As individuals? As partners in education? Who are we perceived to be? We are encouraged by many in our field to be reflective, to think as we teach (Knoblauch; Ronald and Roskelly). But how many of us consider on a regular basis our reactions to students, their work, or our own positioning in relation to both? Beyond keeping a teaching journal, talking to colleagues about the pile of papers we have to read or the lesson that fell flat (or the student who failed), do we really spend much time reexamining our actions in the classroom? Do we have any rewards for doing so? It's hard work, emotionally and cognitively. Such consideration requires us to first articulate our assumptions and then systematically believe and doubt them in order to better understand ourselves and our students and ourselves. More than that, it's work that is not necessarily valued in the academy. Where does self-examination fit into the typical model of service-teaching-professional development?

Considering how we react to decisions that we make in the classroom on a daily basis is paramount to active reflective teaching. Peggy Raines and Linda Shadiow tell us that

[T]hinking about teaching practices is only the beginning; describing perceived classroom successes and failures is an initial step. Reflection, in the most potent sense of the word, involves searching for patterns in one's thinking about classroom practices and interrogating the reasons for one's labeling some lessons as successes or failures; it challenges one not to stop with the thinking about the doing. ("Reflection and Teaching" n. pag.)

Of course, the practice of reflective teaching, while becoming more popular in some academic circles, also entails some risk. It's possible that asking ourselves why we react in various ways might cause us to question the way the academic system is organized in the first place. And, though we are encouraged to reflect on (and account for) our teaching and related activities in annual evaluation reports, we are not rewarded for questioning the status quo or our relationship to its continued existence, especially if we are not tenured. The university system, as it has been designed, maintains a specific relationship between teacher and student, one that is based in part on the idea of the teacher being in control and being truthful in and out of the classroom.

Another risk associated with reflecting on our teaching—especially on those days when we don't see ourselves (or the way the class went) as successful—is that we might have to leave our comfort zones and view our teaching actions as external to our teacher "selves." What we believe about teaching, what we were taught about good teaching, what students have told us about ourselves as teachers, all these surface when we slow down and contemplate the decisions we make in the classroom.

Disconnecting from one's teacher self to consider choices made by that self is emotionally difficult as is any practice which asks us to evaluate what our preferences and judgments might be. This discomfort with self-evaluation became apparent to me when I introduced a role-playing activity to my students in another writing class. I asked them to respond to their own papers as if they were not the author: taking notes as they read, thinking about what the author's point was and how well the author explained that point. Students were asked to write notes to themselves about what they might change now that they've read their own work as readers. It was awkward for students to separate the decisions they made as writers from the interpretations they constructed as readers; however, when students accepted that their choices as writers did not define their writing identities (i.e., "I'm a good writer, I just didn't have a good introduction to this essay"), they were able to give themselves better advice for revision later.

Teachers would benefit from trying the same kind of self-detachment in their reflections; however, the danger of discovering flaws in our teaching identities keeps many of us from asking complicated and often personal questions concerning our beliefs about teaching or our decisions as instructors. Recognizing who you represent yourself to be rather than who you think you are can be disconcerting. When I stopped and asked myself, for instance, about my feelings related to the student reactions in my freewriting experiment, I found myself questioning my beliefs about what teachers should do. I found that I couldn't ever step outside the position of influence I inhabit in the writing classroom, despite my wanting to do so. Realizing that my students sometimes have blind faith in me because of my position, rather than because of who I am as an individual, shook my notions

of the emotional intensity of the student-teacher relationship and efforts to build trust with students individually. Teachers engaging in the kind of self-analysis I have illustrated here might find themselves discovering parts of their teaching identities that are unsettling or, at the least, contradictory.

What is clear to me now is how much reflecting on our decisions in the classroom (those in which we were honest with our students and those in which we were not)—and our identities as characterized in those decisions—can offer opportunities for growth and change. James Banner, Jr., and Harold Cannon suggest one way for us to get started in this endeavor: “Professors[Teachers] can begin simply by thinking concretely and honestly about their own personal qualities and dispositions and then initiating some conversations about them with their colleagues” (n.pag.).

This is exactly my motivation in recounting the interchanges between students and me in this essay. It’s also what motivated me to read a draft of this essay to the students in that class and to ask for their feedback. Interestingly, they were surprised that I spent any time or energy thinking, much less writing, about the incident. This response gave me the perspective I needed. Students, even those who have been manipulated by their educators, trust us to make the right decisions, to do the right thing, to be on their side. My reaction to the incident, then, is more about me than about them. Thus, my purpose in writing this essay changed midstream, from reflecting on what they learned and what that means to what I learned and what that might mean.

When I stopped concentrating on my students, I was able to come to the following realization: though I advocate honesty and encourage congruence, I am predisposed to withhold information, to tell only what I think students need to know at any given moment. This tendency is part of a controlling personality, a part of who I am as a person that also bleeds over into who I am as a teacher. There’s a great sense of power that comes from planning what will happen in a classroom, an emotional payoff that we don’t often acknowledge. By recognizing it, I found myself open to questioning it, to asking myself about what might have happened if I told students we were going to try something a little different before doing the freewriting activity. Thanks to changing the focus back to myself, I was able to learn something from the activity, something that has made me a better teacher. My need to feel in control, combined with my choice to work within a system that sets up the student-teacher relationship so that the teacher is most often the (benevolent, well-intentioned) decision-maker, leads me to design lessons in which I am the knower. Even though I do not intend to set up my relationships with students based on a current-traditional pedagogy, my preference to control can position me that way.

That’s why I had such a significant reaction to the incident; I was aware of how much control I had over what students did (and felt), and I didn’t like it. Students did exactly what I wanted them to do and learned the lesson I expected them to learn, leaving little room for dialogue, exchanges of ideas, or growth. It felt wrong because it was not the way I usually teach (yet, emotionally, it was comfortingly familiar. I was in charge and everything went the way I wanted it to go). The contradictions that surfaced as a result of my writing about the lesson-gone-wrong were ones that were useful, but not until I reflected on them and began to dialogue with others about them.

Considering these issues—positioning in the classroom, my intentions, my

personality, my beliefs about teaching writing — and talking about them to students, to other teachers, even to myself, has helped me to better understand myself. This, I am convinced, is the lesson that was supposed to be learned as a result of the activity I did with my students. And, although it wasn't the lesson I intended, it was the one I needed. Whether students got what I wanted them to get is really not pertinent now. What is important is that I take more opportunities to think reflectively about my reactions to students and to the possible lessons (for me) in my classroom. In the spirit of growth and change, then, I offer this story of the day I wasn't completely truthful with my students as a mirror for others to hold up to themselves to ask, "What have I done that I'm not proud of, that didn't work the way I wanted? How can I learn from that?" I invite all teachers to join me in thinking about the ways that our reactions to classes, to students, or to our work can help us better understand our beliefs about learning, teaching, and ourselves. ☺

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