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2014

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Bossman, Dorothy Marie, "Teaching with Poetic Insight: A Practitioner Reflection and Dream of Possibility" (2014). *The Nebraska Educator: A Student-Led Journal*. 15.

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# Teaching with Poetic Insight: A Practitioner Reflection and Dream of Possibility

Dorothy Marie Bossman

## **Abstract**

This reflection focuses on the case of a student who failed my English class when I was concurrently a PhD student and a middle school teacher. The pedagogical insight imbedded in the story of our time together adds to the literature on teacher content knowledge Shulman (1986) called *the missing paradigm*. The piece takes an unorthodox approach to a case study based on the twofold identity of the author as a researcher intrigued by the complexity of teacher thinking and an educator driven by concern for a particular student. This case reflects back on my experiences teaching this young man, whom I failed to bring out from under an oppressive system (Friere, 1970). The reflection unfolds into a fantasy of an emerging, poetic curriculum I wished I had created for this student, rather than assigning him a failing grade. This approach to curriculum could “allow students their full humanity and allow me to stay alive as a teacher” (Ayers, 1993). Based on Dewey’s conception of a poem as “a universe” that is “self-enclosed and self-limiting,” (1934, p. 250), I construct a metaphorical understanding of my ideal teaching as a poetic creation. Through a careful rebellion against constraints created by policy and school governance, my teaching could be a model for students, whom I hope will become “strong poets” (Bloom, 1978) with the confidence and space to write their own beautiful learning agendas.

**Keywords:** *at-risk students, teacher manner, pedagogy, curriculum*

## **Introduction**

In the presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association in 1985, Lee S. Schulman asked, “How

long have we been burdened by assumptions of ignorance and ineptitude within the teaching corps?” Next, he presented a bold idea; the academy needed to include the expertise of classroom teachers in the burgeoning corpus of pedagogical knowledge. He urged researchers to work alongside teachers as they engaged in “systematic inquiry in their classrooms,” in order to construct an authoritative collection of cases to serve as “prototypes, parables, and precedents” from which researchers, teachers, and teacher educators could draw wisdom and expertise (Shulman, 1986). Other scholars have sought to improve the status of teacher research and practitioner knowledge (Avery, 1987; Cazden, Diamondstone, & Naso, 1989; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Giroux, 1988; Schon, 1987; Latta & Wonder, 2012), but the assumptions that divide teachers and researchers persist.

This separation became palpable for me during the four years in which I was a PhD student and a secondary English teacher. At the university and at work, I struggled to counter aspersions about educational researchers and classroom teachers. I became a dual outsider, emboldened by an indignant urgency to defend the legitimacy of my expertise in both contexts. Work colleagues spoke disparagingly of education professors (and graduate students) who do not understand the reality of school and fellow doctoral students condemned classroom teachers for a lack of interest in research. It became apparent that teachers and those who conduct research about teaching still lack respect for each other. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) concluded more than a decade ago, “those most directly responsible for the education of children have been disenfranchised. (p. 5)” In my experience, nothing has changed; teachers do not consult researchers for their expertise and scholars of education have marginalized themselves from contexts in which education actually occurs.

The piece that follows is an example of the reflective practice I engaged in as a teacher and a researcher. This case illustrates the “metacognitive awareness” and “reflective understanding” Shulman (1986) called on teachers to employ in their inquiries. I begin with an “intellectual biography,” (Schon, 1987) which narrates the development of my pedagogical approach; then I recall my interactions with one seventh-grade student whose deficits as a learner had been codified by a list of “limiting labels” (Ayers, 1993). The reflection describes my fruitless at-

tempts to help this young man succeed within a standard, linear curricular paradigm. My thinking about that failure unfolds into a dream of a poetic curriculum that could have encouraged this troubled student to speak out and “to become more whole and fully alive in the classroom” (Ayers, 1993, p. 43). The implications of my case form a “pedagogic creed” (Dewey, 1897), which asserts what I have learned about what ought to transpire in a secondary English classroom.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey claims that “a poem presents material so that it becomes a universe” with a “self-enclosed and self-limiting” nature (1934, p. 250-251). This art form has always been enchanting for me. The first poet I loved was Dickinson, who taught me to “dwell in possibility”<sup>1</sup> of words. As a teenager, I wrote cathartically, following the lead of Auden, who illustrated the dramatic therapy of claiming that “the stars are not wanted.”<sup>2</sup> Later, when I studied literature in college, I came into contact with more poetry, and continued to love it. Poems still stay with me like kind words from faraway friends. Wordsworth encourages me to find power when the “world is too much with [me]”<sup>3</sup> and Sandburg shows me the joy of detail with his whimsical depiction of fog “on cat’s feet.”<sup>4</sup> Poems also serve as mementos of pivotal moments in my life and they have comforted me when “things fall apart.”<sup>5</sup> Now that I am a public school teacher, it is easy to entangle myself into battles over education legislation, the role of testing, the nature of curriculum, the status of teachers, and the aims of education. Dewey’s reminder that a poem “becomes a universe” invites me to *pause* and to linger on the potential of words again.

It is a difficult time to be an English teacher. Our content area has become a locus for standardized testing, so we spend a large amount of time teaching reading *strategies*. This focus on decontextualized skills comes at the cost of fostering an intimate connection between reader and writer (Wilhelm, 2008). The students and I need space to build this connection, hence my visceral reaction to constrictive mandates. Per Dewey (1934), “anger appears to be a reaction in protest against fixed limitation of movement” (p. 217). Thus, I can articulate my frustrations at the ever-narrowing confines of my practice, but I wonder how my students are feeling about their futures. There are predetermined expected outcomes for school, but they are usually assigned to students without regard for their interests, history, or talents. Students who cannot or will not follow

the standard narrative for academic success are too easily labeled as failures, along with their teachers, schools, and communities (Ravitch, 2010; Labaree, 2010).

My teaching is the most rewarding when I can practice teaching in the manner of an independent artist, akin to what Bloom (1973) called a “strong poet.” Barone (2001) proposes that schools should help all students become strong poets, writers of their own lives. Despite the pressures of assessments and curricular regulations, Barone suggests, a school should create space for each student to act as “a strong storyteller, continuously revising [his or her] life story in the light of [his or her] own experience and imagination” (p. 125). The vision of a young person composing a unique, imaginative path through education is beautiful, but realizing this dream in the “technological, bureaucratic, often dehumanizing systems of schooling” (Barone, 2001, p. 121) is not simple. In my practice, I have witnessed students who do not feel empowered to speak for themselves at all.

This paper considers my experiences with Cole,<sup>6</sup> one victim of a failure-focused, dysfunctional educational situation. Before the year started, the seventh grade resource teacher told me that Cole was a “difficult student,” pointing to a list of acronyms (BD, ODD, and LD) that followed his name on the class roster. When I met Cole, he did not speak or smile when I tried to get to know him. Also, he came to class empty-handed every day and he would not walk up to the front of the room to pick up materials. Cole would not respond to questions or make eye contact, even when I called on him directly. Despite his being labeled as a student with behavior disorders, Cole did not disrupt class; it was easy for me to overlook him, much easier than it was to get him to participate.

Later, Cole was placed in my homeroom, which had become a class for students who were considered likely to fail upcoming standardized reading tests. In this smaller group, Cole began to talk and even smile a little. Building on this connection, I hoped that I could help him enjoy my subject and find some success at school. He actually participated in a few homeroom activities voluntarily; he liked those that involved making some kind of picture in reaction to a text. In English, we began reading poetry and writing about it (founded on their teacher’s enthusiasm for the subject matter). I exposed students to poets I loved, and they shared some of their work or their favorites poems with me. Many of my stu-

dents were excited when we examined the lyrics of popular artists as forms of poetry, but Cole stayed silent in that context.

Several months later, I had assigned a reflective essay for which students were asked to pick a poem in our textbook and explain why it moved them. In the computer lab, I noticed that Cole was typing, something I had never seen him do. As I looked closer, I saw that he had copied down a line from the poem “Dreams” by Langston Hughes: “For if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly” and the rest of his document was blank. When I asked if he had more to write, Cole shrugged and said, “I don’t know how to tell about this metaphor.” I sat down beside him excitedly and pushed him to explain. “That part about the bird. It is the kind of thing I like in poetry; I just don’t know how to explain how pretty it is.” I was stunned. After that, Cole didn’t say anything more and no amount of prompting could get him to type any more than that line. But that moment of understanding we had shared was magical.

Despite the fact that Cole had yet to produce any measurable work, I was overwhelmed with pride. Although there was a new spark that thrilled me, I could not use his lingering on one line of poetry as evidence that he deserved a better grade. After the year was over, as I reflected back on this event, it highlighted the wrongness of the way I was assessing students. According to the standards under which we were operating, both Cole and I failed. I could never prompt Cole to write a paper (and he did not pass my class or any reading test), but my glimpse of his thinking that day made me wonder about what he had locked away. If I had fought against the constraints placed upon my teaching and placed Cole at the center of his learning, what could I have seen in him? Dewey (1934) celebrates the hard work of an artist shaping a medium when he observes that “resistance that calls out thought generates curiosity and solicitous care, and, when it is overcome and utilized, eventuates in elation” (p. 62). If I had acted as strong poet, what could I have done for this student? If I had taken more care to construct a poetic curriculum, would I have seen this young man feel elation?

Below, I consider what I would do if I had had the chance to travel back in time to create a curriculum *with* Cole. This piece is a reflective fantasy; in it Cole and I do not fail. It also includes strategies that allow teachers to share ownership and creation of educational outcomes with

students. It is written as a progress report for a unit, which includes many of the elements of reading, speaking, and research that were covered in the mandated 7<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. It is fictional, but it illustrates the possibility of curriculum reconciliation with poetic insight.

**Week One: Expression of Self:** For the self-introduction, students made presentations and Cole played a song for the class, Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,” rather than give a speech. Later, he told me that the song explains how he feels “so hopeless sometimes about the world.” At the end of the week, Cole answered some peers’ questions about Marley, using his expertise.

**Week Two: Points of Conflict:** We read several short stories that offer radical ways of thinking and Cole chose one that was meaningful to him, “Thank You Ma’am” by Langston Hughes. When asked to find a conflict, he chose the one faced by the young protagonist. Cole shared his connection by drawing a cartoon, in which he was looking at an I-pod surrounded by dollar signs and question marks. “He [Hughes] wanted to steal from that lady because he wanted shoes and I would do anything to get an iPod,” Cole wrote on the back.

**Week Three: Expanding our Understanding:** For a reading assignment, Cole set out to find other stories in which the main character is a criminal. From my list, he chose to read Malcolm X’s autobiography (even though it is long) and “Reformed Reformation” by O. Henry. He also added the movie *Catch Me if You Can* and a book of Hughes’ poetry to his project.

**Week Four and Five: The Process of Inquiry:** Cole began with some research questions:

1. Who were O. Henry, Hughes, and X? How did they get in trouble?
2. How did they go from being criminals to authors? (Can that really happen?)
3. Why do kids start stealing?
4. How can somebody change from a life of crime?

The class also learned to assess the quality of internet sources, many of which Cole used in addition to his selected texts, to conduct research during class and at home.

***Week Six: Presentations and Activities:*** Cole presented his research on a Power Point. He asked the class for ideas about confronting juvenile crime. Several wanted to have an expert come to class, so Cole asked our school resource officer if he could join us. Cole and another student wrote questions, which they gave to students who wanted to speak up in class. The officer's visit was interesting for all of us!

***Cole's progress as a "strong poet:"***

Cole showed his musical intelligence, which helped him feel confident.

Cole explored ways to respond to stories, such as his cartoon.

Cole is shy, but talked to the class and adults outside of class about his questions.

Cole organized an educational experience for us.

***His words:*** "I didn't know I could do so much. Stealing is a real problem, but there are actually things kids can do if they need help. I found some cool things out about those writers and I didn't get scared when I presented."

## Reflection

The supportive classroom environment and the flexible teacher depicted in the fictional report are unlikely to exist within an environment of mandated curricula and high-stakes testing. This scenario grants the teacher and the student aesthetic space in which to build an "integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies" (Dewey, 1934). A poetic teacher responds uniquely to her students as they experience the curriculum; the materials the teacher brings and the activities they pursue together cannot be scripted into tightly written plans. On this emerging path of learning, Cole does not fail; instead he is engaged, uplifted, and challenged by his experiences with the English curriculum. Teachers following poetic insight empower

their students to express themselves and to control the direction of their own learning, which requires rebellion against the “banking concept” (Freire, 1970) of curriculum that renders students as passive recipients of knowledge.

Dewey (1934) reminds educators that young people need to know that “the future is not ominous but a promise; it surrounds the present as a halo” (p.17). I should have defended my student’s right to succeed and made space for him to express himself, regardless of the mandates I would have had to violate. Then, perhaps, I would have been able to see more of the sensitive poet inside him. If young people leave our classrooms with a vision of life “as an on-going project with no final end in view, a project comparable to the creation of a work of art” (Barone, 2001, p. 131), we have not failed. These young people will be emboldened to speak for themselves, based on what they have learned from their teachers. The world needs to witness the future these young poets will create once they have left our classrooms. According to Dewey (1934), “[t]he moral prophets of humanity have always been poets.” (p. 362), so we must listen.

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### **Explanatory Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Dickenson, E. (published 1951). Poem 657 or "I Dwell in Possibility"

<sup>2</sup> Auden, W. H. (1938). "Funeral Blues."

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, W. (1807). "The World is Too Much with Us."

<sup>4</sup> "Fog" (1916) by Carl Sandburg

<sup>5</sup> "The Second Coming" (1919) by William Butler Yeats

<sup>6</sup> The student's name has been changed.