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Empowering Learners as Teachers

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## Empowering Learners as Teachers

### Abstract

A letter of recognition, a professional reflection from a former student, provided a heartwarming prompt for another reflective experience. Beyond trophy, together we celebrated our learning and teaching. It is a pleasure to empower learners as teachers, especially when they serve in-kind. Learning the art of reflective practice is a gift for the soul; using it serves society. Once novice teachers graduate, we hope they continue to learn and grow. We also hope that we have truly incited a passion for learning. It is a profound opportunity to be invited to share in their continued journey and to, yet again, learn from our students. Such moments embody the cycle for teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* learning, reflection, recognition, differentiation, Montessori, novice teacher

## Empowering Learners as Teachers

Email opened one autumn morning with a special gift of connection and an opportunity rich with reflection. A heartfelt thank you, from recent alum, Tami, recognizing our work together as learners and teachers became significantly more.

*Dear Terri,*

*You've been heavy on my mind for the last two years. I have always held your words of wisdom close to me. Your early childhood classes have stuck with me and I thank you so much for everything you've taught. The biggest Takeaway I've had from any of your classes is: "if you're tired from prepping/working until the middle of the night, know that you're doing it to yourself." You always stressed that the students should take charge of their learning and be heavily involved with every process of an activity, including the preparation.*

*I am now a Montessori teacher and holy smokes!!!! I have fallen deeply in love with Maria Montessori and her theory of learning.*

*I struggled with this until last year, but now I can confidently say that the only work I take home is planning for the next day/week. These kiddos are amazing me every single day with what they can do! I've always looked at the limitations of children: what they can't do. This caused me to frantically over-prepare for EVERYthing. You were the first woman to open my eyes to what young children CAN do! I have witnessed 2 and 3 year olds cutting (with real knives) apples, juicing oranges, peeling cucumbers, shine tarnished silver, do dynamic addition with manipulatives, grind coffee, cut out patterns, carefully glue, etc!!*

*I've noticed that when a child does something from start to finish they hold their head up higher and walk taller. This sense of accomplishment and pride resounds deep inside of my students. I want to thank you for helping me see in children what I wouldn't have seen on my own.*

*Oh I hope to see you again so I can tell you in person how big of an impression you've made on me. Thank you for everything, T-Walk!*

*Love,*

*Tami \_\_\_\_\_*

*2012 Graduate*

As I read her message I thought about our time together, about others before her and after, and about the profession we share. I smiled at remembrance and

celebrated the recognition with reflective thought. Recognition, accepted humbly, offers time to think and the fodder necessary for doing so. Hubris attached to recognition renders limited depth of understanding.

For example, when my son was young, he would purchase trophies from yard sales, because his concept was simply that a trophy was the “prize” and that he was a proud owner, but he did not understand what a trophy represented below its glitz and glamor. Superficially, a trophy signifies accomplishment. It is the “what” and “how” a trophy is earned that is held in esteem, that holds meaning. A trophy becomes a placeholder for nostalgia, an object designed to call up memories of the dedication and hard work that went into a moment of fulfillment. In similar spirit I offer our trophy letter, part-by-part, complete with my own personal reflective comments.

Tami is a 2012 graduate of Central Washington University having majored in Elementary Education with a minor in Early Childhood Education. She composed and sent a thank you letter to me in the fall of 2014, the beginning of her third year teaching. Her letter is really a reflective summary of her developing perspective as a lightly-seasoned teacher. The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument (Danielson, 2013) highlights reflecting on teaching as a professional responsibility and suggests productive outlets for doing so. “Teachers may reflect on their practice through collegial conversations, journal writing, examining student work, conversations with students, or simply thinking about their teaching” (p 60). Tami has used collegial conversation, through correspondence, to summarize her own thinking about her

teaching. Reading Tami's letter spurred my own reflective thoughts as an educator. Sections of her letter are separated and followed with my own reflective comments.

*Dear Terri,*

*You've been heavy on my mind for the last two years. I have always held your words of wisdom close to me. Your early childhood classes have stuck with me and I thank you so much for everything you've taught.*

Teaching teachers has its challenges especially since the time to independent application of theory, ideas, and concepts can seem so far in the future. How do novice teachers know what will be important in their future? They likely don't, so it is important to elicit personal values, attitudes, interests, strengths, and challenges in an effort to encourage information to seep into the crevices of their minds – a place where concepts can be stored until needed. As educators we can intentionally create opportunity and schedule time to wrangle with the import of personal implicit and explicit bias.

A student who begins early childhood education courses with a bias against a content area, or more than one, needs opportunity to rediscover the wonder within that area or those areas. Students with a passion and predisposition for a particular subject need to understand what it means to struggle with a concept, especially within an area of expertise. Similarly, social biases also need attention, time for discovery, analysis, and restructuring or re-prioritizing personal values, attitudes, and beliefs to create an inviting presence and openness to others.

*The biggest takeaway I've had from any of your classes is: "if you're tired from prepping/working until the middle of the night, know that you're doing it to yourself." You always stressed that the students should take charge of their learning and be heavily involved with every process of an activity, including the preparation.*

It is refreshing and daunting to wonder what learners will take with them from our experiences together. It is even more spine chilling to find out from them what they found valuable. What if their perception was misinterpreted? What if Tami thought she heard something like, “teaching is easy, you don’t really need to plan for it?” Her message might be interpreted by some that very way. But, because I know the background story, I believe Tami received the intent of my communication shared with the class. It is important that as professional teachers we understand how to value and utilize our time efficiently and effectively. One way to do so refers to the total amount of output effort by teachers as it relates to the intended learning value by students. We discuss the idea of cost-benefit analysis.

The initial example I share comes from working with teachers who spent countless hours doing things for children that were superfluous or, worse, detrimental to learning. Most graphically, teachers would cut out busses from yellow construction paper, apples from red, and pumpkins, you guessed it, from orange. All this work was in an effort to prepare children for easel painting. The thematic implication was likely the white noise of learning, and the creative process began with limitations of both shape and color. The developmentally appropriate alternative requires little adult preparation, have paper available for painting; if you want to knock yourself out and be a great teacher,

have different sizes. The beauty of this solution continues, there is nothing to lug home from school and back, and stocking the paper can be a child-centered responsibility. Students can monitor inventory, shelve, and order more stock as needed. How might they estimate how many sheets are needed? Is there a size that is most popular? How could they find the answer? Maybe students could conduct a survey of user preference, or maybe a research project to determine daily use overtime, either complete with interpretation and dissemination of their collected data. Different students could work on each of the two ideas (or more) and compare results. Yes, I believe she recognizes the importance of meaningful work as a teacher, as well as, how crucial it is for students.

*I am now a Montessori teacher and holy smokes!!!! I have fallen deeply in love with Maria Montessori and her theory of learning.*

In the interest of continuous program improvement, our students would benefit greatly from more involvement opportunities, especially those demonstrating theory to practice. After all, seeing is believing, but experiencing is so much more. At least the incorporation of field trips to schools based in foundational beliefs, such as Montessori and Waldorf would offer a chance to see interpreted theory in action. Although some students do get these types of experiences, it is not institutionalized within the program. This “what?” offers room for change, room for improvement.

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*EVERYthing. You were the first woman to open my eyes to what young children CAN do! I have witnessed 2 and 3 year olds cutting (with real knives) apples, juicing oranges, peeling cucumbers, shine tarnished silver, do dynamic addition with manipulatives, grind coffee, cut out patterns, carefully glue, etc!!*

First, I think about my personal interpretation of teacher development. Years of working with novice teachers as an administrator for Head Start and Washington State's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) has afforded opportunity to observe teachers and, with each, construct individual professional development plans. I have personally found that emphasis during the first three years is complete but developmentally unbalanced. That first year is primarily about the individual as a teacher. It is an egocentric phase, unless it is more than a state and actually a personality trait. Some refer to it as survival, because there is so much to learn and juggle. Children are the major emphasis of course, but first-year teachers are realizing the import of family partnership, faculty team membership, and the administrative responsibilities that accompanies a classroom of learners.

During their second year, curriculum takes the spotlight. The teacher has completed a full year, is aware of pacing in some capacity, knows his or her own strengths and challenges and has experienced a variety of learning interpretations by students the previous year. There is no one-size-fits-all lesson. Finally, during the third year, it is as if a light is turned on. Suddenly teachers notice the room is full of individual children, and typically know themselves and the curriculum content well enough to venture beyond the obvious. Therefore, the third year is a year to focus on the need for individualization and hopefully accept the challenge to differentiate.

While each of the three components is present each of the first three years of teaching, this overgeneralization is used to call attention to developmental needs and expectations of beginning teachers. Early career development is as much about the teacher as it is the students they teach. I think about Tami's words and how her development has progressed. I believe she is following a similar and progressive path. "Indeed, practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice" (Schön, 1983, p viii).

*I've noticed that when a child does something from start to finish they hold their head up higher and walk taller. This sense of accomplishment and pride resounds deep inside of my students. I want to thank you for helping me see in children what I wouldn't have seen on my own.*

Welcoming a child and family advocate to our profession, for me, is the greatest measure of success as an educator. That is a grand champion trophy, the purple ribbon of empowering learners as teachers.

*Oh I hope to see you again so I can tell you in person how big of an impression you've made on me. Thank you for everything, T-Walk!*

While seeing Tami again would be a personal and professional pleasure, it is not a necessity. Her words to me, in my opinion, offer celebration of her own accomplishments in the learning journey. The fact she shared it with me is a bonus. My responsibility now is to use Tami's words to foster my own learning and somehow share the impact of today's information to benefit others.

*Love,*

*Tami* \_\_\_\_\_

*2012 Graduate*

The salutation is an indication of a well-built, long-lasting relationship, a personally designed learner outcome. Making connections strengthens learning. Love is evidence of reciprocity, and its recognition is also graciously accepted.

Tami has shared such a gift. Now I have peace of mind that Tami understands and uses her reflective skills. She also offered a prompt for my own reflection in thinking about what she learned in the recent past, and what current students may be learning. I thought about how our program has changed in its total make over; that, as a student, Tami heard about more than she experienced; ways in which my own focus has changed since Tami was in class; and how our desire to embed critical elements of the edTPA within our program has impacted our current students as compared to our past graduates. Would Tami's reflection be different somehow if she had experienced the fruits of these efforts, or our work to implement professional growth plans aligned with the Washington State Teacher/Principal Evaluation Project (TPEP)? "Over time, this way of thinking both reflectively and self-critically and of analyzing instruction through the lens of student learning— whether excellent, adequate, or inadequate—becomes a habit of mind, leading to improvement in teaching and learning" (Danielson, 2013, p 60). Habits we can both celebrate as educators.

Historically, I have used the idea of teaching experience to introduce the concepts of single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris, 1993). For example, non-reflective teachers are single-loop thinkers who may have taught for 3, 5, 10 years or more, but may only have 1 year of experience that they have repeated. While the example is tongue-in-cheek, these teachers continue to make the same or similar mistakes without significant personal or professional growth. Contrarily, double-loop thinkers, reflective teachers, have cumulative experience over the years. They also make mistakes, but see them as challenges and use them as learning opportunities. I believe Tami is well on her way into her third year of experienced teaching, and I am thankful for her work with young children and their families.

In addition, I appreciate that Tami offered fuel for my own learning in the past, and again with this letter. To say I teach teachers implies a one-sided relationship. Empowering learners as teachers is a two-way street, where both parties learn from one another and we seasoned teachers continue our quest as learners.

I will gently place Tami's letter near my dollar bill from Cotton, a kindergartener who lost his first tooth. Initially I denied acceptance, but when I called Cotton's Mom, she passionately and emphatically confirmed that he indeed wanted me to have his dollar from the Tooth Fairy, "because he loves kindergarten." While that was nearly a quarter century ago, my first token object of recognition, I remember the import like it was yesterday, how building relationships is foundational to learning. It is an honor to accept another trophy of such significance.

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