THE HEART OF TEACHING

A pedagogy of community in the classroom

Prelude

The concise Oxford English dictionary offers this definition of the word, community, which come from Latin communis, or ‘common’: a group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together or occupying a specified habitat. I like this biological perspective on community as a way of describing a classroom environment, for a classroom is and should be a place where a group of interdependent people are growing and living together. I wonder how teachers can enable students to be part of this kind of community, to become interdependent and place pure self-interest aside at times, for the greater good of the group. Is teaching just a form of manipulation? What motivates some children to want to learn more than others? Is teaching just means of indoctrination? Why do we seem to value compliance more than nonconformity and individualism? These are some of the big questions that I wrestle with as I near the end of my second decade of teaching. These are the questions that intrigued me the most when searching for an appropriate line of inquiry for my research project. I believe that it is possible to build a community within a classroom. I believe we can create learning environments in which students and teachers are truly interdependent, in which the motivation for the group to succeed is as strong as the interest in individual successes.

Setting the Story

SEPTEMBER 12TH

Today the students wrote letters to me to introduce themselves. I liked the last line of Luke’s letter.

Dear Mrs. Paxton,

Hi my name is Luke. I like to play hockey and skate board. I have two dogs and three cats. My two dog’s names are Jinger and Triesie. My three cats names are Mocha, Daisie and DJ. I have 2 sisters and 1 brother. My two sisters’ names are Coral and Dirdre. My brother’s name is Sean. This letter is almost about my life.

Your student, Luke
As a teacher of twelve and thirteen year olds, I am always looking for ways to work smarter, not harder. Early in my career, I would leave school at the end of the day exhausted, dragging my marking bag to the car, dreading a long night of ticking and x-ing papers and projects. As well, too much of my energy was being spent managing my students, trying to control their behaviour, so that I could “teach.” On occasion, I caught glimpses of a different way of practicing teaching and learning. I saw that there were fragments of time in the school day when there was a hum of learning and active engagement in the room, when we were all working together on something that really mattered to everyone. It was what Csikszentmihalyi describes as a state of flow: “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life” (1990, xi). In recognizing the potential of flow in the classroom, I began to seek ways of creating more of it, but I also realized I would need to change my patterns of teaching. I would need to find ways to inspire students to work together with a common goal, and to learn to satisfy their own natural curiosities. My enthusiasm was buoyed in a summer institute with the North Vancouver School District. In their text, Bennett & Rohlheiser (2001) state, “Teachers are involved in one of the most complex, demanding and important professions in the world – a profession where changes emerge in the blink of an eye …To respond to the ever-increasing demands and complexity, teachers must be aware of and act on the science within the art of teaching – a challenging task” (p. 3).

Through the integration of an art and science of teaching, I believe one finds the essential, creative, heart of teaching. Bennett & Rolheiser (2001) describe the absolute necessity of creativity. “There is no guarantee,” they argue, “that a teacher who is knowledgeable, has an extensive repertoire of instructional practices, and is kind and caring will necessarily be an effective teacher” (p. 5). It is the ability to be imaginative, to be spontaneous, and to teach intuitively, that characterizes an effective, creative teacher. Throughout my graduate courses, as I read and listened, and read and listened again, I realized that many educators shared my desire to teach with a sense of flow—with a sense of creativity.

From Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1972) I learned that with creative teaching, “the drive is no longer the teacher’s but the children’s own … the teacher is at last with the stream and not against it: the stream of children’s inexorable creativeness” (p. 82). I liked everything about Ashton-Warner’s description of teaching “organically.” She wrote about “the preservation of the inner resources, the exercise of the inner eye, the protraction of the true personality” (p. 87). I, like Ashton-Warner, appreciate “unpredictability and variation; I like drama and I like gaiety; I like peace in the world and I like interesting people, and all this means that I like life in its organic shape and that’s just what you get in an infant room where the creative vent widens” (p. 87).

I craved a more creative practice, but also a more cooperative one, in which students did not merely “work in groups,” but worked collaboratively. From Johnson & Johnson (2004) I learned that since 1896, over six hundred studies have been conducted on cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning, with the results indicating that achievement, quality of relationships, and