FORUM

Bridges from Content Experts to Novice Learners in 21st-Century Classrooms

Susan Kilgore
Washington State University

"Teaching is the highest form of understanding."
Aristotle

"Good teaching requires self-knowledge:
it is a secret hidden in plain sight."
Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

"Teaching is… a dynamic endeavor involving all the analogies,
metaphors, and images that build bridges between the teacher's
understanding and the student's learning."
Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered*

I started out my grown-up life as a good teacher. I turned into a very bad teacher. Maybe I quit understanding my subject. Maybe I stopped knowing myself. Whatever the reasons, I woke up one day with mental pockets empty of the "analogies, metaphors, and images" I needed to connect what I knew and valued with the students in front of me. The awareness I was no longer connecting became inescapable about the time students became younger than my sons. Or perhaps it was when my hair turned white. I really noticed respect and attention dramatically changed when these digitized students could no longer sit through an hour and fifteen minute class without leaving—to go to the bathroom or to smoke or to take a break, I neither knew nor cared. Or they fell asleep. It was not just that cell phones went off in class, but that students would answer and converse on the damn things while I was talking. I had to ask students to remove headphones, to put away their newspapers, and my jokes no longer worked.

After a number of wounding and frustrating years, I am beginning to be a better teacher: more professional, more visible, and more able to explain how, why, and

what my students are learning. To become more professional, I have had to learn to be more intentional, more thoughtful about what I am doing, to ask better questions of myself, about my teaching, and to become more systematic about recording what worked and what didn't.

What follows is a short trek down that path from good to bad, a path I don't think I'm alone in having traveled. I also want to talk about what I needed to become a better teacher, needs I think are shared by other professors. Along the way, I cast an eye toward ways in which technology has changed how students learn and how, ideally, teachers teach.

Attempting to teach something actually *is* the best way to learn it. I found this to be true as a TA teaching Comp 101, as an instructor teaching "Intro to Women Studies," and as a new Ph.D. teaching American Studies. I never really understood a thing until I tried to explain it to someone else. And frequently, I didn't know I knew something until I heard myself explain it in response to a student's question or comment. Lo, those many years ago, I discovered that learning to explain the rules of grammar and composition, I had learned to write. Teaching Women's Studies taught me the political, that is, the *teaching,* consequences of my personal life. And American Studies helped me understand the power of my subject for helping students connect intellectual work with personal wellbeing. About this time, I learned that I need to teach and teach well, in addition to writing, or I don't know who I am or what I know.

I got my first teaching job at a 21. Those first years I was often as young or younger than my students. I talked like they talked, played like they played, and what I read and what I wanted them to read were books they did read and enjoy. The skills of writing and critical thinking and cultural analysis that I wanted to teach them they recognized as valuable. So, for teaching strategies and curriculum design, I relied heavily on intuition and a young teacher's quick ability to identify with students. I put little thought into the how or the what of teaching, trusting that I was entertaining enough to hold their interest and that my ideas and subject were of obvious relevance to their lives.

As for their learning, I understood how they learned because it was the same way I learned. They demonstrated they had "mastered" (or not) what I expected by writing papers like I would have, or failing to write them. I could explain to students why a paper failed and expect they would make the necessary improvements. We—my students and I—spoke the same language, were interested in the same kinds of books and poems and movies and activities.

In these early years, I discovered I really loved teaching, more than I loved research, and that I was fairly good at it. Whether I was fairly good because I loved

teaching or loved it because of my (modest) teaching successes was not a question I chose to explore at the time. My teaching evaluations and what I heard of my reputation were good, and that was enough. I was convinced that I was a very good teacher.

But looking back now, I realize I was a passionate amateur, a hobbyist, not a professional. Because I was still so close to the student role myself, I remembered to pose authentic questions—their questions—and required them to fulfill authentic tasks: create a magazine, stage a poetry reading, teach a class, make a daybook. Any time I encouraged them to participate in the real-life activities of poets and readers and creative thinkers, I did so by accident not because I recognized that students learn best when answering their own questions.[1] Because I hated to assign letter grades to creative work, and more importantly was afraid I would hurt students' feelings or that they wouldn't like me if I did, I de-emphasized grades, eschewed tests, and kept reminding students that learning is delightful and personally significant. Because they liked me, students produced. Because I liked them and was proud of their work, I responded.

Students often came to my office to talk about assignments, to simply chat or seek advice on some issue. At this time in my teaching life, it was not unusual for me to pull out the Kleenex box and shut the door to protect a confession or a revelation or a minor therapeutic breakthrough.

The teaching strategies I used as an amateur I knew intuitively to be right, not from considered thought and planning, certainly not from examining in any systematic way whether my students were learning, or what they were learning. I habitually devised strategies based on my own interests, my own way of being. My supposed "good teaching" seemed very easy, very natural. I got students to read and do the work I assigned because classes were small and students were motivated. Conversations with them kept me in touch their backgrounds and interests, so I came up with assignments that seemed relevant, and jokes based on common cultural assumptions.

About 10 or 12 years ago, I started noticing changes. I was taking on new subjects, teaching required courses rather than electives, and teaching bigger classes. I found myself shocked and grumpy about how little time my students spent studying, how much they complained about both length and cost of my reading lists, about my requiring more work than any of their other professors. Instead of decoding this bit of information, I responded with snide comments about the way things were when I was in school: a book a week in my literature classes, for example. Not for a long time did I begin to understand how rarely they read, and almost never for pleasure. When they did homework, they did it to-

gether in front of the TV, talking on their cell phones with the stereo blaring. I didn't get it.

In conversations I had with myself about all this, I explained to myself that my interests became different from those of students and my standards higher. I became much more interested in whether they were learning than whether they liked me. As I grew older and students got younger, I forget the lessons of authenticity and trust I had first learned. Or, like many of my colleagues, I didn't seriously reconsider how these lessons might play out differently as my interests changed, my self—physically and emotionally and intellectually—changed, and my students changed.

Rather than reconsidering my assumptions about appropriate presentation forms, about content, about learning and learners, I became cranky: what had been easy was becoming harder and harder. Steadily, I became a less and less successful teacher. Discussions became harder to hold; the flow was gone. When students did not respond to questions I posed for them to answer, I found myself lecturing more and enjoying teaching less. What had happened to careful reading? What about reflection? Re-reading? Careful study? They would tell me they had done the reading, but it was "boring" and they had gotten nothing out of it. I no longer knew what they were interested in and found it increasingly difficult to get them interested in what I felt was valuable. I remember one class where mildly hostile students laughed, not kindly, when one of them finally got my "right answer" and another shouted out "Bingo!"

One day I caught myself making a joke with a colleague about not wanting to look too carefully "into their little minds" for fear it would be like picking up a rock. "I don't *want* to know too much about what or how they think," I said, and suddenly understood why grading papers had become almost impossible.

Those papers were the evidence of how far short of success I was falling. Where I'd started out teaching determined to create classroom climates that encouraged and supported creativity, my teaching evaluations complained of "busy work" and "boring" assignments and readings. What I saw as a creative open-endedness, some students saw as disorganization. Where I felt I was encouraging them to find their own voices, they saw vagueness about class and assignment expectations. I was hurt because students no longer seemed to trust me, and I no longer trusted them. Too many saw my classes as "hoops to jump through" on their way to more important and more interesting activities. Listening to other faculty complain, I knew I was not alone, but somehow that didn't help.

What had happened to me as a teacher? What had happened to students? What had happened in the world that it had become so difficult to demonstrate the value of my content?

In "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants" Marc Prensky identifies a "fundamental" reason so many of us without meaning to have become bad teachers: "Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach" (1). He claims a "really big discontinuity has taken place," even a "singularity" from which "there is absolutely no going back." Prensky refers to "the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century." Where our students are "digital natives" in this profoundly changed learning environment, we of my generation will always remain "digital immigrants," and suffer all the disadvantages and the unknowingness of immigrants everywhere.[2] As "digital immigrants" we can laugh at the evidence of our "accent," but what it indicates is for Prensky "very serious": "the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (2).

Prensky's metaphor of the digital age as a new country where instructors are immigrants and students are natives comes even more sharply into focus in his description of students K through college:

> They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. Today's average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives. (1)

Today's undergraduates are people who like to "parallel process" and "multi-task," and "prefer their graphics *before* their text rather than the opposite." "Random access" suits them better than most professors' careful step-by-step development, and they "function best when networked" (2). It is not simply that students conditioned by TV expect professors to be stand up comics—a comment echoed frequently on campuses. It's that their way of processing information is faster and their way of thinking and learning different from previous generations.

> They are used to the instantaneity of hypertext, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, beamed messages and instant messaging. They've been networked most or all of their lives. They have little patience for lectures, step-by-step logic, and "tell-test" instruction. (3)

The wound that my teaching had become starting healing only when I began to think seriously about how technology had changed learners and learning. I had the good fortune to sit in on a class on spirituality and teaching. We read books such as Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* and talked seriously to one another about our teaching, as if it really mattered. I understood how out of touch with myself as a teacher I had become. I needed to re-visit my subject and class organization in order to have class and assignment design reflect my objectives in the class. I began using an on-line classroom called "the Bridge" to do that. A second event that has helped my wounded teaching self to heal has been becoming clearer on what I actually wanted students to know and be able to do when they finished my class.[3] And the third has been my involvement with the New Media Classroom and the Visible Knowledge projects.[4] These experiences allowed me to stop committing malpractice in the classroom, and to begin, very, very slowly, to identify why, as Prensky says, I felt as if students and I were speaking different languages. We were. Learning a bit of theirs, I could start to develop new "analogies, metaphors, and images" to communicate my understanding of my field to students very different as people and as learners from me.

To teach these digital natives what I understood to be significant, I needed to adapt to a way of learning radically different from the way I had been taught. I began in earnest to take seriously the on-line learning environment I had been convinced to try, making highly visible, for example, my objectives in assignments, and my expectations and grading criteria. Students from such a different learning universe than me will not intuit what I see as good writing and scholarship without being given examples. I used "the Bridge" to encourage them to publicize their work, and to read and respond to one another. I encouraged them to "network" by using the Bridge to link papers and offer suggestions to each other as they work on assignments.

I have not given up what is important; I have however found quicker, less linear ways of communicating it. I repeat things in a number of different ways now, and I have learned more obviously relevant ways of connecting to today. I still passionately teach critical thinking and writing and analysis, but I may use examples from popular culture to connect theory and history, and then move back to what Prensky calls "Legacy" content. I have dramatically increased my use of images in my work: before the "text," to communicate complex ideas and connect and re-enforce ideas throughout the course. Through fostering the skillful reading of images, I am working to connect these non-reading students to skillful reading of other kinds of texts and learning from them greater depth in my own response to image and text combinations.

I rely heavily on these new learners to teach me how to teach them. Recently, two freshmen from my intro class came to my office—they more often come in twos and threes these days than by themselves, I've noticed. Only the very brave and the very good students will come by themselves. Those who are nervous or unsure either won't visit at all or will come only with reinforcements. The two were bright, enthusiastic students determined to overcome their poor high school educations. The more self-assured girl asked me several questions about an assignment I had posted in detail on our website. "All that information is posted. Just log on," I said with some defensiveness. The girl responded, "I did, but I don't like to read. It was too much writing." I was most impressed by her utter lack of embarrassment over such a comment. Since this conversation, I've attempted to make my postings more visually friendly, and to back up information with oral discussion of assignments in class. I haven't changed my standards; I have changed how I communicate them.

Another method I'm working with comes from noticing how these digital natives work with new programs: no manual, they simply start doing and figure it out as they go along. I give fewer explicit instructions, instead designing assignments in steps, broken down so that accomplishment of each step forces them to learn what the assignment is intended to have them learn. As they walk through the steps and accomplish the tasks, they learn. My "exams" are now opportunities for students to "perform" and show off what they've learned: to themselves, to one another, and to me. And I work energetically to get students to "network," to work together on all aspects of a project, including evaluations of themselves and others. Some of this is working; some of it is not. Class is a lot noisier than it was there for a while. But it's all interesting, and I am reminded of Parker Palmer's observation that knowing and learning are communal acts.

Nearly fifteen years ago, Ernest Boyer reminded us of the importance of teaching when he pointed out that "The work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others" (23). What does it mean to be a professional teacher? What do teachers need to remain, in the words of Parker Palmer, in love with "learners, learning, and the teaching life"? Like Rodney Dangerfield, we need respect—which means fair compensation, tenure for teaching, permanent positions for the saintly hordes of instructors who populate most of the university classrooms in this country. We need more grant opportunities, such as FIPSE, and conferences and workshops such as those offered by the Washington Center for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education, and VKP and NMC. In short, re-stating what Boyer called for 15 years ago, I think we still need to be viewed as

and treated as professionals in teaching within our fields. And we need more room to research our teaching in our classrooms.

Yet what Boyer names "a confusion of goals" on many campuses has made many of us slow to respond to changes in societal expectation of college and university teaching. Fifteen years after Boyer "reconsidered" definitions of scholarship to include the serious scholarship of teaching, the reward system at the majority of institutions remains based on research scholarship in one's field, not on teaching—whether as scholarship or as hobby. Yet larger communities—state legislatures and accrediting agencies, for example—are demanding evidence that we are in fact *teaching* what we think we're teaching, and our students are *learning* what we're trying to teach them. We need to get on it. ❋

Notes

[1] The idea and phrasing come from Georgetown's Dr. Randall Bass, Director of the Visible Knowledge Project.

[2] Prensky describes "digital immigrants" as retaining an "accent," a "foot in the past." He goes on: "The 'digital immigrant accent' can be seen in such things as turning to the Internet for information second rather than first, or in reading the manual for a program rather than assuming that the program itself will teach us to use it." Other examples of the "accent" include "printing out your email… needing to print out a document written on the computer in order to edit it," or calling someone to see if your email was received.

[3] Again, the idea and phrasing come from Randy Bass.

[4] The New Media Classroom Project was initially an NEH-funded faculty development effort operating out of the American Social History Project, CUNY, New York City. Ms. Donna Thompson-Ray is the director of the project. Georgetown University and an anonymous donor sponsor the Visible Knowledge Project.

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