

Reflecting on Reflecting

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When the editors of *JCACS* invited me to identify a key paper as the touchstone for a short retrospective, I knew immediately that it would be the paper published in the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*. I could not remember the title or the date (which turned out to be "Supervision as a creative act," written in 1989), but I knew the paper was old enough and important enough in the history of my research into my teaching practice¹ to anchor a retrospective. While the editors went off to get permission to reprint, I made a plan. I would reread subsequent papers I had written on the topic, analyze them for major themes, and describe the changes in order to see where I had come in the intervening years. I proceeded as if I had forgotten that what I plan is rarely what happens.² For me, planning is an activity indicative of a desire for certainty about how to proceed and where I will end up. In contrast, my writing, as well as my teaching practice, always proceeds, usually in spite of me, in the manner of creative activity, emerging in the course of taking action, and relying on inspiration and that capacity of intellect Michaelangelo called *intellecto*: "intelligence not of the merely rational kind, but visionary intelligence, a deep *seeing* of the underlying pattern beneath appearances" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 31, italics in original).

In all my writing, I aspire to proceed in a manner congruent with what I am writing about. I tell the graduate students I teach that congruence between method and topic makes a text powerfully persuasive. Yet here I was, forgetting my aspirations and admonitions, and allowing myself to be seduced by my desire for the comfort of a predictable way of proceeding and a predictable end. The cultural demand for predictability engulfed me, just as it does students: Where is

the carefully formulated topic and the detailed plan for developing it? Resisting this demand, I tell students in my research methodology courses that it is possible to proceed without topic or method being explicitly formulated. I tell them that when they allow themselves to inquire into something that interests them deeply, they are already researching,³ and that as they undertake to articulate precisely the topic of their already ongoing research, the research process is continuing to unfold. I tell them that contained in this unfolding is a rudimentary method, which, like the topic, comes into being as it is articulated. Yet here I was, forgetting that these assertions were also true of my own project at hand.

What happened next was that without consciously thinking about it, I deviated from my plan and began to leaf through my informal journal writing from the last fifteen years. When I came to a passage that caught my attention, I typed it into the computer along with the date. I did not know how I might use the material I was extracting. By the time I took a break, I had eleven pages of single-spaced typed material. Without making any predictions about what would come next, I had opened to what was in front of me, and responded to what drew my attention. Opening, paying attention, and not knowing⁴ have become key in my theories about my teaching. It makes sense that they would also be key in my writing.

Although I did not have a plan for using the excerpts I was compiling from my journal writings, I expected that I would somehow incorporate them into the paper I would eventually write. Again, my expectations were not borne out. Like the original plan, the idea to write from excerpts fell by the wayside. In retrospect, I see that compiling those excerpts was a way for me to keep on going without a plan. Only when freed from the confinement of a plan was I able to open myself to the question of where I had come since writing the *JC&S* paper in 1989. Sitting down with my favorite pen and my journal, I wrote. After many cycles of reflecting, rewriting, and editing, I can articulate where I have come through the last fifteen years of researching my teaching.

I have now refined the language of reflection and can say more explicitly what is entailed. I have approached this task reflectively, that is, by studying what happens as I go about the business of teaching. This point is important. It distinguishes my mode of research from the conventional method of identifying a research topic and then choosing a particular time and place to study it. My teaching proceeds as a creative engagement within my teaching environment, propelled not by a preset agenda but rather by paying attention and responding in a way that seems fitting,⁵ and my researching proceeds similarly, by continuously paying attention to this process of engaging. I can now say that paying attention is pivotal in reflecting on my teaching. Normally, paying attention is a transitive verb with a clearly defined object. When a teacher

or parent says, "Pay attention!" we know we are to focus on them. However, in my practice of reflecting as research, it is not the object of attention but its manner that is crucial. Attention must be open and without presumption of knowing (see note 4). Being open is holding an intention⁶ and waiting,⁷ trusting in the visionary intelligence of *intellecto*. Rational intelligence that presumes to know what the case is and what is needed to accomplish a specific goal must be suspended⁸ so as to open to the unexpected.

Through my reflective research process, I have come to describe my teaching and the researching of my teaching as a practice of opening, paying attention, and not knowing. Writing this paper has been a repetition⁹ of this process. The description of how I proceeded in writing this paper shows this process in action. As I began writing, I noticed a subtle sense of dissatisfaction that lurked beneath conscious awareness, somewhere high up in the back of my throat. This noticing was an act of opening and paying attention without knowing exactly what I was paying attention to, or to what end. Without knowing what would happen next, I set off in another direction. This is the nature of a self-organizing, emergent¹⁰ process. Looking back with the full participation of rational mind, I see what happened. I initially denied my natural tendency and opted for the norms of conventional academic writing which begins with a point to make and a plan for how to make it. By letting go of this restriction, I was able to proceed differently. The new direction that I went, while not predictable, was not arbitrary. It was delimited by what had come before and what had been rejected, and by my intention to write a retrospective of my work.

What more can I say now that is different from what I said in the 1989 article, "Supervision as a creative act"? In that article, I addressed classroom teachers and their field supervisors. Although I have been a field supervisor, my context both then and now is the university, where I work with graduate student educators from a variety of institutional settings, not just public schools. I relate to students primarily as teacher and research supervisor.¹¹ In that article, I laid out conditions that field supervisors might create to facilitate teachers' reflection on the ground of their professional practice.¹² Today, referring to my own facilitation of educators' reflection, I describe the conditions similarly, but I say that it is not only *reflection* as a specific act but also *reflectiveness* as a way of being that I aim to facilitate. In 1989, I mentioned but did not emphasize the importance of supervisors being reflective themselves. I now say that my reflectiveness as a teacher is crucial to what students can learn about being reflective. It is crucial because what students learn through their interactions with me depends on their experience of me.¹³ If they experience me as someone whose life is congruent with her words,¹⁴ who is living what she is talking about, their experience of me is likely to be more provocative¹⁵ than if that congruence is lacking. My aesthetic or

style, as Foucault called it (Flynn, 1988) (see note 13), may be intriguing or attractive to them. They may want to explore their own style or aesthetic. That is, they may decide to reflect on their lives. Through many years of labouring to create spaces conducive to reflection, I have deepened my respect and appreciation for their sacredness. Ancient Greeks called such a space a *temenos*. A *temenos* was a delimited space where "special rules applied and extraordinary events were free to occur" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 75).

Being reflective myself creates the *temenos* where students become willing to risk reflecting on the unconscious assumptions that pattern their experience. I suggest that being reflective is risky insofar as it entails calling into question what has been taken for granted and left unexamined, including the ways one's subjectivity has been constituted. In the supervision article, I did not use the term "subjectivity"; however in saying that reflection entailed becoming aware of taken-for-granted assumptions that shape teaching practice, I implied an intertwining political and personal analysis.¹⁶ I now also speak of the kind of analysis that calls on *intellecto*, that creative capacity of intellect to see more than what rational analysis makes visible. Once brought into awareness, these assumptions and patterns of behavior become the object of choices. The primary choice is what choice can be afforded in present circumstances. Changing and not changing are both choices.

In writing this paper, I have disclosed an unconventional way of proceeding in teaching, researching, and writing. I did not set out to do this. Rather, I became interested in a retrospective of my work since 1989, directed my attention to written and remembered records of work I had done between then and now, and proceeded as described above by opening to what my interest brought into focus and following my attention without knowing what might result. As I allowed an interpretation to evolve, I deepened my appreciation of what is entailed in a practice of opening, paying attention, and not knowing, of how ordinary and yet how radical¹⁷ it is, how natural and yet unfamiliar.

This way of proceeding feels risky. Setting out, there is always the risk that nothing will happen. When something does happen, there is the risk that the result will not be viewed as credible: proceeding without method¹⁸ is suspect in an academic environment where adherence to method is the only legitimate source of legitimacy. And yet I feel compelled to proceed in this way, not only in teaching, researching, and writing, but also in relating with colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and family members. Being open, paying attention, and not knowing, that is, presuming as little as possible about others, is a deeply respectful way of relating. Seeing "the underlying pattern beneath appearances" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 31) opens up a new way of seeing and hence a new world of possibilities.

References

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Notes

¹ While the title of the article, "Supervision as a creative act," and of the journal in which it appeared both suggest that the topic is supervision of student teaching, the inspiration for the article was drawn from my experience as a teacher of graduate students in courses on curriculum theory and interpretive research methodologies.

² The plan to identify themes in my writing also ignored my disenchantment with the commonly used approach to developing interpretations through a process of inducing categories and grouping them into themes. This approach is most often conducted as a mechanical exercise (sometimes even using computer programs) in which insufficient care is taken to develop rich interpretations, to acknowledge the effect of the researcher on the interpretations, and to create theoretical coherence among thematic strands.

³ The truth of this observation can be seen in the morphology of the word *research*. To research is to search again, and again and again.

⁴ I use the phrase "not knowing" to indicate what Buddhists call "beginner's mind." It refers to a state of mind in which prior knowledge is held in abeyance and every situation is approached with the humble request, "Teach me."

⁵ I believe it was Gadamer who spoke of a fitting response, in a long lost reference. I am fortunate that my teaching assignments, which are inquiry courses, allow me the latitude to respond to students rather than obligate me to teach a set syllabus.

⁶ The primary intention is always the intention to pay attention. In a research course, I might also intend to speak in ways that further students' inquiries.

⁷ Simone Weil (in Frost & Bell-Metereau, 1998) develops the idea of attention as waiting.

⁸ I am under no illusion that prior knowledge can be completely suspended. My intention is to interrupt the tendency to impose a ready-made interpretation.

⁹ I refer to Kierkegaard's famous notion of repetition as repeating forward, by which I understand him to mean that retracing one's steps with the intention to discern what directed them carries understanding forward.

¹⁰ I use "emergent" to refer to a pattern that comes into being by virtue of the way I focus my looking. Bohm (1987) calls what focuses looking "theory." In his sense of the term, theory determines what is "lifted to attention" or "releved" or "made relevant" (p. 151). Thus, the pattern does not preexist the looking but literally emerges in the act of looking.

¹¹ I am also researcher and writer, two roles (which for me are one) not unimportant for my relationships with students.

¹² Note that I use "practice" in two senses. In the phrase "professional practice" or "teaching practice," it refers to the work professionals do. Used in the phrase "a practice of. . .", the term refers to a way of being in the world, a manner of living, or what Foucault (1988) and Deleuze (1987) both call a "style."

¹³ As R.D. Laing (1967) put it, there is nothing other than *my* experience because I can never experience another's experience (pp. 15-17).

¹⁴ Foucault speaks of this congruence as harmony between the *bios* and the *logos*. He discusses it in the context of a concern for an aesthetic of existence, or a style of living, that is deeply ethical (Flynn in Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988).

¹⁵ To provoke is to call forth. Students may be called to take up the work of becoming more reflective in the same way one is called to a vocation.

¹⁶ To speak of intertwining the political and the personal suggests that what we take as personal beliefs and assumptions are shaped by our political context. In the language of discourse theory, it can be said that what we believe is largely determined by the discourses available to us.

¹⁷ Caputo (1987, p. 267) uses the phrase "radical thinking" to refer to thinking that resists the desire for definitive answers and instead stays open to the question of how to live in relation respectfully.

¹⁸ In the same way that Gadamer (1986) claims that interpretation, which is the proper way to study the human sciences, has no method, I would claim that there is no method for opening, paying attention and not knowing, nor for the exercise of *intellecto*.