

My praxis, my reflection and action, in READ 8100 has been much like the work of a photographer this semester. On our first meeting in hot and humid August, I arrived with two major tools: my prior experiences and linguistic reservoir or my many "rolls of film", and myself, the "camera." As we have investigated the range of possibilities for how an inquiry stance can look in a literacy classroom, new understandings are "developing" through the transactions I have experienced with our classmates, through our readings of theory and practice, through the dialogue with our School-Practitioner group, and through my own teaching experiences. Through these transactions, these "lenses", I have interrogated and examined my beliefs, my attitudes, and my prior understandings about teaching, learning, and literacy. These transactions have also been the "darkroom" in which I have tried to develop understandings or "pictures" of a classroom and a life that takes an inquiry stance on literacy and learning. The transactions both filter and focus my study of literacy, the culture of school, and learning.

So what are the ways inquiry theories play out in classrooms? Just as lighting, degree of exposure, film speed, and other variables affect the development of a photograph, the variables of individual classrooms affect how inquiry might look. However, just as a skilled photographer follows certain principles for shooting and developing interesting pictures, a thoughtful and deliberate teacher relies on key principles as the framework of her inquiry classroom. Taking an inquiry stance values students voices and makes them

visible; both teachers and students develop their voices as readers and writers. In this classroom, we strive to develop a community that respects the right to express different perspectives while acknowledging and addressing the threat that can arise from the interrogation and sharing of diverse and differing opinions; dissonance and struggle are embraced, not ignored. Questions that facilitate deep inquiry and lead to greater depth of learning are essential to taking an inquiry approach to literacy; student interests and needs help the learning community inquire around the curriculum, whether it be constructed completely by the community or centered around required elements and standards. We strive to create what John Dewey calls "educative" experiences, experiences that "...live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences"(p. 28, 1938).

Problem-posing that may disrupt dominant discourses drives the inquiry. For example, Beth Steffen, a high school English teacher in Beloit, Wisconsin, organized an inquiry of study around students' attitudes and ideas about hate, race, prejudice, and respect when race issues came to the surface of classroom conversations after the KKK threatened to organize a rally in a neighboring town. Steffen's students began dialoging through letters with Laura Schneider VanDerPloeg's classes of middle school students in the town of the threatened rally. Inherent in such a discussion is the issue of threat as beliefs, stances, and attitudes were questioned and interrogated. Students generated inquiry around questions such as "...where does racism come from?"(VanDerPloeg and Steffin,

p. 90, 2002). Through these dialogues, students also had opportunities to inquire about language and writing as they examined the words they used and means of persuasion in the letters they composed to each other. At the same time, these classrooms were spaces that transcended the threat presented through their inquiry into bigotry and addressed social justice issues. Through this inquiry of study, a learning community was created that acknowledged threat and at the same time, allowed "...assertions, responses, and questions [that] intertwine in a sophisticated tapestry of voices", much like the quilt of many different voices and colors Melanie Hundley of the School-Practitioner group envisions:

No one piece was more important or more special than any of the others. Each piece has a perfect place to be. I can read in this quilt the story of my Granny's family and friends. Each person contributed fabrics that were important to them; Granny and I threaded their colors and textures together. There is such beauty in the unusual mixing of color and texture, such joy in the juxtaposition of flannel and velvet, of vivid reds and gentle violets. This is what I want for education. (November 7, 2002)

The students reflected on their stances and attitudes, but they then engaged in the other critical part of praxis: action. They went beyond dialoguing to write for social change; eventually, their work was celebrated publicly and culminated in the class "Write For Your Project," which shared their words with the community. VanDerPloeg and Steffin observe how inquiry empowered many of the students as they, "...became aware of the power that writing and speech have to change other and the world around them...Students began to believe that their acts of literacy could make a difference, could react against the racism

and tolerance they had discovered”(p.100, 2002). In this learning community, both students and teachers were engaged in praxis that lead to social change as discourses were disrupted and stances were questioned.

At the heart of an inquiry stance is a focus on learning and **why** you and your students are doing what you are. With photography, you can always return to the negative of a photograph and alter the picture you produce; you contemplate why you are altering the picture. Is it to sharpen the image? To soften the lines? To see gradients of color? Whatever your purpose for fine-tuning your art, the picture is never really final and the interpretation of it is dependent on an individual's perspective. Much of the joy a photographer experiences is derived from the hours of experimentation in the field and in the darkroom. Many times, the changes are slight and take time to result in noticeable change. Similarly, an inquiry approach to literacy is never static and always a work in progress; the focus is on the journey and process of learning. Being comfortable with inquiry means being at ease with uncertainty and being open to critique.

Prior to this semester, my teaching was similar to the “point and click” method of photography. I did not possess the lenses of theory to affect the ways I perceived teaching and learning or the culture of school or to filter what I saw. For many years, I relied heavily on my own experiences as a learner and the example of fellow English teachers as I created the picture of my classroom. However, I was not only behind the camera, but too often, I was in the foreground of the “picture” of my classroom while my students were merely

background. As I taught in alternative settings and roles in the school systems over the past four years, I began to question my teaching philosophy, but I still did not have the tools to play with the pictures I wanted to create in my classroom.

Then I met Freire, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, hooks, Rosenblatt, and Dewey; for the first time, I recognized the significance of theory as a tool and foundation for my teaching philosophy and literacy pedagogy. In my first project, I shared the impact of these theories on my thinking and understandings about what it means to take an inquiry stance in the classroom. A conversation with a colleague a few weeks ago highlighted the importance of theory in my teaching and decisions about classroom practices. My colleague, a classroom teacher and fellow student here at UGA, dismissively remarked, "All that theory stuff is nonsense. I stay clear of it---it is useless!" As if by instinct, I countered, "I can't imagine living or teaching without it!" At that moment, I truly recognized how I have internalized the theory I have discovered in this course, and how my transactions with it are not temporal, but how they transact with me in the present and how they will affect my beliefs and decisions about teaching in the future. Thus, I am not just reading about inquiry, but I am living it because true learning extends out of the classroom and facilitates future learning experiences.

So how are my transactions influencing my daily life in the classroom as I try to take an inquiry stance on literacy? In my first project and the School-Practitioner list serv, I shared these understandings:

On pp. 48-49, I was struck by the idea that the value of being revolutionary lies in the daily work (praxis)---action and reflection---not an abstract idea of being revolutionary. This idea is repeated on p. 54 when she says that "...our lives, our work, must be an example" (hooks, p. 48-54, 1994). Freire champions the concept of praxis and continual critical reflection and action when he asserts, "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other"(Freire, p. 72, 2000). I am trying to be political and revolutionary in my work, but many times, I feel as though I am fumbling along as I strive to stay true to my principles, but at other times, feel guilty for acquiescing to school mandated practices that do not teach anything of value and are geared toward a test that privileges certain groups who have the "cultural capital."

In response to my sharing these reflections, Dr. Jo Beth Allen then asked my colleagues in our School Practitioner group and I to consider, "How is your daily work---your praxis---different this fall?" (Allen, November 18, 2002).

My praxis has affected my perceptions of the purposes of school as well as my classroom instruction. Whereas in the past I blindly followed the traditional required English curriculum and the teaching practices my department colleagues held up as "the" way to teach, I have come to question and reject many of those ideals. When I first began teaching eleven years ago, I did not want to conform, but I did not have the foundation of theory to anchor my beliefs, nor did I have a network of peers who shared the same philosophy as I do now through the University of Georgia. Like many new teachers, I simply succumbed to the pressures of being new and overwhelmed. I did not always feel good about my classroom, but I usually assigned blame for failure on my students rather than questioning my own practices. I was regarded throughout the school as a

“good” teacher because I was organized and precise in my *coverage* of the curriculum. I simply mirrored the dominant culture of the teaching community in the school; I was an oppressor. By the end of my fifth year, though, I had no joy in my work; the flames of passion that energized me at the beginning of my career were nearly extinguished.

In 1998, I began teaching in different learning environments that were a departure from traditional secondary school; this was the beginning of the journey I am now on as a teacher although I did know not it at the time. In the face of working with diverse learners and a school structure completely different than any I had ever known, I began to question what I believed about teaching. I started to wonder what was really important in education and why. By the fall of 2001, I realized I needed to approach my classroom in a radically different way. Like Randy Bomer, I recognized it was time to “...revise the draft of English class” (p.47, 1995). As school started this past August, I resolved to act upon the reflections I had contemplated for four years. As the semester has progressed and we have immersed ourselves in theory, my thoughts have centered around the Rosenblatt’s concept of transactions; I wonder frequently what kind of transactions are occurring and not occurring in my room, and how do those transactions impact all of us in my learning community? John Dewey reminds us that these transactions are not isolated because, “Experience does not go on simply inside a person” (p. 39, 1938). I constantly struggle as I try to create what Dewey calls “educative experiences” because it is not enough to

simply abandon traditional ways of teaching and leave students to fend for themselves; rather, Dewey reminds us “It is the business of the educator to see in what direction the experience is heading” (p. 38, 1938). Hence, the theory has permeated my thinking and heightened my critical consciousness.

Instead of diving headfirst into a litany of assignments, outside readings, and exercises at the beginning of the school year, I devoted the first two weeks to cultivating the seeds of community even though everyone else had compacted to stay together and follow a rather ambitious schedule for “covering” the material and devoting classroom time to many test prep activities. Rather than mindlessly following what Freire calls the “banking system” model by simply “covering” and dictating to students what they should know about American literature, I now ask them to think about questions they have about the required units of study. We then use those questions to guide our inquiry of the literary periods. Whereas I used to lecture and provide elaborate notes all of the time, I now ask students to interrogate texts, their beliefs, and their assumptions individually, in pairs, and in small groups. Daily reading and writing are staples of classroom life and have replaced the traditional book questions and drills. While district and school policies stifle my efforts to do inquiry on a larger scale, I am happy that I have been able to accomplish what I have; at the same time, I am neither content nor resting on my laurels. However, this process of change and understanding is constant, and I regularly scrutinize the moments of success as

well as my many fumbles as I forge ahead with this way of teaching and way of life.

In our October 23rd class session, Sharon Murphy posed a question that will stay with me forever: "If our classroom is a second text, what does yours say?" Although challenging at times, I observe and listen with an open mind about what my classroom says about me, my students, and what is valued. Action research, which I have endeavored to make a regular part of my teaching life, is a major means of inquiring into classroom life to try and read what that text says. For example, after completing an action research project on the use of writer's notebooks with my freshmen, I now am thinking about other ways to use them other than for the collection of writing ideas. Through my action research and literature review, I now want to inquire about how we might use our writer's notebooks as a tool for what Randy Bomer refers to as "social critique" and to examine issues of social justice through our own writing (Bomer, 2002). My praxis is revolutionary because reflection and action have led to change in my teaching. Even though the changes may be small right now, praxis anchors my efforts to disrupt the discourses that privilege some and silence others; the action research provides additional impetus to continue my praxis.

This shift in paradigm has also required a shift in assessment and evaluation. Assessments are culminating projects and/or written reflections. While some students have been threatened by these techniques and shaken

from their comfort zone, many have embraced this way of classroom life because they see their input is valued and enjoy how we construct knowledge both individually and collectively. Students know they are expected to dialogue about what stood out for them in a text and why; the “how” and “why” are essential questions we ask frequently. Gone are the multiple-choice tests and quizzes over insignificant facts and minutia. I try to resist the “drill and kill” approach others seem bent on imposing upon all teachers, but I am not always successful in skirting or challenging these issues. The “darkroom” of our learning community at UGA and theory are a sanctuary and wellspring of renewed purpose when other forces, such as administrative expectations or strict curricular requirements, begin to blur and mar the picture of what I envision for my students and me.

Questions occupy my life on a regular basis now. Classroom life is never far from the forefront of my mind as certain questions nag at me. I question why our curriculum is lacking in diversity, why it is so literature-heavy, and why so much material is crammed into the course descriptions. I question why students are expected to read certain texts or why they must master certain skills; I wonder why we follow a curricular model that is outdated, repetitive, and stale. Why am I expected to teach 150 students in 50-minute shifts? Why is writing such a low priority in our classrooms, and why is the focus on error when teachers do teach writing? Why are certain groups of students privileged to receive certain kinds of instruction and smaller class sizes while others languish

like suffocating fish in an overstocked pond crusted over with algae? Why are teachers in my department threatened by our growing Hispanic population? What is the purpose of school? Above all, why are our classrooms and school structures not places that encourage inquiry? As I ask these questions, I try to act upon these reflections to engender change in my learning community.

Of course, this kind of teaching and learning is time-consuming, and being in a school with a fifty minute block and semester system that does not roll over classes into the second semester, I feel pressure to somehow explore a large amount of required literature which leaves little room for inquiry in larger ways. Like Terry Wood, a teacher in a practitioner-research community, I worry if my students will be prepared for the predominantly banking system model they may re-encounter next semester or next year. However, Wood realized that she needed to teach the way that was best for her students, not the way others might teach them in the future. As a colleague pointed out to her, "Are you assuming that you should be the one to change?" (Allen, p. 49, 1995). I realize now that I do not need to teach from a position of fear and reaction, but rather I need to make proactive decisions based on theory, practice, and the needs of my students.

Obstacles to taking an inquiry stance on literacy in larger ways are everywhere; the road to an inquiry stance on literacy is not easy path because inquiry is demanding, difficult, slippery, and exhausting. At the same time, inquiry is exhilarating, joyful, and liberating. Even though I sometimes feel

discouraged, as though someone has taken my film and overexposed it, I feel compelled to try even if inquiry is not as large of a part of my teaching as I want it to be right now because I cannot wait to see how the picture of my classroom and the possibilities for learning may develop. Randy Bomer asks these riveting questions about revising and redrafting our vision of a place called school:

What is we were able, just for a day, to overthrow in our own minds the book of hours, the bells, the Autocrats? What might our lives with our students be if they and we were out from under strict authoritative control of appetite, elimination, activity, attention, and passion? (p. 17, 1995)

Why do I feel compelled to challenge the status quo and ask myself the questions Bomer poses? I think of my mother, a victim of the banking system and a pedagogy of the oppressed forty-five years ago. The only child of poor, uneducated, and working-class parents, my mother was not part of the dominant culture at Forsyth County High School in the 1950s. She failed her tenth grade math class because a cruel, uncaring teacher would not ask these questions, would not try to help my mother understand math even though she constantly came in after school for extra help. My mother failed the class, and thinking that the failure meant failure of her entire tenth grade, my mother decided to quit school and get married rather than face the embarrassment of being deemed a failure by her peers. No teacher, no guidance counselor, no member of the school community bothered to wonder why she did not return to school or to help a young teenage girl who did not possess the cultural capital of the school. Now sixty, my mother wonders how different her life could have been if

someone had cared to ask these questions, had cared to help her find ways to be successful in math. Unfortunately, I see similar situations to my mother's played out in my school of 2000 students. The desire to create a democratic environment in which all voices are heard and valued bolsters my spirit whenever I feel I am hitting brick walls.

In conclusion, I must engage in this praxis because each and every student is important. It is my ethical obligation to strive for a classroom of inquiry and social justice, to make all students feel they have a vested interest in their learning, and to expand our concept of what school could be. For me, the picture and possibilities for a life of inquiry is only beginning to develop. My work of this semester is only a series of snapshots in the album of inquiry I am building. Rather than focusing on what I cannot do, I have decided to focus on what I *can* do. I can share my findings and the work my classrooms create as evidence for this way of teaching, thinking, and learning. I have the courage, the desire, and the strength to critique my own practices as I ask the essential question:

Why are you doing this?

References

- Allen, J.B. (Personal email, November 18, 2002).
- Allen, J.B, Cary, M., and Hensley, F. (1995). Evolving Research Communities. In J. B. Allen, M. Cary, and L. Delgado (Eds.), *Exploring blue highways: Literacy reform, school change, and the creation of learning communities* (pp. 29-52). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bomer, R. (2002). *For a better world: Reading and writing for social action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bomer, R. (1995). *Time for meaning: Crafting literate lives in middle and high school*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier/Macmillan.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- hooks, b. (1994). Paulo Freire. In *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, (pp. 45-58). New York: Routledge.
- Hundley, M. (Personal email, November 7, 2002).
- VanDerPloeg, L., and Steffen, B. (2002). Writing for community awareness and change: Two schools talk about race. In C. Benson, S. Christian, D. Goswami, and W. Gooch (Eds.), *Writing to make a difference: Classroom projects for community change* (pp. 83-104). New York: Teachers College Press.