Learning & teaching journeys

We teach who we are (becoming)

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“My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p.xxviii, my emphasis).

Abstract

In this short article, I talk about how changes in my personal life have led to changes in my teaching. Starting from the assumption that “we teach who we are” (Palmer, 1998), I reflect on how my teaching has changed due to personal transformations. Drawing on insights from different authors in several areas such as Social Sciences and Education (Bache, 2008; Brown, 2012; Claxton, 2008; Day, 2007; Morris, 2012; Palmer, 1998), I highlight three main areas in which my teaching has changed as a result of the person that I am becoming: a) playfulness and improvisation; b) creativity and risk-taking; and c) mindful teaching.

In her new book Daring Greatly, Brené Brown (2012) states:

Who we are and how we engage with the world are much stronger predictors of how our children will do than what we know about parenting (Chapter 7, Section 1, parag. 1).

Reading this quote made me wonder if I could say the same thing about teaching: “Who we are and how we engage with the world (and with teaching) are much stronger predictors of how our students will do than what we know about teaching and techniques.” I think I can. As Palmer (1998) puts it: “we teach who we are” (p. 2). The author explains that good teaching involves knowing not only our students and our subjects well, but also ourselves. He goes on to say that if we do not know ourselves well, we cannot know either our students or the subject. According to him, “the human heart is the source of good teaching” (p. 3). I could not agree more.

This book has taught me that we teach from our integrity and we cannot fake teaching; that is, pretend to be one kind of teacher that we are not at our core. I remember when I started teaching I believed I had to be like my past teachers or others at the department. They were stricter and I felt that I was not; I felt that I was “softer”, if I can say this. I did not know this back then (now I see that I was trying to teach from my heart) but felt compelled sometimes to try to fit in. There is no other way of being a teacher than being yourself, and that is why we are so vulnerable. As Palmer (1998) says, “teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability” (p. 17). This is because in teaching we deal with uncertainties, complexities, messiness, ambiguity, feelings, and emotions—all of which make us so vulnerable and afraid of failing, not knowing, and not connecting to students.

I would also dare to say that we teach who we are being and what we are discovering in our personal lives. I am saying this because my teaching, as well as the way I now see teaching and myself as a teacher, have been transformed because of changes in my personal life. In recent years my life has unveiled in a way that has shown me love in different ways. Being in love, resisting loving, letting go, giving a chance to love, learning to accept love in my heart have all been recent lessons. Love has transformed me and helped me learn more about love and about myself. As I have become more open to life and love, so have my interests
and my openness to creativity and different ideas in teaching. It is funny how certain articles and books just fall into my life and help me realize these transformations in my teaching. The personal transformations give rise to new ideas and new readings, which in turn feed back into my teaching, and this also makes me see myself as a different person. Throughout the past five years, my teaching has been undergoing a series of transformations which I describe below.

1. Playfulness and improvisation
I have transitioned from a teacher who has always had a ready syllabus on the first day of class (and would panic and feel bad if I did not have one) to a teacher who has learned that it is OK not to have the syllabus ready on the first day; I now opt to get to know students, brainstorm with them, vent some ideas, see what they think, then talk to them about it. As Morris (2012) suggests, I said “yes” and “and” (the two rules when improvising with others: confirm what they say and add something) to telling a different story by allowing myself to improvise and go with the flow. As I relaxed more into being and accepting the person that I am, I have also become more playful. This has led me to look for ways to have a more relaxed and fun class as well. I have added affirmation songs (Murphey, 2007); action logs and newsletters with students; articles and texts that helped them and me to reflect about language learning; and have really listened to and given students more choices of activities in classes. More recently in my graduate classes, I have given myself permission to think outside the box and have asked students to do the same. One specific example was asking them to respond to an academic article in any way they wanted to: using poems, plays, drawings, music, etc. One of the groups outdid themselves and produced this wonderful parody of the song “Dancing Queen” by ABBA, now called “Learning Queen” (see YouTube: http://youtu.be/Z6NDvaWv6K0). These actions (and through the feedback I got from students) have helped me feel like a much more confident, relaxing, and fun teacher in my eyes.

2. Creativity and risk-taking
I have transitioned from a teacher who had always given tests to a teacher who has started experimenting with not having any tests in favor of alternative forms of assessment such as learning projects, reading books on self-esteem with students, and helping them explore their own learning processes by inviting them to write and share their language learning histories. Creativity is all about taking risks. Becoming a better teacher involves the willingness to “let ourselves fail,” as Morris (2012) put it. When you risk more, you run the risk of making mistakes, and thus, you have more chances to learn more and succeed—contrary to the belief I used to have that I had to avoid any mistakes and to be right. When I allowed myself to play more, things became more fun and more relaxing. This increased the chances of more flow and more interesting ideas for my classes, especially in terms of co-constructing the classes with my students and allowing our creativity to emerge in our interactions. Being more relaxed also helped me to wonder and read more about other areas, which contributed to my personal journeys and thus, to my teaching.

3. Mindful teaching
I have transitioned from a teacher who was so worried with following the plan and getting to the end of class to a teacher who now tries to be in the here and now of classes (Author, 2010; Schoeberlein, 2009) and more “present”; that is, mindful of teaching moments, epiphanies, and WOW of teaching (cf. Murphey, 2012). As a result, I have started thinking of students before the semester starts—before actually seeing them in class. Bache (2008) calls this a course field: “The energetic field that holds the cumulative learning experience of all the students who
have ever taken the course with this professor” (p. 54). According to him, a course field begins weeks before the classes really start (when students are choosing their courses and registering for them). When I read this quote and this book, my approach to my classes started changing. Now, I usually send students a welcome email as soon as I know who has registered for classes. Before starting a new semester, I also do a special meditation on my classes, setting an intention for all of us to learn together and have a prolific semester. More recently, I have started experimenting using a 5-minute meditation in the beginning of classes. I first dim the light (our classes are at night) and play some relaxing music in the background. Then I ask students to sit comfortably in their chairs, close their eyes, relax, and take three deep breaths. After that, I guide them either through a body scan or some mental imagery of nice relaxing places, or through a gratitude or loving mediation, all of which I am learning myself by reading and listening to several meditation books and webinars. When we finish, I sometimes ask students how they feel, or ask them to share their comments on the short meditation with their colleagues. We then start the class. I am not a meditation teacher and I am not suggesting here that every language teacher should become one. What I have done with students is what I am learning myself. I am learning to meditate: to sit still and let thoughts come and go. It is great that I can do this with them since it is a practice for all of us. As the saying goes, we teach what we need to learn.

The first time I did this, students seemed to like it, as we can see in excerpts from their action logs below:

With the meditation, everything seems easier and thus I can pay more attention to class, better enjoy the moment with the teacher, my colleagues and take more advantage of the teachings in class.

The meditations have been very interesting for me since many times I come to class exhausted thinking of many problems and this moment brings me peace and tranquility to continue. The classes become more pleasant and attractive.

I believe all teachers should do this for I feel more motivated for classes after the meditation. We could have more time of it though (about 10 min).

As we can see from these excerpts, students feel more relaxed and more peaceful with this “quiet time”, as we called it, at the very beginning of classes. They also feel they are able to enjoy classes with more motivation. For me as a teacher, as well, it has been a great moment to become more present to the class and to my students.

Thus, in this moment, I am teaching who I am becoming. I am becoming more relaxed, more present, more in tune with my teaching self, my students, and my subject. I have become more accepting of being in the moment of chaos, of not knowing, but also of opening up spaces for self-learning, for (self) exploring, for curiosities and for modeling those attitudes in class for my students. As Claxton (2008) states, “Minds are contagious,” and, “one of the most powerful influences teachers can have . . . is not so much what they are

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1 The Chopra Center (http://www.facebook.com/ChopraMeditation) offers a 21-day-meditation challenge twice a year for free available to anyone who has an internet connection. I’ve done this 3 times and it is amazing.

2 The original excerpts were written in Portuguese and translated into English by the author of this paper.

3 Eleven students wrote their opinions and there was no comment that was negative. The only comments were that we should have more time, that we could have yoga mats (since they cannot feel very comfortable in those chairs, and I agree). Another student said that she had difficulty visualizing what I was suggesting in the guided meditation. Despite its success, this semester in 2013, (with the same group), when I started the first class with an intention meditation, I noticed that one student did not really participate. I sensed he was not enjoying it. I have decided to ask give them a choice to arrive 20 min before class and I will be there to guide them through a meditation. I felt this would be a way of letting them choose to participate or not.
teaching, but what learning characteristics they are modeling as they do so” (parag. 16).

The path of becoming a teacher more in tune with my heart has been influenced first by changes in my personal life, which in turn triggered my search for different reading topics and books that have inspired my teaching. In visualizing a different self and a different identity for myself, I have begun to risk and explore more and have started becoming a teacher more in tune with myself, my passions, and most importantly, my heart! Teaching is, after all, a work of heart! Or, as Palmer (1998) puts it: “The human heart is the source of good teaching” (p. 3).

As my personal journey goes on, so does my reading on topics such as the art of possibility and positive change (Zander & Zander, 2000), the passion for teaching (Day, 2007), mindful teaching (Schoeberlein, 2009), the living classroom (Bache, 2008) and cultivating learning dispositions (Claxton, 2008), to name just a few, that have taught me so much about living with complexity. I am not referring necessarily to chaos theory (though it could be that, too) but mainly to contemplative states of mind and consciousness that have helped me realize learning and teaching are also “not knowing” and “not thinking too hard” (Claxton, 2008); they embrace the possibility of other ways of knowing and learning that are more intuitive, loving, playful, and most importantly, closer to our hearts and souls.

In becoming more open to life, love, and emotions, I have started to experience more flow in my teaching and in my research as well: expressing my voice and allowing myself to write in a different tone, and not being afraid to express my views and really let my most profound heartfelt desires come to the fore, as has happened with this article. Now I look for opportunities and invitations around me to expand myself as a human being and as a (language) teacher. As I do that for myself, I also do it with my students. This is the kind of teacher I am becoming. What kind of teacher are you becoming?

As a transitional being, I find myself in the process of awakening, evolving, and becoming a teacher who is more aware of herself and of others. One of the most important lessons I have been learning is that love and passion are not forbidden words in EFL teaching, for teaching is a work of love. But what’s love got to do with it? Ah, that is a topic for another article—and for more contemplation.

References


Learner views

Action Research Student Case Study

Students were offered the choice to do an interview or to teach a song to someone in the Sogo III class: Change the world: One playful smile at a time in order to write up a case study. All case studies were collected and put into a class publication and all students given a copy (contact PeerSpectives editors, if you would like one). Below is a sample:

My “young & strong & beautiful” father

Misaki Kamoda

I chose my father, Masami to teach a song that I learned in class. He is 55 years old, and he works at a publishing company. I chose him for this teaching assignment because he looks tired recently, and also, he likes to study but dislikes studying English. So, I wanted him to be relaxed and enjoy learning English with the song.

I selected “Are you young?” because I think that the lyric is so fantastic. And I believe that the melody of the song makes him relax. When I heard this song in class at first, I felt happy and comfortable. The lyric is “Young and strong and beautiful, I'm living an adventure, the world's so fascinating, it makes me wanna cry”. It is long but it’s easy to remember, I think.

First of all, I told him about this assignment and I sang the song, "Are you young?", for him. After that, I taught the meaning of the words. He looked embarrassed but he said, “Interesting! I'll try to remember with words meanings.” I was glad to hear that. He seemed happy while singing the song, so I asked him to sing with me. We sang this song together at that time, and enjoyed it! The next day, I asked him, "Are you young?" and, he said only one line, “Young and strong and beautiful”. He forgot the other lines but he remembered the melody so he hummed it. So, I taught him the lyric again. He tried to memorize the song again. And I suggested that he sing it on the train (of course not out loud!) or at break time at his company. The next day, I asked him, "Are you young?" suddenly, he sang the song and he could sing all of it. Two days later, he asked me, "Do you have another song or thing you learned in your class?" I was surprised that he asked but I was really happy to hear that. And I taught him how to juggle. I made balls with old newspapers and showed my juggling. He looked like he was having fun! He could juggle soon, so I said, "Try to juggle and sing the song you memorized." On starting his singing, the balls dropped on the floor. But he looked like he was having so much fun and was so happy.

After I taught this song to him, he doesn't look so tired. He has succeeded to learn how to juggle! And I’m really happy that he is interested in learning English. In