TEACHER REFLECTION AS A CURE FOR TUNNEL VISION

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The importance of not getting caught within one's own narrow vision when reflecting on classroom practice is well illustrated in this teacher's account of one year of writing instruction in her fifth-grade class.

Anyone interested in the topics of teacher thinking and teacher growth has most likely noticed the increased attention given to teacher reflection in recent years (MacKinnon & Grunau, 1991; Schon, 1987; Zeichner, 1991). While I was a doctoral student teaching teacher education courses, I was drawn to the research on teacher reflection because I found it a personally meaningful way to understand better my teaching. Furthermore, I advocated the importance of teacher reflection to preservice teachers in my courses and structured activities that would allow them to engage in reflective processes. Such activities provided us opportunities to examine critically our beliefs, underlying assumptions, instructional practices, and potential consequences of various instructional practices (Cruickshank, 1987; Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1987; Zeichner, 1991). I hoped that, through engaging in such reflective processes, the students would come to understand better the belief systems influencing their instructional decision making and the consequences of their instructional practices for their future students. Furthermore, by critically examining how students responded to my instruction, I was able to include them in my instructional decision-making process. As a result, learning became a mutual process for me and my students.

When I finished my doctoral studies and returned to teaching full-time in a fifth-grade elementary classroom, I found that I continued to engage in a tremendous amount of teacher reflection as I strove to understand better the impact my beliefs and practices had on my students. A major focus of my reflection dealt with my beliefs about the most effective way to implement process writing in my classroom. I wanted to implement a writing program in my classroom that would help children not only grow as writers but also learn to view writing as a means of learning. What I found, however, was that learning to understand and acknowledge where my students were and *their* beliefs regarding themselves and writing was just as important as my beliefs or the theory underlying writing instructional practices.

The story that follows is the journey my students and I took through process writing during our year together. The reason for telling my story is not to address process writing practices themselves, but rather to show how easy it was for me to become a victim of "tunnel vision." I had to relearn the lesson that, despite the effectiveness of a practice and how strongly I believe in certain practices that reflect my theories about teaching and learning, there is never only one way to implement a particular practice. Through this learning experience, I rediscovered how important teacher reflection is to the process of teaching and what a crucial role students need to play in instructional decision making.

Background

During my doctoral program I worked with teachers who were successfully using process writing and helped other teachers implement writer's workshop in their classrooms. Thus, I had seen its positive impact on children's writing firsthand. Consequently, when I returned to my own classroom, I spent hours revisiting books such as *Creating Classrooms for Authors* (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) and *In the Middle* (Atwell, 1987). I organized the classroom to have all the necessary components, such as a writer's corner, an editor's table, an overstuffed chair for author's chair, and a supplies center. I even persuaded my principal to let my class be one of the few to have a computer in the room. In all my careful planning, however, I made a giant assumption. I assumed my students would be as eager to engage in

process writing as I was. Consequently, I failed to enter the possible factor of students' lack of cooperation into my equation. Granted, my assumption was not entirely unfounded. I had been assured by previous teachers that students in my school had been exposed to writer's workshop and should be familiar with process writing. As a result, I assumed students would enter my classroom ready to be authors. However, as the students were so fond of saying, "NOT!"

The School Year Begins

I began the year with the topic of "Family Stories." I chose this topic because the professional reading, experienced teachers, and valued colleagues had suggested it; they had found it a successful one for beginning the year and introducing the authoring cycle process. Moreover, I had previously used "Family Stories" successfully as a means of encouraging students to write. This year, however, was a different story. Quite simply, it was a disaster. My students did just about everything except write during writer's workshop (structured to resemble closely Harste et al.'s [1988] concept of the authoring cycle). Regardless of all the time we had spent reading books about families, discussing families, comparing families in the books to our own, and so on, the students were unwilling to write about their families in any way other than the most limited relating of facts (for example, how many brothers and sisters they had, their names and ages, and the names of their pets).

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Not one to be discouraged easily, I tried new approaches to encourage students to enter the writing process. I allowed them to choose their topics and brainstormed possible topics with the class when they could not think of any on their own. I tried relating their writing topics to topics from other subject areas we were studying. I read pattern books and let them continue the pattern in their own books. I shared my own writing with them when modeling how to conduct an author's circle.

At one point, I even had our two Chapter I teachers come into the class during writer's workshop. One teacher helped students in author's circle; another took students who did not have anything to write about and simply talked with them about their lives and interests in an attempt to help them generate topics; I monitored the room for students who were writing and conducted individual conferences with them. Even this extra support did not improve the situation. It seemed that regardless of what I did, or what approach I tried, the result was always the same: The students simply were not writing.

During this time I continued to keep my own journal and regularly talked with a fellow teacher as means of analyzing how the students were responding to the various modifications I made in an effort to encourage them to write. However, despite my efforts to reflect critically in an attempt to understand better what was happening in my classroom, I was unable to come up with any answers that generated more positive results. Imagine my dismay—here I was, supposedly a literacy expert who had been advocating writer's workshop and the authoring cycle to preservice teachers for years and had successfully worked with teachers in their attempts to implement it, and I was watching it fail miserably in my own classroom.

Entering My Students' World

As I got to know my students and their world better, an explanation for their unwillingness to write emerged. It related to the initial topic I chose for introducing writer's workshop—family stories. My students were predominately African American, Hispanic, and Native American. Most were living near or below the poverty level in single-parent homes. Many viewed me as the "rich, white lady" who knew nothing about their world and the issues they faced in their everyday lives. Thus, they chose not to reveal information about themselves and their families to someone they viewed as an outsider whom they probably did not trust. Furthermore, a community of learners had not yet developed in our classroom, so the students did not trust each other. Consequently, it is perhaps not suprising they did not want to reveal publicly what was personally important to them, since they did not view our classroom as a safe place.

When I began to visit my students' homes and talk with their parents, I more fully understood their

reluctance to use family stories as our focus in writer's workshop. Some visits were to discuss a problem at school; however, many times I simply drove students home when they missed the bus. These visits and drives gave me opportunities to get to know students better and interact with them one-on-one away from school. They also helped me see that the world in which most of them lived consisted of violence, poverty, rejection, hopelessness, and abuse. On several visits I watched with a lump in my throat as students tried quickly to clean up the sitting area in their apartment by shoving clothing under furniture, throwing away beer cans and food wrappers, and covering up springs that were coming through the furniture, while simultaneously offering me explanations for why things were so messy. Their discomfort at having me see their homes was palpable, and it became painfully clear to me that they were not yet ready to share their world with me or in the public forum of our classroom. This realization was the first hint that I was allowing tunnel vision to cloud my judgment regarding instruction. I was so convinced that starting with family stories was an effective way to begin writer's workshop that I had ignored the not-so-subtle messages my students were sending me.

As the first semester progressed, it also became clear that many students were not familiar with the process involved in writer's workshop and were merely waiting to turn in a piece, have me find all their "errors," grade it, return it, and have them correct their "errors." Even more devastating than their notion of what constituted writing was the growing evidence that many of them simply did not believe they had anything of value to say. One explanation for this could possibly be their past experience with writing. If all they knew about writing was having their pieces come back covered with red ink, it is likely they concluded that their ideas were inadequate. Moreover, if their experience with such editing practices followed the common pattern of paying attention to mechanics at the cost of content, then it was also likely they thought that writing was about spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and other mechanics, rather than the sharing of ideas.

Changing My Thinking about Writing Instruction

Coming to this realization through my continued reflective efforts helped me understand *why* my students were resisting writer's workshop; however, I now needed to determine what to *do* about the situation. Around Thanksgiving break, I was reflecting on how things were progressing (or not progressing, as was the case) and how I could modify the workshop yet another time when it suddenly came to me: Who said I had to do writer's workshop as a specific component of our literacy instruction time at all? Why not just cut my losses and discontinue designating that 45-minute block of time every morning as writer's workshop? It was as if I believed in the practice so strongly that I had forgotten that although having it constitute a specific chunk of instructional time during literacy instruction is *one* way of implementing writer's workshop or the authoring cycle, it is certainly not the *only* way. This realization helped me see that I had clung to my belief that I *should* be doing writer's workshop in a particular way despite how miserable it was making both me and the students.

With this stroke of insight, I freed myself to consider all the other ways we used writing in our classroom. The students were pen pals with preservice education students; they were keeping journals; they were writing observation notes and experiment conclusions in science, raps for talent shows, and responses to their literature books; and they were researching topics in social studies. I came to the conclusion that they would certainly not be deprived of opportunities to write both for pleasure and to facilitate learning if I discontinued having writer's workshop every morning. Furthermore, when I thought about the types of writing the students were doing in the context of other content areas, I realized they were, in fact, engaged in process writing. Students were writing drafts of their research reports and extended projects. I was conferencing with various students and groups about their writing, and they were peer editing and revising in conjunction with their group projects. They also were sharing their writing with other groups and the class as a whole when they were finished.

After reaching this understanding, I then had to ask myself why these types of writing experiences involving process writing were so positive when writer's workshop was so dismal. The answer became clear through reflection: All of these other writing activities took place in a larger context that was interesting to students and served a specific purpose (for example, writing in their literature logs to prepare for literature discussion groups; writing on self-selected topics for in-depth study in social studies; writing a research report to communicate their findings from a science experiment). Consequently, these writing activities were relevant and meaning-

ful. Moreover, these types of writing activites involved less risk for the students. Granted, all writing involves some risk. However, writing your ideas about the relationship between density and gravity, the similarities between the antislavery and women's movements, or the effects of controlled variables on your mold experiment is much less threatening than having to reveal personal information about yourself in a family story.

I realize this may sound contradictory to the theory that writing about personally important things is a key to writing well (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). However, I think it is important to remember that al-

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though the types of writing in which the students found success were not "personal" in nature, they were personally meaningful. Students self-selected their writing and inquiry topics. Consequently, they were writing about topics they were personally interested in and about learning explorations in which they were personally invested. Furthermore, these topics were "safe" since they did not require students to share personal information, feelings, or experiences. This type of writing that combined topics that were nonpersonal but still personally interesting appeared to give my students, who were insecure about their writing ability and unsure about the safeness of their learning environment, the comfort zone they needed to begin to engage in the writing process. In other words, this type of writing gave the students a meaningful but safe place from which to embark on their journey into process writing. It also gave them time to build a community among themselves and create a safe learning environment in our classroom that helped them feel more comfortable sharing their writing with each other.

Another possible reason for the students' resisting writing in the context of writer's workshop could be their previous experiences with writing. If students had negative experiences in past years in a situation their teachers called writing workshop, it is likely they viewed writer's workshop as an unpleasant portion of their day and one in which they had found little success. Consequently, I thought I might be well served by simply calling our writing time something other than "writer's workshop."

I was fully aware that writer's workshop and the authoring cycle could be implemented as a specific component of literacy instruction in such a way that it could be an authentic, positive learning activity for students. I simply never found a way that worked with my particular group of students. Within the context of writer's workshop, whether they were writing on self-selected topics, chosen topics, or those related to topics of study in other subject areas, the students resisted writing.

Outside of that context, however, most of them had no difficulty writing. For example, a group of 3 students, who collectively had never written even one draft in writer's workshop, were so interested in Frederick Douglass that they researched him and proceeded to write and illustrate their own biography of his life. Another group wrote a play depicting the Seneca Falls Convention and staged an argument between men and women who advocated women's rights. Moreover, because most of these activities were group tasks, the group members took over the role of providing peer feedback on writing, and they constantly engaged in a process of revision as they worked together to improve their projects. Perhaps most rewarding, however, was that these same students who originally thought they did not have anything to say could hardly contain their excitement at sharing their work with their classmates. In fact, their presentations were often taken "on the road" to other classrooms.

Students' Changing Views of Themselves as Writers

Skeptics of using such activities to "teach" writing may raise the issue of whether the students were actually improving in their ability to write individually. My best response to such a concern is to relate an experience that occurred in our room the last week of school. Our principal had told us the week before that we were required to administer a "standardized process writing" test to our students before the end of the year. The test involved a guided prewriting

session, a rough draft and revision session, and a final copy session. Since we had engaged in prewriting activities throughout the year, the prewriting session went smoothly.

The first grumblings began when they started writing their rough draft on the second day; the test directions said the time limit was 15 minutes. Not only did this contradict everything I believed about the process of writing, but it also violated everything I had tried to convey to the students about writing. They had never had time limits for their writing in my class, so they saw this as a tremendous about-face. In the end, I could not bring myself to enforce the time limit; and these same students, who had difficulty working productively on a writing task for 5 minutes at the beginning of the year, were still writing 45 minutes later when I finally had to call time. Despite the fact that the writing on this test was an assignment completely out of context and not relevant to anything in our classroom, the students had progressed to the point where not only did they believe they had something to say, but they also valued their thoughts and wanted the time necessary to convey them properly.

Things heated up even more the next day when they were to write their final copy, despite the fact that many had not yet finished their rough drafts. Several students started asking what would happen if they did not complete their pieces and wanted to know if they could take them home to finish. They asked if they would get their work back and were angry when I had to tell them no. They wondered why they could not share their writing with their classmates as they worked and why I could not give them feedback. In other words, they recognized that this was definitely not an authentic task, and yet they were still invested enough in their pieces to want to finish them and do a good job. They were not writing for some unknown evaluator; they were writing for themselves. They were not trying to get their thoughts to match "the right answer" ; they were trying to convey their own thoughts as clearly as possible.

If there ever was a test designed to evaluate what students knew about writing, this one certainly served that purpose for me—although probably not in the way its creators intended. My students' writing behaviors and responses to this test clearly illustrated just how much they had learned about writing over the course of our year together. They knew that writing is a process that benefits from peer feedback and does not adhere to time limits. They also learned that writing can serve a variety of purposes and allows you to express yourself to others. Perhaps most rewarding for me, though, was seeing in action how the students had come to view themselves as writers, as people with valuable ideas and opinions to be shared.

What I Learned

And what did I learn from this experience? I learned how easy it is to become so absorbed in something I believe in and wholeheartedly endorse that what begins as a way of opening up possibilities for students actually ends up constraining them. In other words, I allowed my beliefs in what I thought I *should* be doing to result in tunnel vision. Having to face such a situation allowed me to explore other instructional possibilities and different ways of utilizing process writing. As a result, my students learned far more about writing than they ever would have had I continued to subject us to a particular means of implementing process writing simply because I believed in it and knew it *could* work even though it was clearly *not* working for us.

When something is not working, we stop and ask ourselves why. What can we change to help it work better? As I discovered, however, sometimes all the changes in the world do not help. In such a situation, I found I had to look beyond the here and now and explore the wealth of other possibilities. Simply because I decided to stop doing something or changed the way I implemented a specific instructional practice does not mean I stopped believing in it. It merely means that I reflected on how one particular group of students responded to a particular practice and made an informed decision to try something different. Furthermore, I realized it may be that a certain type of context needs to be built before a particular practice can be implemented. Perhaps at the end of the year, when my students had established a comfortable writing community, writer's workshop could have been implemented successfully.

Decisions like these, however, can only be reached if we are willing to engage in critical reflection on our teaching. Such reflection allows us to reframe our past understandings, rethink the assumptions underlying our understandings of a problematic situation, and consider the possible responses available to us (Grimmett, MacKinnon, Erickson, & Riecken, 1990). Reflecting on our teaching is not easy, for it involves a degree of personal risk (Wildman, Niles, Magliaro, & McLaughlin, 1990), can produce a great deal of doubt, and re-

quires that we seriously question what we are doing. Such a questioning and systematic reflection, although difficult, is nonetheless important to our growth as teachers.

Engaging in such reflection allowed me to rediscover how important it is to let students and their individual needs and interests into my instructional

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decision making. After all, teaching and learning is a two-way process between ourselves and our students. Not only do we teach them, but they also teach us, if we are willing to listen to them. We may begin the year with a map of the road we want to travel with our students, but if we really want to address their learning needs, we need to be prepared to make all sorts of detours along the way. In my case, the year ended up being a much more interesting trip than the one I had originally planned, which made reaching the destination all the more rewarding for everyone.

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