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Teachers’ Roles

In the fall of 1999, two colleagues and I conducted a workshop on self-evaluation at the NCTE conference in Denver. We based it on one of the basic premises of writing workshops: they are public spaces in which writers work and learn from one another’s work, as different from classrooms where students work alone in isolated desks in rows.

The three of us and the educators who attended the workshop devoted the day to discussions of who we are beyond our classrooms, who we are as teachers, and what our goals are. Our goals were public; we discussed them and what we intended to do to accomplish them.

To illustrate the public nature of goals, I shared my teaching goal for the graduate class on reading I had taught the previous spring:

To receive a perfect score from this class on item 6 on the university’s evaluation form. The last time I taught this class, my students ranked me lower on this item than on any other. It reads “Objectives for course were clearly presented.”

Everyone in that reading class knew of my goal, and I kept asking them how I was doing.

The workshop participants laughed as they pictured the teachers in my class helping me teach them well.

I explained, “Everyone in the class knew everyone’s goals—what we each wanted to learn about the teaching of reading—and we devoted our workshop time each week to serving as resources...”
to each other. I, for example, kept asking, ‘What are the objectives for this course?’ If someone didn’t know, I’d present them again in written, demonstration, visual, or oral form.”

Setting goals is automatic for professional educators. Making them public, seeking help, and helping others can each be a challenge. Documenting and sharing the artifacts that show our growth and telling the accompanying stories are vital to the livelihood of our profession. The public must know that we are continuously and purposefully becoming more adept at our responsibilities.

In these times, unfortunately, some persons outside of education don’t believe that we educators consciously grow; they see it as their responsibility to make decisions about what should be done to improve our work. Agencies and individuals at the federal, state, and local levels try to tell teacher educators and secondary and elementary teachers what and how to teach. We are enmeshed in a hierarchical system, with the locus of authority in Washington, D.C. That’s where the money is. In order to secure funds, the U.S. Department of Education needs to speak in a strong voice when it asks for its rightful portion of the national budget. It asks for funds to support the teaching procedures the legislators understand.

If we want the teaching processes we favor to receive recognition, we must be sure our legislators believe in what we do. One of our roles is to create a public personae of ourselves as professionals who are articulate about what we do well and who have specific plans for our continuous growth.

**We Strive to Become Better Teachers**

The interns I supervise pursue teacher research within their internships. This helps them see, from day one, the central importance of their own professional development to their lives as teachers. Trisha Sutphen, who interned in a second grade, knows she still has a long way to go and that she will never perfect this art, but she does intend to devote her career to revising and polishing her teaching skills. She reflects on her teaching, celebrates when her days go well, and generates options for new beginnings when lessons flounder. Trish struggles and flourishes amidst the support of her colleagues.

When Trish began her yearlong, full-time internship she found it difficult to set a goal to purposely guide her growth. She was overwhelmed! In order to find a focus in the midst of turmoil, Trish studied two children as writers. Throughout the fall she conferred with each of them each week, taped the conferences, transcribed them, and wrote a weekly reflection about each one. Through these reflections, the meaning of teaching began to reveal itself to Trish.
She wrote about Mark in the following way:

Well, from looking at Mark’s writing now, compared to what it was at our last conference, it is plain to see that he has lost interest in his Cub Scouts draft. Besides the fact that he has written only two lines, he has planted a big THE END at the end of his short piece of writing. . . . I am disappointed that my last conference did not have much effect and concerned that Mark is, once again, abandoning a topic. . . .

Trish evaluated her efforts with Mark, brought her confessions to the seminar I held with the interns each week, and our group supported her efforts. Trish continued on her relentless search and re-search for ways to find out what Mark needed. She had taken her first steps on a long trek toward understanding that it can be hard for writers to be able to recognize events and issues in their lives about which they feel strongly enough to write with energy. Trish was learning that no formula existed for her to follow; while some of her students wrote volumes, Mark wrote two lines.

For each of our weekly seminar sessions, Trish created a two-part portfolio entry about one of her two case study children. Her artifact was usually a draft written by one of the students or a portion of a transcript of a conference she had held, and in her reflection she repeatedly addressed her goal, or research question: “What do I say in a conference to be as helpful as possible to the writer?”

Although the interns and I all conducted different kinds of research, each of us prepared for our seminars by setting aside time to stop and evaluate what we were learning. Trish constantly critiqued herself, her students, and her profession. She was not searching for the right way to teach, nor for a foolproof way. The interns’ goals gave them a place to center their ultrabusy lives and document an accomplishment on the road of ever-better teaching.

During their second semester, most of the interns set a new goal for themselves. Whereas their emphases varied, the main focus was on the two-week unit each of them was required to create and conduct. Trish had decided in the fall that her unit would be on poetry, and she had read Georgia Heard’s (1989) *For the Good of the Earth and the Sun* and Don Graves’ (1994) *A Fresh Look at Writing*. She had learned that it is wise to marinate children in poetry, so, during the fall, she had frequently read poetry to the students for their enjoyment and placed several poetry books in their classroom library. Some children had chosen to read them during reading workshop.

As the time for her unit approached, Trish set an overall goal for it, “What encourages, supports, and enriches children’s love for poetry?” She arrived at this question after much deliberation (Hubbard & Power 1999) and officially began her unit—which she designed as a seven-week unit—during a week in February.
During those five days, Trish focused each day on one way to sweep children into poetry, such as by moving their bodies to the beat of poems or by choral reading. These sessions opened reading workshop each day that week.

Trish taped all of these class sessions, transcribed them, and wrote a reflection about each. All went well, and none were perfect; she planned to revise all of them the next time she taught poetry. Here, for example, is part of her analysis of the day of the choral readings:

> When I told the class that we were going to read some poems out loud there was cheering and “Yesss!!”-ing from the kids. I was very happy that they were so excited. . . . Then I invited them to read “Potato Chips” by M. C. Livingston with me. . . . Sarah noticed the words *munching, lunching,* and *crunching.* . . .

> Next, I began explaining that we were going to read the poem using two voices . . . a third section crunched as loudly as possible on a handful of potato chips. . . . Unfortunately, it was getting incredibly late and we had to move on to something else before everyone had a chance to be in the chip-cruncher group. *That* was when the true disappointment set in. I should have planned my time much more carefully. One of our students is a boy with autism and he was totally unable to handle the disappointment. . . .

Again, as in the fall when she had reflected on her writing conferences, Trish analyzed what went well and what could have been better. Her daily reflections and her weekly written reflections for our seminar helped ensure an awareness of the importance of both reflection and support in order for her career to thrive. At the end of her unit, Trish felt satisfied, overall, about her children’s love of poetry, but her questions about the child with autism lingered, and that’s fine. All professionals find themselves driven by more questions.

At the end of our year, the interns created portfolios to take with them when they went out for job interviews. Each organized this document differently, and Trish decided to use her philosophical statement as her guiding principle. Each section in it became a section in her portfolio, including Writing Workshop, Assessment, and Meeting the Needs of Teachers.

Trish interviewed for a position as a third-grade teacher, and the element of her portfolio that most impressed the principal and teachers who interviewed her was her series of reflections. She had included detailed, pagelong reflections to accompany every item in her portfolio, and the principal took Trish’s portfolio home for a weekend to read it carefully. This principal wanted to promote purposeful, deliberate growth on the part of her faculty and saw Trish as a person who did this. Trish had gained a relatively clear image of herself as a professional. The principal offered Trish the position and she accepted.
Trish initially learned about reflection when she studied writing instruction. She thought about what worked and what didn’t. She didn’t mechanically teach one lesson after another. Trish could tell us what she was learning to do as a teacher and what she was working on to become better. To look at herself with appreciation and scrutiny is her goal for her professional life.

We Find Out Who Our Students Are

The more we know about the overall lives of our students, the more likely we are to be able to help them with their schoolwork. There may be lots of aspects of our students we could learn about, but I will write about two: who they are in school and who they are beyond school.

Who Our Students Are In School We purposefully create the culture of a school. Ideally, it is one in which our students benefit from their entire day.

When I taught at Hanahauoli, a private day school in Honolulu, I experienced a well-crafted milieu. The parents, teachers, and children had created a Deweyian culture years before my tenure there, during the heyday of John Dewey in the 1920s. A group of parents designed this school where the children continue to participate in many projects. In order to do so, they use the resources of a music teacher, a rhythm teacher, and a shop teacher. A separate building houses a shop in which the students construct the mosaic school sign and create the stepping stones that crisscross campus.

My first-grade classroom included an annex equipped with an enormous supply of blocks and a puppet stage. We had our own sandbox. I found out who my students were within a multitude of locations and experiences. When I saw Peter create phenomenal block structures in the annex, intricate roadways in the sandbox, and detailed cars in shop, I could eventually find reading and writing tasks that fueled his passions. The more I knew, the greater the likelihood I could get my students started on the right foot.

I also taught second grade at Hanahauoli and tailored math assignments to my various students. In handwriting, I helped each child with the letter(s) he needed to work on. My children didn’t have assigned seats; they sat at whichever cluster of desks felt right at that moment. All of this was new to me. In my previous teaching positions, I had taught group lessons, and my students had sat in assigned seats, but at Hanahauoli I learned to more carefully honor my students as individuals with varying needs (Tanner 1997).

At the same time, they knew one another well; my students had been together since prekindergarten and would remain
together through sixth grade in this little school with only one section of each grade level. The individualized nature of instruction did not keep them apart. They cared about one another and helped one another a great deal with their work. In addition, because I knew what each needed and could do, I knew who to send to the courtyard when fidgety Tommy needed a reading partner. The school was a community of children and adults who were committed to the well-being of this place.

Unfortunately, schools exist in which the culture turns children’s dreams into nightmares. Denny Taylor, Debbie Coughlin, and Joanna Marasco (1997) edited a book in which they show the shattered dreams of students who found themselves in the wrong school at the wrong time. One of those students, Mark, written about by LaFon Phillips (46–68), did not pass sixth grade because his work habits were poor. He had test scores above the grade 6 level, but his teacher awarded him failing grades on his report card because of poor effort. His mother, the author and a teacher herself, and father, a professor, unsuccessfully fought the system. The culture of a school wields power and it is our responsibility to exert the power in support of the children. When we know them, we must use our overall knowledge to serve them well.

Who Our Students Are Beyond School On Bromley Mission in Liberia, as a Peace Corps volunteer, I was different from all of my students, and I learned the value of us learning as much as possible about each other’s total lives. My first and second graders spent at least an hour at my house every afternoon. I learned to sort out the difference between a play ma, a real ma, and a born ma. They learned that it was impossible to plait my hair. The Bromley community was close; we all—teachers and students—lived on campus. Everyone knew one another’s family stories. Each person counted; no one got lost in the shuffle of schoolwork or life. Everyone helped everyone, and a few of us still do, decades later.

However, it took me years to realize that it isn’t only in Africa that it behooves me to understand the influence of students’ lives on my work as their teacher. In 1990 some of us UNH researchers trekked down Route 101 to Manchester at the request of Jane Kearns, the director of writing for the city. We didn’t focus on one school; we studied with a few teachers who taught at various elementary and secondary schools all located near the center of the city, where the statistics showed the highest free lunch count, etc. The teachers jumped in with both feet; excitement reigned. We were about to learn about students as evaluators of themselves as readers and writers in a culture quite different from that of the schools near UNH.

At the beginning, we didn’t realize the importance of the students’ lives beyond school. We focused on school. We asked the
students to create portfolios to show themselves as readers and writers. Many of them did, but some didn’t. From those who claimed to not be readers and writers I learned the most (Hansen 1996b). When a student does not see herself as a writer, it is impossible for her to become a better writer. The same goes for reading. These students needed to see themselves as readers and writers before they could go further.

It took us months to realize that it was the students’ lives beyond school that would permit them and us to see them as readers and writers. One student who didn’t see himself as a reader in school brought the floor plan of the Boys Club he went to after school every day. He could read it! Gradually, as word spread, students found evidence of themselves as readers and writers outside of school and brought the artifacts inside. They could read old license plates and could teach others. Gradually, as they shared and gained confidence, they took the reading and writing of additional classmates seriously and accepted invitations to try additional forms of literacy. They were reading and writing in school. Eventually, with the support of their classmates and teachers, they purposefully became better readers and writers.

Similar evolutions occur in other schools. Maureen Barbieri (1995) wrote about an entire year she devoted to helping her grade 6 girls see themselves as competent young women whose thoughts deserved recognition. While they were on the track toward becoming unassertive young women only seeking to please others, she helped them find situations in which their voices carried influence. Maureen taught them to critique their white, middle-class culture and find ways to step out of it.

Students’ lives outside of school provide them with a springboard into reading and writing in ways we don’t understand but strive to learn (Ladson-Billings 1994). When their cultures become classroom currency, they can critique, question, and consciously seek value in who they are. And, knowledge of who they are helps us find ways to get them started as writers and readers.

**We Find Out What Our Students Know**

The process of finding out what our students know in order to know what to teach them next is a hallmark of what we do as reading and writing teachers (Daniel 1996). This distinguishes us from teachers of the past who picked up their red pens to search for what their students did not know and taught the next lesson in the textbook regardless. The same goes for reading teachers. We have stopped highlighting mistakes on children’s work and then assigning them the next page in the workbook just because it’s there. Instead, we listen to them read and talk. While they are in the process of reading and talking, we listen for what they...
know, in order to know what they are on the verge of knowing, in order to teach the very process or skill they are ready to learn.

Recently I listened to three very different children in one grade 1 classroom in Nassau, Bahamas. Richanda read from a little book: “The Dog. The dog has red ears. The dog has red paws.” She read fluently and could also read the words in isolation, in random order. I needed to listen to her more so I could discover her growing edge. Then I’d know what to do to help her become a better reader. Maybe she needed to read from a more difficult text in order to grow.

Next I sat beside Tishea, who read the same lines about the dog. She also read fluently, but when I asked her to point to certain words, she couldn’t. I asked her to read her name, Tishea Brown, and she did. I asked her to point to Brown, and she could. She could also point to Tishea. She sat on the verge of knowing the concept of a word, so I decided to try to teach her this skill. With minimal help she learned to point to various words in the two sentences she could read. As Tishea continues to learn to see individual words she will not need to memorize and can read longer text. By sitting beside her while she read, I learned what she knew.

Finally I moved to Trevornicka, and she read the first of the two sentences about the dog. Has was difficult for Trevornicka, who preferred to say have. We read it together a few times with minimal success and Trevornicka diverted herself from this hard work by touching my hair and saying to her classmates at large, “I never see a woman with soft hair like that before. Come, feel her hair.” Several of the little Bahamian children instantly encircled me, feeling my hair. One said, “I don’t cry when my hair get plait.” Another said, “Her hair soft, soft.” When the children dispersed, Trevornicka returned to her little book, I taught her to read the first sentence fluently, and she went right on to read the second sentence correctly on her own on her first try.

I found out how difficult this language pattern was for her, and wondered if I had done the right thing when I insisted that she read it the printed way. Later, when I talked with several Bahamian teachers, I asked if they would have focused on this language difficulty and they said yes. Children learn to talk and read at the same time. Other children struggled with has and practiced with Trevornicka, who needed to practice this new speech pattern.

I learned to closely study students when they read after I learned to carefully watch and listen to them when they write. Not only did I notice how carefully young writers focus on meaning, I noticed this similar behavior when these young writers read the print others created. In order to ensure carryover from writing to reading, teachers use similar teaching processes in both writing and reading. Thus, when Trevornicka writes, if she con-
fuses has/have, her teacher will refer her to the story about the red dog. Students' reading and writing can inform each other when we know the details of what they can do in each.

**Hmmm...**

Christine Duthie (1996) wrote about the autobiography unit she conducted with her first-grade children. When they talked about the books she read to them, they thought about their past and future experiences. On the last day of school, as they talked about their next school year, one child said, “Next year I’m gonna be a friend to someone who looks scared on the first day of school... like, remember the boy who was blind in that book?” This young child saw herself as part of a larger culture that isn’t always kind, but could be. Christine had purposefully taught her young students to see themselves as persons who care throughout their school day.

The processes of evaluation, writing, reading, and talk can help students create supportive cultures, and they need many opportunities to do so. Euro-American students and teachers, whose culture has dominated our country and educational system for centuries, especially need to take a close look at the gatekeeper role we play so well. We need to seriously consider whom we welcome in and whom we don’t. Finding out as much as we can about the culture of the outsiders will help us know the terrain in which these students negotiate their lives.

Many Euro-American students in classes with students from other countries think, “I don’t have a culture,” which may show their unawareness of their prejudices and viewpoints. Self-study is especially important for the gatekeepers of a culture (Florio-Ruane 1994). Boys can critique the wide freeway their male culture oftentimes affords them, gifted students can critique their privileges, and children who don’t ordinarily approach new students can purposefully do so.

As teachers, we constantly critique our classrooms, our schools, and our selves in our effort to move forward. Our involvement in writing has helped us realize the importance of strong voices in our efforts. We challenge ourselves to strengthen our own voices as we fulfill one of our primary roles—to cocreate with our students school cultures in which everyone supports learners.
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