Chapter Two

Becoming Critically Reflective
A Process of Learning and Change

Waxing rhapsodic about the benefits of critically reflective teaching is of limited use unless we have a specific focus on how it actually happens. In the previous chapter, I explained that critical reflection focuses on the hunting of assumptions of power and hegemony. The best way to unearth these assumptions is to look at what we do from as many unfamiliar angles as possible. In this chapter, I want to explore how we can see our practice in new ways by standing outside ourselves and viewing what we do through four distinct lenses. Each of these lenses illuminates a different part of our teaching. Taken together, they throw into sharp relief the contours of our assumptive clusters.

Attempting to become aware of our assumptions is a puzzling and contradictory task. Very few of us can get very far doing this on our own. No matter how much we may think we have an accurate sense of ourselves, we are stymied by the fact that we’re using our own interpretive filters to become aware of our own interpretive filters—the pedagogic equivalent of trying to see the back of one’s head while looking in the bathroom mirror. To some extent, we are all prisoners trapped within the perceptual frameworks that determine how we view our experiences. A self-confirming cycle often develops, in which our uncritically accepted assumptions shape actions that then serve to confirm the truth of those assumptions. We find it very difficult to stand outside ourselves and see how some of our most deeply held values and beliefs lead us into distorted and constrained ways of being. To become critically reflective, we need to find some lenses that reflect back to us a stark view of what we do.

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stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do. Our most influential assumptions are too close to us to be seen clearly by an act of will.

One of the problems of standing outside ourselves, however, is that the people we use as mirrors often share our assumptions. In this situation, our conversation with them becomes an unproductive loop in which the same prejudices and stereotypes are constantly reaffirmed. Just as we tend to read authors we already agree with, or have some affinity for, so we tend to seek out colleagues whom we know are sympathetic to, and familiar with, our orientations. Rare indeed are the people who deliberately seek out books, conversations, and practices that they know will challenge or even undercut much of what they find to be comfortable and familiar. Indeed, the whole idea of systematically searching out assumptions is often deliberately avoided for fear of what it might lead to. No one likes to discover that ideas they have lived by for much of their life are invalid.

Sooner or later, however, something happens that forces teachers to confront the possibility that they may be working with assumptions that don’t really fit their situations. Recognizing the discrepancy between what is and what should be is often the beginning of the critical journey.

Four Critically Reflective Lenses

When we embark on this journey, we have available four lenses through which we can view our teaching. These lenses are represented by the four arrows in Figure 2.1. They are (1) our autobiographies as teachers and learners, (2) our students’ eyes, (3) our colleagues’ experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. Viewing what we do through these different lenses alerts us to distorted or incomplete aspects of our assumptions that need further investigation.

1. Our Autobiographies as Learners and Teachers. Consulting our autobiographies as learners puts us in the role of the “other.” We see our practice from the other side of the mirror, and we become viscerally connected to what our own students are experiencing. Investigating our autobiographies as teachers is often the first step on the critical path. Through personal self-reflection, we become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasonings
that frame how we work. When we know what these are, we can start to test their accuracy and validity through conversations with students, colleagues, and books.

2. *Our Students' Eyes.* Seeing ourselves as students see us makes us aware of those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationships in the classroom. They also help us check whether students take from our practice the meanings that we intend.

3. *Our Colleagues' Experiences.* By inviting colleagues to watch what we do, or by engaging in critical conversations with them, we can notice aspects of our practice that are normally hidden from us. As they describe their readings of, and responses to, situations that we face, we see our practice in a new light.

4. *Theoretical Literature.* Theoretical literature can provide multiple interpretations of familiar but impenetrable situations. It can help us understand our experience by naming it in different ways, and by illuminating generic aspects of what we thought were idiosyncratic events and processes.

Let me say some more about each of these.

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*Source:* Developed by Laurie Peterman.
Our Autobiographies as Learners and Teachers

Our autobiographies as learners and teachers represent one of the most important sources of insight into teaching to which we have access. Yet in much talk and writing about teaching, personal experience is dismissed and demeaned as "merely anecdotal"—in other words, as hopelessly subjective and impressionistic. It is true, of course, that at one level, all experience is inherently idiosyncratic. For example, no one experiences the death of a parent in exactly the same way as anyone else, with the same mix of memories, regrets, affirmations, and pain. Yet at the same time, bereavement as a process of recognizing and accepting loss contains a number of patterns and rhythms that could be described as generic.

The fact that people recognize aspects of their own individual experiences in the stories others tell is one reason for the success of peer support groups for those in crisis or transition. As I hear you talk about going through a divorce, struggling with illness or addiction, or dealing with the death of partners, friends, or parents, I am likely to hear echoes of, and direct parallels to, my own experience of such events. The same dynamic holds true in teacher reflection groups. As we talk to each other about critical events in our practice, we start to realize that individual crises are collectively experienced dilemmas. The details and characters may differ, but the tensions are essentially the same.

Analyzing our autobiographies as learners has important implications for how we teach. Our experiences as learners are felt at a visceral, emotional level that is much deeper than that of reason. The insights and meanings for teaching that we draw from these deep experiences are likely to have a profound and long-lasting influence. They certainly affect us more powerfully than methods or injunctions that we learn from textbooks or hear from superiors. We may think we're teaching according to a widely accepted curricular or pedagogic model, only to find, on reflection, that the foundations of our practice have been laid in our autobiographies as learners. In the face of crises or ambiguities, we fall back instinctively on memories from our times as learners to guide us in our responses. As Denicolo and Pope (1990) found, when teachers are asked to explain why they favor certain approaches, "frequently they evidence their choice of method, for instance, by reference to a formative experience of their own, whether it be a positive one..."
which they seek to emulate for their students or a negative one which they strive to avoid reiterating for others” (p. 156).

For example, teachers who were underestimated as students when they were in college are careful not to make the mistake of underestimating their own students. This predisposes them to allow students second chances, to renegotiate course requirements and deadlines, or to give students the benefit of the doubt when they are unable to do what they had promised. Teachers who were reluctant discussion participants in their own student days (as I was) are not likely to dismiss noncontributors to classroom discussions as mentally negligible, disengaged, or hostile. They may well interpret a student’s silence as evidence of his being engaged in reflective analysis. Remembering the cultural and psychological inhibitors to their own discussion participation, they are more inclined to create ground rules that acknowledge the value of silence and that create space for equal participation.

Analyzing our autobiographies as learners often helps explain to us those parts of our practice to which we feel strongly committed, but that seem unconnected to any particular pedagogic model or approach we have learned. Recalling emotionally charged dimensions of our autobiographies as learners helps us understand why we gravitate toward certain ways of doing things and why we avoid certain others. Pedagogic preferences that seem instinctual (for example, a liking for group work or independent study, a tendency to personal disclosure or reticence, an emphasis on sticking to announced plans, or a liking for breaking away from structures) can often be traced back to situations in which we felt inspired or demeaned as learners. A good example of this is Andresen’s (1993) examination of his own practice as a teacher. Remembering the joy he felt as a student of science at discovering unanticipated connections, he came to understand his career as a teacher “as a search, a pilgrimage, toward recapturing this primary joy” (p. 62). When we’re trying to uncover our most deeply embedded allegiances and motivations as teachers, a useful path of analysis is to study our autobiographies as learners.

We can also do some useful reflection on our autobiographies as teachers. For many of us, thinking privately about what we do is easier than subjecting ourselves to the scrutiny of others. There is always the fear that the latter will embarrass rather than
enlighten us. The prospect of public humiliation is one reason why many reflective efforts begin with private autobiographical analyses of teaching. There are several tools we can use for this purpose, including teaching logs, teacher learning audits, role model profiles, survival advice memos, videotaping, ideology critique and best/worst experiences matrices. All of these are outlined in subsequent chapters. Other approaches are those of concept mapping (Deshler, 1990a), the repertory grid technique (Candy, 1990), learning conversations (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991), metaphor analysis (Deshler, 1990b), ideological analysis (Kennedy, 1990), and self-administered inventories to help you recognize your philosophical and methodological orientations (Zinn, 1990; Conti, 1990).

The intrinsic problem with approaches to private self-reflection is that when we use them, we can never completely avoid the risks of denial and distortion. We can never know just how much we’re cooking the data of our memories and experience to produce images and renditions that show us off to good effect. I use autobiographical reflection myself because I think it’s a good starting point for my own efforts to see myself more clearly, and I have also seen it work well with other teachers. But we need to be aware of the limits to any approach that relies on self-reporting and self-analysis. No matter how creative I might be in taking mental leaps and looking back on experiences from unfamiliar vantage points, I am always trapped inside my own meaning schemes and perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). This explains why students’ and colleagues’ perceptions, and engagement with theoretical literature, are all such important critical checks. But the critical journey has to start somewhere, and examining our autobiographies as learners and teachers is one obvious point of departure.

Our Students’ Eyes

Seeing ourselves through students’ eyes is one of the most consistently surprising elements in any teacher’s career. Each time we do this, we learn something. Sometimes what we find out is reassuring. We discover that students are interpreting our actions in the sense that we intend. They are hearing what we wanted them to hear and seeing what we wanted them to see. But often, we are profoundly
surprised by the diversity of meanings students read into our words and actions. Comments we made incidentally that had no particular significance to us are heard as imperatives. Answers we gave off the cuff to what seemed like inconsequential questions return to haunt us. Long after we've forgotten them, they are quoted back at us by students to prove that now we're contradicting ourselves. What we think is reassuring behavior on our part is sometimes interpreted as overprotective coddling. What we regard as an inspired moment of creativity, when our awareness of new possibilities causes us to diverge from the plan for the class, is perceived as inconsistent or confusing behavior. A joking aside appreciated by some leaves others insulted.

The main difficulty in trying to see ourselves through students' eyes is that students are understandably reluctant to be too honest with us. They have probably learned that giving honest commentary on a teacher's actions can backfire horribly. Teachers who say they welcome criticism of their actions vary widely in how they respond when it is actually expressed. Students have an understandable reluctance to describe how they see the teacher's power and authority adversely affecting what happens in class. Even under the cloak of anonymity, it feels risky to point out oppressive aspects of a teacher's practice. It takes courage to suggest in public that teachers have unwittingly stifled free discussion, or broken promises, or treated certain kinds of students with more deference than others. Given the egomania of some academics, and the power they wield, student paranoia is sometimes justified.

Therefore, a cardinal principle of the attempt to see ourselves through students' eyes is anonymity of students' critical opinions. When students have decided that you have earned their trust, they may choose to speak out publicly about negative aspects of your actions. But early on in the history of your relationship with a class, you will get honest criticism only if anonymity is guaranteed. You have to make students feel safe. After students have seen you, week in and week out, inviting anonymous commentary on your actions and then discussing this publicly, they start to believe that you mean what you say about the value of critical reflection. But saying you welcome critical commentary from students and having them actually believe this are two quite distinct and separate events. Between them lies a period of time in which you must consistently
model a public, critical scrutiny of your actions. The concern to guard students' anonymity has shaped the development of the classroom critical incident questionnaire described in Chapter Six.

Seeing our practice through students' eyes helps us teach more responsively. Knowing what is happening to students as they grapple with the difficult, threatening, and exhilarating process of learning is of the utmost importance; without this foundational information, it is hard to teach well. Obviously, a good grasp of methods is essential. But this must be coupled with insight into what is happening to students as those methods are put into practice. Without an appreciation of how students are experiencing learning, any methodological choices we make risk being ill-informed, inappropriate, or harmful. This is why, in my opinion, the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good teaching is happening is the extent to which teachers deliberately and systematically try to get inside students' heads and see classrooms and learning from their point of view.

Our Colleagues' Experiences

Talking to colleagues about what we do unravels the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped. Participating in critical conversation with peers opens us up to their versions of events we have experienced. Our colleagues serve as critical mirrors reflecting back to us images of our actions that often take us by surprise. As they describe their own experiences dealing with the same crises and dilemmas we face, we are able to check, reframe, and broaden our own theories of practice. For example, if we ask colleagues what they think are the typical causes of students' resistance to learning, we will likely hear a spread of responses. Some of these we will have discovered ourselves. Others, such as teachers making false promises, teachers being perceived as dishonest, or students' fear of questioning previously unchallenged ways of thinking and behaving, may never have occurred to us. When we ask our colleagues how they have dealt with each of these causes of resistance, we may hear answers that surprise us and that suggest new readings of this problem. We may never have considered apologizing for anything we do, or seeking new ways to justify the learning we want students to undertake, or paying constant attention to our own modeling.
Talking to colleagues about problems we have in common and gaining their perspectives on these increases our chances of stumbling across an interpretation that fits what is happening in a particular situation. A colleague's experiences may suggest dynamics and causes that make much more sense than the explanations we have evolved. If this happens, we are helped enormously in our effort to work out just what we should be doing to deal with the problem. Without an accurate reading of the causes of a problem (are these embedded in our own actions, in our students' past histories, in the wider political constraints placed on our learning and teaching, or in a particular intersection of all of these?), we are crippled in our attempts to work through it.

Checking our readings of problems, responses, assumptions, and justifications against the readings offered by colleagues is crucial if we are to claw a path to critical clarity. Doing this also provides us with a great deal of emotional sustenance. We start to see that what we thought were unique problems and idiosyncratic failings are shared by many others who work in situations like ours. Just knowing that we're not alone in our struggles is profoundly reassuring. Although critical reflection often begins alone, it is ultimately a collective endeavor. We need colleagues to help us know what our assumptions are and to help us change the structures of power so that democratic actions and values are rewarded, both within and outside our institutions.

Theoretical Literature

Theory can help us "name" our practice by illuminating the general elements of what we think are idiosyncratic experiences. It can provide multiple perspectives on familiar situations. Studying theory can help us realize that what we thought were signs of our personal failings as teachers can actually be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of certain economic, social, and political processes. This stops us falling victim to the belief that we are responsible for everything that happens in our classrooms.

In her study of beginning teachers, Britzman (1991) comments that "because they took on the myth that everything depends on the teacher, when things went awry, all they could do was blame themselves rather than reflect upon the complexity of pedagogical
encounters" (p. 227). Teachers who subscribe to this myth believe that student lassitude or hostility are the result of teachers' not being enthusiastic enough. They get frustrated that they have failed to use the right pedagogical approaches or that they have not been sufficiently creative in finding points of connection between the subject matter they teach and their students' lives. Reading a theoretical analysis that offers an alternative interpretive framework for a situation can be life-saving—or at least, career-saving. Critical theory may help us realize, for example, that students' disinterest is the predictable consequence of a system that forces people to study disconnected chunks of knowledge at a pace prescribed by curriculum councils and licensure bodies.

We often interpret students' hostility as being caused by—and therefore, directed specifically at—our own personality. Theories of cognitive and moral development may point to an alternative and equally plausible explanation for such anger: students realize that they are on the verge of scrutinizing, even changing, aspects of themselves that they would prefer to leave untouched. Similarly, ethnographic research on the experiences of minority students may reveal that, from their point of view, many teachers are engaged in a con trick. Teachers tell students that they can use education to overcome their oppression, yet these students see friends a year or two ahead of them graduating to the welfare roll, the streets, burger flipping, and drug dealing. Teachers talk about the transformative power of education to move disenfranchised individuals and groups into positions of influence, but minority students notice that the tenured faculty includes mostly white males. In such circumstances, for faculty to receive anything other than hostility would be surprising.

Teachers are caught at points of political contradiction just as much as students, and theoretical literature can help them know this. Realizing these contradictions will, in and of itself, do nothing to ease or change them. However, the realization will prevent teachers from mistakenly blaming their personal inadequacies for situations that are politically created. This means that the emotional energy they would have spent on criticizing themselves for their supposed lack of animation, compassion, or creativity is channeled into working for change. The study of theoretical literature becomes a psychological and political survival necessity, through
which teachers come to understand the link between their private troubles and broader political processes.

Getting teachers to read educational theory and research is sometimes tough. Many of them have the perception that people who write books on teaching don't have a clue about the reality of classroom life. The following comment by one teacher is typical of this view: "Much research related to education had the cutting edge of a sponge; for a long time I questioned the honesty of much that I read about in some of the academic journals. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that their authors were anything but sincere and well intentioned. What I am trying to say is that their research did not speak the truth to me. These works seem more concerned with statistics than sensitivities; rats rather than brats; research rather than the researched" (Jones, 1990, p. 45). The tone of disconnected asceticism or intellectual braggadocio that some authors adopt can tar the whole canon of educational theory and research.

Part of the reason for teachers' skepticism about educational literature is that much of it is written by university professors of education to impress tenure committee members rather than to help teachers. The tone of this kind of writing is formal and academic, with an absence of the colloquial language teachers use in their everyday lives. There is none of the hesitation, stumbling, or backtracking that characterize how teachers think about problems of practice. With its concern for objectivity and its formal style, this kind of writing creates a distance between what working teachers see as their real problems and what appears to be the protected, pampered, reflective preserve of university academics. Never mind that this vision of university departments of education is seriously flawed. The fact remains that it is often hard to get teachers to take seriously any educational theory written by a professor of education (as most of it is). As one participant at a college faculty development institute I ran in Minnesota wrote about me on the day's evaluation sheet, "The last thing we need here is another university professor of education. Why don't we bring in a real teacher sometimes?"

Fortunately, however, a body of literature has emerged in recent years that is grounded in teachers' concerns and sympathetic to teachers' voices (Dollase, 1992; Miller, 1990; Gitlin and others, 1992; Branscombe, Goswami, and Schwartz, 1992; Henry,
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Some of this deals with personal narrative (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; McLaughlin and Tierney, 1994) and autobiographical stories (Witherell and Noddings, 1991; Nelson, 1994; Thomas, 1995; Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995). Research on teacher thinking (Day, Calderhead, and Denicolo, 1993; Carlgren, Handal, and Vaage, 1995) uses teachers’ own words and constructs to describe the personal theorizing that informs their decisions (Calderhead, 1984, 1987; Ross, Cornett, and McCutcheon, 1992; Bell, 1995). There have also been ethnographic studies of teachers’ lives (Goodson, 1992; Ducharne, 1993; Huberman, 1994) and case studies of teachers in practice (Bullough, 1989; Bullough, Knowles, and Crow, 1992; Berman and others, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Grossman, 1990). These case studies invariably include lengthy excerpts from interviews in which teachers describe their work in language that makes sense to them. Detailed transcriptions of conversations with teachers on how they become critically reflective also exist (Newman, 1990, 1991). The literature that seems to have the greatest effect on teachers, however, is that in which autobiographical stories of teachers’ struggles are the springboard for wider theoretical analysis (Horton and Freire, 1990; Shor, 1992b; Kohl, 1994).

What Critical Reflection Means for Our Teaching

Gaining new perspectives on our practice and questioning assumptions that we did not even realize we had are always emotional experiences. As Chapter Eleven makes clear, any critically reflective journey involves our negotiating feelings of impostorship, lost innocence, and cultural suicide along the way. Our practice as a whole becomes the object of systematic inquiry. We become more aware of issues of power and control in our classrooms. As students or colleagues point out to us unwittingly oppressive aspects of our actions, we start to think more deliberately about the creation of democratic classrooms. We pay greater attention to naming and confronting the dilemmas and contradictions we live through on a daily basis. We also become better at developing and communicating the rationale that underlies our teaching. In the following paragraphs, I want to explore in more detail the changes that accompany any effort to become critically reflective.
We Realize the Ideological Basis to Teaching

The critically reflective journey invariably produces a deepening appreciation of how all teaching is ideological. We start to realize that our actions, decisions, and choices all reflect ideological perspectives. It strikes us that even maintaining that we have no ideology is an ideological statement. We understand that anyone who declares an apolitical neutrality in teaching implicitly accepts the right of authorities such as curriculum councils, licensing agencies, and policy makers to prescribe what educational processes should look like and how learning should be defined and judged.

Critically reflective teachers know that curricula do not just happen. They exist because particular people in a particular place at a particular time believed that someone else should know about something. Curricula have not simply come into being through divine intervention or the whims of fate. Instead, they have arisen out of conflicts of interests in which the wishes of certain individuals and groups have prevailed. Somehow, somewhere, at some time, and for some reason, someone's preferences have held sway. What are these preferences and interests? Whom do they serve? How have they become dominant? These are the questions that any critically alert teacher raises habitually.

When we practice critically, we regard curricula as constructed and tentative, as framed by human agency and therefore capable of being dismantled and reframed by teachers and students. How curricula are constructed, what evaluative formats are used, how the learning day is divided into discrete units of time, who is allowed to occupy the role of teacher, how the legitimacy of that role is decided, what items appear on the monthly staff meeting agenda, who chooses which texts are to be taught—all these are seen as problematic. In other words, they are recognized as contested decisions whose outcomes reflect the interests and agendas of specific people in specific situations.

We Learn to Minimize Risk

Being critically reflective may well bring us into direct conflict with organizational priorities and hierarchies of power. As we start to question institutional definitions of appropriate teacher and stu-
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The threat that we are discussing, or as we suggest alternative, more democratic ways of constructing curricula, we are threatening a way of living and thinking that is comfortable for many of our colleagues. This threat might be feared because of its ideological nature. Or it might simply be that what we are proposing represents a shaking up of familiar routines.

Threat makes people angry, and they want to punish whomever they see as its cause. So, for the sake of survival, critically reflective teachers must learn how to prompt colleagues to question their taken-for-granted assumptions in a way that doesn’t imply that they’re enemies or idiots. Many of the approaches advocated in this text spring from the experience of making critical reflection as nonthreatening as possible. Although it can never be totally without risk, we can engage others in this process in ways that are invitational, even playful, rather than confrontational.

One of the most important tasks for critical teachers is to develop a measure of tactical astuteness and cunning when it comes to challenging commonly accepted assumptions and practices. The most effective activists are those who secure the social and organizational changes they wish to see while keeping damage to themselves to a minimum. An example of how teachers learn political skill can be seen in Shor’s notion of deviance credits (Shor and Freire, 1987). Deviance credits are the institutional brownie points that teachers accrue by taking on tasks (such as serving on the alumni or library committee) that earn them a reputation as organizational loyalists. When we have deviance credits, we can take an oppositional stand and still have our voice heard. Playing the role of agent provocateur in the absence of such credits means that after a while, our voice is dismissed by those who dislike our ideology. They can almost predict what we will say on any issue and so they discount our comments as the ravings of a discredited subordinate. But when we criticize accepted practices against a history of our having made significant organizational contributions and having displayed institutional loyalty, our voice has credibility.

Working democratically in organizations that are strongly hierarchical (even if they espouse collegiality) involves us in building alliances within and outside our institutions. Trying to effect structural change engages us in organizing collectively for reforms that would be impossible to achieve individually. In doing these things,
we are repairing what Mills (1953, 1954) described as the severed connection between private troubles and public issues—that is, between the individual difficulties and dilemmas of our teaching and broader social and political changes. Since our experiences as teachers are politically and organizationally sculpted, changing aspects of our individual practice often needs a collective effort. As activist teachers have pointed out (Shor, 1992b; Nemiroff, 1992; Kreisberg, 1992; Kincheloe, 1993), teachers who try to swim against the cultural and pedagogic tide that flows through institutions hostile to any questioning of the status quo had better be equipped with life preservers. Learning how to act with minimal risk serves as a kind of flotation device.

We See Ourselves as Being in Continual Formation

When we take critical reflection seriously, we also begin to think differently about professional development. It is in the nature of the reflective process for us always to be evolving. We never have the luxury of regarding ourselves as fully finished critical products who have reached the zenith of reflective evolution. We see our ideas and practices as needing constant investigation. In the aftermath of action, we try to find the opportunity to reflect back on the memories, experiences, and interpretations that caused us to make what felt like instinctual responses. When understood as a critically reflective process, good teaching becomes synonymous with a continuous and critical study of our reasoning processes and our pedagogic actions. We study their origins and their consequences. We also study the extent to which these processes and actions are embedded in investigated experience, as opposed to some external source of authority from which they have been uncritically assimilated. At no time do we ever consider the possibilities for learning and change to be fully closed.

Our Teaching Becomes a Connective Activity

Critical reflection is a matter of stance and dance. Our stance toward our practice is one of inquiry. We see it as being in constant formation and always needing further investigation. Our dance is the dance of experimentation and risk. As evolving teachers learn-
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ing about and modifying our practice, we move to fluctuating and
sometimes contrary rhythms. One rhythm is felt in our quest to
accomplish what we think is educationally important—for ex-
ample, helping students think critically, providing experience in
democratic process, encouraging independence, or inducting
people into a body of knowledge or way of thinking. A sometimes
contradictory tempo is created through our study of how students
experience the educational processes we have initiated. On the
one hand, we are fired by an articulated sense of why we are teach-
ers—a vision of the democratic values we stand for and a convic-
tion about why they are so important that we can explain to
ourselves, our colleagues, and our students. This critical rationale
gives direction, purpose, and meaning to our pedagogic actions
and lives. On the other hand, we realize that our practice is not
perfect. Despite our best intentions, we discover that students may
be humiliated or confused by actions of ours that we thought were
supportive or clarifying.

Sometimes our discoveries of how students are experiencing
learning lead us to drop habitual exercises or assignments because
they seem to be causing more problems than they are solving. At
other times, we learn that we need to find new ways of connecting
to students as people and learners. In the midst of a course, we
start to question why bodies of knowledge are organized the way
they are, why learning is sequenced the way it is, and why we assess
students the way we do. Doing this makes us aware of the cultural
and political determinants of what passes for “common sense”
about teaching. We reinvent our practice to take account of what
we have just found out so that the relevance of an activity is clear
to students. Creating connections between educational processes,
students’ experiences of learning, and what they feel are impor-
tant concerns in their lives becomes a guiding principle.

In striving to realize our vision of democratic education while
at the same time adjusting our actions to take account of how stu-
dents experience learning, we dance to the music of critical prag-
matism. We try to become critically responsive teachers, guided by
clearly articulated values but responding creatively to the needs
and concerns of students. As we dance to this fluctuating rhythm,
we try to stop ourselves stumbling and falling (though we always
do, at some points) by making sure that whatever we do is well
grounded in an accurate understanding of students' experiences. We research these experiences by encouraging learners to write (in journals, critical incident responses, life histories, or brief evaluations) and speak (at times during classes set aside explicitly for this purpose, during advisement hours, and informally in coffee bars and college hallways) about the emotional highs and lows of learning. We try to find out about students' moments of connection and disengagement and about actions we take as teachers that affirm or puzzle them.

In exploring these connections, we conduct what Marton (1988) calls a "phenomenography of learning." We try to get as close to students' experiences as we can so that we understand how they feel their way, cognitively and emotionally, through a learning effort. Conducting a phenomenography of learning helps us build a case for the educational processes we advocate in a way that is connecting and convincing.

We Try to Create Classrooms That Are More Democratic

A commitment to critically reflective teaching marshals our efforts in a moral and political project that is always complex and unfinished. This project—which might handily be described as "learning democracy"—is one that takes several different yet complementary forms. As we think about why we teach at all, and about why we teach in the particular way that we do, we try to ground our practice in core democratic values such as justice, fairness, and compassion. In a deliberate and sustained way, we extrapolate from these values some guidelines for how we treat students and how we organize classrooms. We attempt to make teaching and learning mirror democratic processes while recognizing the philosophical contradictions and practical tangles inherent in the democratic ideal.

As critical educators such as Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) have pointed out, teaching democratically does not mean that we cease to speak authoritatively or that we pretend to be exactly the same as our students. Teaching democratically is not to be confused with creating a laissez-faire atmosphere of intellectual relativism, where anything goes. Neither does it mean an abdication of a teacher's responsibility to judge the merits of what students do. What it does mean is that we make an effort to create
conditions under which all voices can speak and be heard (including our own), and in which educational processes are seen to be open to genuine negotiation.

We Discover Our Voice

In becoming critically reflective, we also learn to speak about our practice in a way that is authentic and consistent. Speaking authentically means that we are alert to the voices inside us that are not our own, the voices that have been deliberately implanted by outside interests rather than springing from our own experiences. Deciding which voices we should listen to is difficult. As one teacher puts it, "Through searching for my own questions and listening to my own responses, I had struggled, not for the approval of an external voice of authority, but for that of the inner voice, the one to which I could listen not just for a few months, but for a lifetime" (Oberg and Underwood, 1992, p. 169).

Part of the reflective process involves recognizing what Mezirow (1991) calls "premise distortions." These are the deeply embedded internal injunctions that define the boundaries of what we allow ourselves to think. They are self-censorship devices—nagging voices of denial that set out acceptable interpretations of classroom events and that remind us constantly of what practices are off-limits. As we become more critically reflective, these voices of prescription start to sound jarring and dissonant. They are heard as false envoys whose messages are refuted by experience.

Concurrent with recognizing false voices is the hearing of other voices that speak in alternative ways. Sometimes it takes a strong external voice—one spoken by someone in a position of ascribed authority—to get us to take our own inner voices seriously. One of the nicest things that happens to me in my own professional life is when someone comes up at a conference and thanks me for putting into words something they have been struggling to say. Or they thank me for affirming the accuracy of things they have been afraid to admit to others. As someone who winces through formal speech introductions that tell the audience how knowledgeable and experienced I am, I comfort myself with the thought that I can sometimes use my position of ascribed authority to jar teachers (in an affirming way) into taking
seriously those inchoate inner voices that are struggling to find expression. It is essential that those of us who see ourselves as teacher developers speak publicly about our own struggles, and that we model the quest for insight, critical clarity, and openness to alternatives that we seek to encourage in others.

For teachers, the discovery, honoring, and expression of an authentic voice are genuinely transformative processes. As a counterhegemonic moment—one in which we reject the commonsense explanations and injunctions that tell us, “This is the way it is and has to be”—the moment of finding our voice leads us to withdraw our consent to our own servitude. What we heard formerly as objective truth (for example, that by finding the right combination of objectives, resources, and evaluative measures, we can package a curriculum that will meet all students’ needs, connect to differing ability levels, and abolish racism) now rings hollow. We find that we are speaking out against images of teaching as a standardized production process. We are no longer able to stay silent as professional development opportunities are planned that view us as passive subjects to be acted on by outside experts who decide what is in our best interests. We are more ready to doubt and challenge master plans, reform packages, and policy changes that use language and metaphors implying that teachers are bloodless, interchangeable units in the grand scheme of things. Finding our voice often means that we question the evaluative criteria that determine our professional advancement and restrict our opportunities to practice in ways we find humane and congenial.

When we speak in a voice that is authentic to us, our experience and our practice cohere in a way that feels pleasingly consistent. As one teacher said when she found her voice, "I just didn't care anymore if they thought I was good, or not. I just knew that, finally, I had something to say!" (Miller, 1990, p. 127). Feeling the power of one's voice is fundamentally connected with developing one's sense of agency. This is why talking about teaching is so important. As Richert (1992) observes:

As teachers talk about their work and "name" their experiences, they learn about what they know and what they believe. They also learn what they do not know. Such knowledge empowers the individual by providing a source for action that is generated from
Within rather than imposed from without. . . . Teachers who know in this way can act with intent; they are empowered to draw from the center of their own knowing and act as critics and creators of their world rather than solely respondents to it, or worse, victims of it. Agency, as it is described in this model, casts voice as the connection between reflection and action. Power is thus linked with agency or intentionality. People who are empowered—teachers in this case—are those who are able to act in accordance with what they know and believe [p. 197].

How is voice discovered? I believe that the discovery of one’s authentic voice is at the heart of the critically reflective process. When we reflect on what we do and think, we start to become aware of how assumptions that do not spring from our experience nonetheless shape how we work. We realize that the words we use to describe our practice are not always of our own making. Sometimes the organizing concepts we use to justify our practice (for example, outcome-based education, andragogy, or dialogic teaching) are recognized as the property of administrators, theorists, or academic researchers. A critically reflective teacher will know when the introduction of a new term (empowerment is currently fashionable) is really a leap forward and when it is a rhetorical sleight of hand hiding old exclusionary and manipulative habits.

The realization of the power of one’s own authentic voice is a beautiful thing to experience. Speaking in our own voice imbues us with a sense of controlled rightness that is both moral and artistic: we hear our voice saying, “What I’m doing right now is creative and spontaneous, yet grounded in my examined experiences. I know it’s good for me and for my students. What’s more, I know why it’s good and if need be I can tell you why.” This sense of pedagogic rectitude means that we grant new value and dignity to our work because now we know what it’s worth. We decide that we are not second-class citizens stumbling uncertainly around in the dark and therefore willing to accept low status, poor pay, and dirty work environments.

Invigorated with this sense of the value of our work, we are impelled to act to change our classrooms, our institutions, and ourselves for what we see as the better. Glorious and revelatory moments of rightness hardly constitute the total flow of our daily
experiences as teachers, but when they happen, they are treasured as high points and remembered fondly as a justification for why we began teaching in the first place. In a way, this book is trying to find ways of helping you—and me—make those moments a more frequent part of our daily experience.