Making Sense of an Uncertain Craft:

A teacher’s road map through uncharted terrain.

By

Carrie
Abstract

This action research (AR) project is a study on the self as the author of both perception and reality in the classroom. It explores the quest of a novice teacher to gain control of the classroom—or at least to better discern the nature of control and its role in the classroom—while coming to grips with her own sense of this self who teaches. Through ongoing, critical reflection, observation and analysis, I will document the changes of self, ideology and practice that transpire along the way. In reflecting on moments of disequilibrium through reframing and deconstruction, the person of “teacher” will be defined and redefined as evolving perspectives wax or wane, become bold or grow silent with each new experience.

As I document the perceptual and practical transitions that occur, I aim to offer a bit of insight and encouragement to teacher and student alike as we cooperatively move down our respective educational paths in search of effective and meaningful teaching and learning opportunities.
Introduction

“All study of human thought must begin by positing an individual who is attempting to make sense out of the world.”
Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind*

The car shuddered and lurched as she edged onto the highway as the sun began to peek above the horizon, illuminating the sky to the east and the yellow lines ahead. A new day awaited, a day that marked the start of a teaching journey. She took a deep breath, accelerated, popped the car into fifth gear and paused momentarily to reflect on the golden events of the past, and the uncertain events that loomed in the near future.

She’d trekked over, around, up and down mountainous and forest trails, identifying creatures great and small, green and otherwise with young, as avid learners clamored at her heels. After three years of teaching in the outdoors, she felt prepared for what was ahead on this journey, but wondered exactly what she could expect from this new environment.

She drove down the road scanning the terrain, taking in the fields of evergreen and the parallel lines of agriculture, the wiry vineyards ripe for harvest, and the rolling hills in the distance. The farther west she traveled, the greater the distance became between houses and the greater her anxiety within. She would soon be teaching her passion—science—to middle school students at a small, rural school located deep in the heart of wine country.

Because she’d done her research, she knew (in the vague, stereotypical sense) what environment she would be entering. The school served a modest population of 250 students,
with 90% receiving free and reduced lunches, while the small staff consisted of nearly two
dozen teachers, two educational assistants, one librarian, two secretaries and a principal.

Rather than teaching life science under a canopy of Douglas fir, she would soon find
herself teaching within the confines of board and brick and coming to embrace a new set of
challenges. Questions ebbed and flowed as she pulled into the parking lot and walked into
the room where she would spend the next six months of her life. She glanced from ceiling to
floor and imagined the opportunities that could rise out of this physical space.

The classroom was well-lit with natural daylight streaming in through eight, large
paned windows. (Nice sun exposure and good for the brain.) It sported eight tables grouped
in a “U” formation facing the overhead and whiteboard in the front of the room. (Teacher-
directed, but potential for collaborative groups.) A row of computers ran along one side of
the room and a host of microscopes, fossils, rocks, nets, chemicals, scales, and animal
skeletons occupied the closet spaces along the wall. (Cool equipment that'll be great for
hands-on learning.)

Upon meeting her certified teacher (CT), she learned that the curriculum closely
followed the textbook with routine laboratory procedures included every few days for
variety. As part of the school’s block system, each seventy-minute class comprised a five-
period block schedule with a thirty-minute lunch falling in the middle of third period. She
would be teaching both seventh and eighth grade general science, which ranged in topic
from the study of life to the physical and chemical processes that govern the universe.

After speaking to her CT in greater depth, she stiffened as she learned of the school-
wide discipline protocol that began with referrals (issued after truancy and misconduct) and
ended with suspension. But she eased up a bit when she learned that the school also put its
energy into promoting an incentive program with character trait assemblies held each month to honor deserving students.

On her drive home that night, she smiled as she considered what she would bring to the teaching endeavor. Surely, passion and enthusiasm marked one of her greatest assets in teaching. Her ability to captivate an audience and facilitate a process whereby meaning could be constructed by the learners would certainly help her through the tough moments. Her heart for integrating authenticity and relationship, coupled with the lessons she’d learned in outdoor education would also serve her well. And yes, there was always humility to fall back on.

She imagined the role she would take in cultivating rich learning experiences that called students to wonder, ask, spy, ponder, and praise the wonders of the natural world while collectively gaining perspective and growth in community. This was the dream. This was the ideal. But the reality came quicker than she anticipated.

It was not soon after she began teaching in this new context that her idealistic assumptions ran smack into the face of reality and fell to the floor with a humble thud. She found herself transported to the tenuous place of disequilibrium where cognitive dissonance revealed a clash in her assumptions of the person she thought herself to be and the work that she thought she would be doing. Her assumptions of good teaching no longer proved effective in this new context, and she was challenged to continually reconsider. And so began her deliberate act of observing, reflecting, reframing and acting on her observations and assumptions as they continually shifted and evolved in response to her teaching experiences.
This is a self-study detailing my journey of learning to read my craft. It hits at the very core of the trade and attempts to figuratively “step outside the room and search for perspective on the events inside” (Miller, 1990). In framing this search for perspective, I used my leads of observations, hunches, assumptions, struggles, and qualms to sift through the trials and epiphanies in search of the emergence of craft and teacher along the way.

Upon starting the program ten months ago, I pledged my allegiance to numerous truths that I felt embodied the essence of good teaching. However, throughout my action research self-study, I was met with considerable resistance to these truths and challenged daily to reconsider and restructure my assumptions in light of new knowledge in the effort to reconstruct a clearer portrait of reality. As such, I took into consideration and continually reflected upon where I was, where I wanted to go, and how I might get there. Through goal setting, weekly reflection, and routine feedback from trusted advisers, I charted my course and documented my evolving thoughts along this journey of honing my practice.

In framing this study, I also sought the wisdom of a host of teachers, writers and thinkers in creating a framework on which to support my data collection and analysis. I used ideas drawn from the literature to compare my raw data to that compiled in research, focusing on active reflection and reflective dialogue in the teaching profession. From this knowledge base, I established a protocol by which to critically reflect on and document my evolving practice and perception through daily self-reflections, weekly videotapes, and student work. Through routine data triangulation and analysis, I then deconstructed my experiences in light of new knowledge gained through experience in attempt to create a new scaffold on which to base future teaching and learning endeavors.
What I’ve Learned from Distant Colleagues

Disequilibrium. A quirk in the plans. A twist in the road. It’s where we want our kids to be because it’s where real learning occurs, but perhaps, it’s not always where teachers like to find ourselves. And yet, when faced with a troublesome event or problem that doesn’t make sense and cannot be immediately resolved, we have a few courses of action we can take. We can choose to define the disturbance within the “collective code” and attribute its presence to salient humans or systems, while writing it off with: “This is just the way we do things at our school.” Or we can call on our personal faculties of observation, reflection and action and begin the process of critically deconstructing our practice. This literature review examines the latter approach as I track through uncharted terrain in search of steady ground, all the while voyaging deeper into the gray paradoxical abyss of the teaching moment.

In preparation for this journey, I sought the companionship of perspectives and practices embraced by teachers of all walks of life. I read great books that illustrate the non-linear progression of the stages in self-development and considered the roles that self plays in creating and shaping the practice of pre-service teachers, using these ideas to frame my own conclusions about personal and professional development.

I pored through the literature in search of perspective on the anomalies I found in the classroom with the hope of establishing a knowledge base in which to integrate practical, management protocol into my classroom. My hope was that I would find fellowship between the lines and use the following literature themes to further craft my role as teacher and learner in the classroom.

Ongoing, Intentional Reflection
Webster’s unabridged defines reflect as “to think seriously; contemplate; ponder.” However the cycle of reflective analysis demonstrated in the teaching practice extends far beyond this meaning and effectively takes us to depths and perspective uncharted by objective research or technical observation. Stated plainly, reflection—active, thoughtful self-reflection—comes down to knowing the “I” who teaches, such that we can know the “Thou” that learns. (Palmer, 1998, p. 25). Though rational, problem-solving processes may be involved in the act of reflecting, surely it is not all-encompassed by a series of rational steps or procedures to be followed.

Rather, as Greene (1986) suggests, reflection “involves intuition, emotion, and passion and is not something that can be neatly packaged as a set of techniques for teachers to use” (Greene as cited in Listen, p. 9). The study of Rosko, Vukelichh and Risko (1987) add to this thought when they describe reflection as a phenomenal event, linking theory to action, that allows us to “move beyond teaching as a field of technical expertise and to socially construct acts of making decisions and taking responsibility” (Brinthaupt, 1999, p. 156).

The literature is quick to point out that mere reflection will not necessarily transform our craft, in much the same way that drawing up a house plan will not turn us into homeowners. Rather it is the active reflection—reflection that breeds knowledge and knowledge that breeds action—that draws us to utilize our epiphanies discovered in our moments of reflection to bring about the honing and shaping of our craft. I like to think of it in Dewey’s (1996) terms when he writes that reflection, coupled with knowledge-in-action, “emancipates us from merely impulsive and routine activity…enables us to direct our actions with foresight and to plan according to ends, in view of purposes of which we are aware. It
enables us to know what we are about when we act’ (as cited in Liston, p. 11). But this art of knowing what we are about is not always easy business.

In her book *What It Takes to Be a Teacher*, Penny Freppon (2001) writes, “Reflection is not reflection unless it is linked to teaching action. Reflection involves conflicting thoughts and questions. It is hard work and it can be painful…Acting professionally on reflection requires true grit” (p. 35). I found this to be true in my own study.

Perhaps the hardest part arrived at the moment of decision when, confronted with new insight on a dilemma, I faced the choice of continuing in familiarity or stepping out in courage to try a new approach. This crucial point of decision-making whereby we must choose to either stay the course or try an uncharted path of uncertain terrain allows us to see what we’re truly made of—those inner faculties that we turn to in moments of conflict. And what qualities, according to the father of modern education, might we possess if we are to be teachers guided by active reflection?

According to John Dewey (1933, as cited by Liston, 1996), the three preconditions or virtues essential to reflective teaching include open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-minded individuals lend a sympathetic ear when listening to opposing points of view and recognize that their views—just like those of others—have shortcomings. As a result, an open-minded person listens to and accepts the strengths and weaknesses of his or her own and others’ perspectives.

The second precondition of responsibility causes teachers to ask themselves why they are doing what they are doing in a way that goes beyond the meeting of objectives. This attitude of responsibility involves thinking over the consequences of teaching on three levels—how my teaching affects students’ self-concepts, how my teaching affects students’
intellectual development, and how my teaching affects the lives of diverse populations of students (Listen, 1996).

The third attitude often expressed in reflective educators involves the work of harboring the sincere attitude of wholeheartedness in subscribing to the notion that each day offers something new to learn...about yourself, your students and your practice.

Now what exactly does reflective dialogue look like? What shape does it take? Some might consider it to fulfill the role of Cassius in becoming a looking-glass of sorts, as suggested in this excerpt from *Julius Caesar*.

Cassius: Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?

Brutus: No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself, But by reflection, by some other things.

Cassius: 'Tis just. And it is very much lamented, Brutus, That you have no such mirrors as will turn Your hidden worthiness into your eye That you might see your shadow. Therefore, good Brutus, be prepar’d to hear; And since you know you cannot see yourself So well as by reflection, I, your glass, Will modestly discover to yourself That of yourself which you yet know not of.

—William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II.ii (Brinthauptt, 96)

According to the literature, one prominent way to study the self is to “study the changing narratives which people use to tell about who and what they have been and become” (Freeman as cited in Brinthaupt p. 4, 1999). That is, we reflect through the telling of our stories in an effort to gain not only a sense of the “what” but the “who, how and why” behind the events of the day. Story serves to illustrate observations, history and perspective, offering a glimpse into the eyes that lived the moment and the voice that re-lives it.
In reading our stories, we are called to “reach into the past, gathering up experiential threads meaningfully connected to the present” and reconstruct our sense of reality based on what we discover (Liston, 1996). In following this logic, I used reflective journaling and story-telling as the primary methods for both gathering and sharing observational data through the study.

Active Reflection and Decision-Making

During a typical day in the classroom, the teacher is faced with a slew of decisions, some of which must be made on the fly, while others offer time for meditation. The process of reaching decisions is no easy task and requires thoughtful, honest introspection coupled with the courage to act. When planning and executing my active reflection (AR) project, I found the words of Henderson to be quite appropriate in providing a framework in which to guide my own problem-solving discourses.

Henderson (1996) looks at the dynamic interplay between subject, observer and teacher when he examines the cyclical approach by which knowledge breeds action. In his book, Reflective Teaching, the author considers the self-empowerment that arises when teachers embark on a four-tiered decision-making cycle. The cycle has four phases: 1) a fluid, open-ended, experimental type of planning, 2) teaching-learning enactments that flow from this planning, 3) sensitive participant observations of the consequences of these enactments, and 4) pragmatic reconsideration of knowledge in light of these consequences (p. 12). In layman’s terms, this cycle involves planning, doing, reflecting and rebuilding.

In the following subsections, I examine the prevailing themes that show up in the literature when we consider the convergence of active reflection and decision-making.
Dissonance—points of contention

Dissonance, or the feeling of tension we experience when our assumptions don’t align with reality, is not always a pleasant state in which to dwell. However, it provides an essential means by which to reframe our questions, re-align our assumptions and gain new found perspectives in our practice.

“Points of dissonance are pinpricks in our consciousness; they sometimes sting at inopportune moments when we are most concerned with maintaining a smooth and unruffled countenance. We become adept at brushing away the annoyance, shooing discrepancy from our line of vision, as we wave away a fly that has hovered too close to the edges of our personal space. Only when the buzzing becomes too persistent, when the sting finally penetrates beneath surface awareness, we are forced to directly confront the sources of dissonance that disrupt our equilibrium, our sense of balance in the world” (Miller, 1990, p. 123).

Paradox

A recurring theme encountered in the literature and in my self-study is one of paradox. Freppon (2001) speaks to this reality when she writes, “Rather than seeking answers, effective teachers seek to understand the paradoxes of teaching and the mindset of living well in the imperfect world of human learning” (p. 156). I am challenged by Freppon’s thoughts to challenge my own paradigms and shift my focus (in a most counter-cultural display) away from hoarding absolutes to fellowshipping within the precarious, dynamic
tensions of the unanswerable. In so doing, Freppon suggests we will find ourselves more alive in the teaching moment and drawn ever closer to our own humanity.

Joseph McDonald (1992) speaks of the emergence of paradox as he learns to read his craft when he paraphrases Dewey’s thought with, “No matter how smart or skillful performed practitioners are, their ‘judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious possibility’” (McDonald, p. 6). A humbling thought, to be sure, but indisputable when you consider the reality that you stand before 26 unique personalities whose emerging selves ebb and flow in a dynamic interplay between external stimuli, internal conflicts and the fly on the wall.

**Inquiry**

Critically reflecting on one’s teaching brings us not to an end, but to a place where clarity, confusion and more questions emerge. I really appreciate the words of McDonald (1992), a veteran teacher, who speaks of the balancing act of pushing, pulling and refraining in which teachers find themselves daily. As such, he considers the crux of teaching to be in the formulation of questions rather than answers sought. I love his honest portrayal of the uncertainties embedded in the profession and the continual waxing and waning of questions that emerge with every statement. Because he offers great perspective on the dynamic tensions of paradox and inquiry, I’ve included one passage taken from his book, *Making Sense of an Uncertain Craft*. In coming to the essence of reading teaching, McDonald writes:

Real teaching, I learned in time, happens inside a wild triangle of relations—among teacher, students, subject—and the points of this triangle shift continuously. What shall I teach amid all that I might teach? How can I grasp it myself so that my grasping may enable theirs? What are they thinking and feeling—toward me, toward each other, toward the thing I am
trying to teach? How near should I come, how far off should I stay? How much clutch, how much gas? Inside the triangle, clear evidence is very rare. Snarls and smiles mix disconcertingly. Right answers fade to wrong, and vice versa: a matter of interpretation, of how one construes a gesture or an attitude, of whether one thinks the moment demands more criticism or more encouragement, of how much energy one has to believe in teaching’s effectiveness. Yet out of the uncertainty, craft emerges (1992, p. 12).

My frustrations and joys are amicably clothed in the above diction as I read the above words and find myself re-living my own struggles in becoming and knowing. I, too, find myself continually plagued by the unknowns, the changing variables, the shifting sands, while desperately clinging to a semblance of clarity and order and reason in it all. I find not only solace, but also hope, in McDonald’s words that suggest to me that nestling in the tenuous balance on the fulcrum of uncertainty, rather than absolutes, is the point at which real teaching emerges. I aim to convey this tension and style in my own study.

**Pragmatic Intelligence and Power**

One concept I ran across in the literature that closely mirrored my response to disequilibrium involves the development of pragmatic intelligence. Dewey’s analysis of pragmatic intelligence is summarized by Grimmett (1988) as:

…beginning with a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity and mental difficulty. This uncomfortable state of disequilibrium leads us toward resolving the problem in a way that we know has worked in the past. However, we act tentatively because we do not know if our inference will lead to a productive solution. Because we act tentatively, we are willing to engage in further inquiry and as necessary, reconstruct our knowledge until we arrive at a conclusion that we believe is “trustworthy” (Dewey, 1910/1933, p. 47).

Schon (1983, 1987) considers pragmatic intelligence to be the honest work of reflective practitioners in that it “allows us to sketch the outline of our craft identity as we take a wrestle with observable uncertainty. We cannot know if our tentative efforts will be successful until we act, but it is difficult to act without knowing exactly what to do” (as cited
In facing this tentative case, we are to remain fluid and flexible by offering to release our once-held assumptions and the power invested therein and allowing new perspectives to shift our thinking yet again, molding us into reflective practitioners, truly empowered.

**The Framework of Self in Teacher Development**

A critical facet in deconstructing the pre-service teacher’s practice lies in understanding the development of the teacher self. Knowledge of ourselves not only strengthens our personal integrity as a teacher, but also serves as a model to our students. According to Bettie Youngs (1983), “The teacher’s understanding and acceptance of him or herself is the most important requirement in any effort he or she makes to help students to know themselves and to gain healthy attitudes of self-acceptance” (p. 18).

While encouraging teachers to come to know the self as it is discovered in the teaching moment, Henderson (1996) writes, “New teachers must be encouraged to develop an identity that does not simply ‘fit in,’ but rather is based upon experimentation and characterized by pedagogical practices and responsive perspectives that place student learning and welfare at the forefront of concerns” (Schempke as cited in Martin-Kniep, p. 158). Considering this trial and error understanding, I fashioned this self-study with the intent of documenting both the practical and the perceptual changes that occurred.

**Active Reflection and Self**

In light of the circuitous nature of self-development through this study, I found it fascinating to consider the theoretical framework in the evolution of self as presented by Liston, 1996).
social psychologist G.H. Mead as discussed in 1934. Based on the idea that the “self” is a social product formed through the processes of internalizing and organizing psychological experiences, the beginning teacher may be viewed as the “developing self,” who gradually forms a concept of one’s professional self through interaction with significant others. Through relationship with salient others such as cooperating teacher, supervisor, and students, the concept of “self” is acquired, crafted and shaped based on the nature of the student teacher’s experience.

Gary Borich (1995) suggests that a teacher’s self undergoes a process of internalization and identity-construction as the teacher transitions to the world of teaching through the first stage of survival. During this stage, the teacher’s concerns for his or her own well-being are primary to the teaching task such that the value of self is measured by the success/performance of the students. Common concerns during this stage include, *Will my students listen to me? Will they like me? Do I look all right? Will I do well when I am observed?*

It is usually during the survival stage when the teacher tends to view the students as an extension of herself and proof of her adequacy as a teacher. In my own research, I make reference to this stage of development when I combat fault-finding blame and correlate my ability as an engaging teacher with the occurrence of displaced behavior in the students.

The second stage of identity development, known as the task stage, finds the teacher focused on lesson delivery with a heightened emphasis on managing daily routines and behavioral problems. The primary focus now is on the improvement of teaching skills and mastery of content. Questions like, *How good are my instructional materials? Will I have enough time to cover all the content? How can I add variety to my lessons? What's the best way to teach my subject?* surface during this stage. This stage leads into the final phase of teacher development that
involves the mastery or impact stage where a heightened concern is placed on learner achievement through creating a safe and productive learning environment.

Research suggests that all teachers progress through these stages to some extent as they move through their teaching career, but that the time spent at each stage is dependent on the teacher and the context. For example, some teachers might return to an earlier stage of development as a result of suddenly having to teach a new grade and/or in a new school. In addition, the three stages need not be exclusive of one another as a teacher may have concerns in one area and still have concerns of lesser intensity in one or both of the other stages (Brinthaupt, 1999).

**Management**

Because a significant part of my research project tested and tried management styles as I sought the nature of control in the classroom, I have included an examination of some key management tenets that I considered through the course of this study.

“We will either give control on our terms, or the kids will take it on theirs” (Faye, 12). Management poses a serious consideration that substantially shapes the teaching and learning environment of the classroom. As suggested by Wong (1998), “Success or failure in the beginning years, bluntly put, resides in the teachers’ control over students; the greater the level of control, the greater the level of success one can expect in the classroom” (Wong, p. 149). If you’ve perused any book on classroom management, you’ve undoubtedly run into something to the effect of the prior statement, followed by the familiar list of how-to’s. After all, as busy teachers with every minute and second accounted for during our workday, we don’t have time to sift through a book that offers only ambivalent suggestions. We want
cold, hard facts on management, and there’s no quicker way to get the information across to the reader than with the almighty checklist. To read up on the latest strategies to employ in my AR project, I went to the experts—Jim Fay (Love and Logic) and best-selling teachers/writers extraordinaire, Harry and Rosemary Wong.

*The First Days of School*

Wongs speak at length about the teacher’s responsibility to create a task-oriented classroom environment through proactive management. They distinguish between the effective and ineffective teacher by the proactive versus reactive response to conflict. The former manages the classroom while the latter disciplines.

The establishment and rehearsal of procedures play a pivotal role in the success of the classroom inhabitants. In creating a safe and predictable learning environment, the teacher makes solid preparations to establish clear expectations and procedures that serve as foundational to classroom management. These procedures, ranging from transitions to behavioral expectations to lining up, are then rehearsed until they have been successfully learned.

My eyes dance over the pages as I open several books and see clear, well-constructed charts that I can summarize thusly:

**Four characteristics of a well-managed classroom**

1. Students are deeply involved with their work
2. Students know what is expected of them and are generally successful
3. There is relatively little time wasted, confusion or disruption
4. The climate of the classroom is work-oriented, but relaxed and pleasant
The point is that to be effective, I must be prepared, proactive, organized, and stay one step ahead of the kids so as to curb potential discipline situations from happening in the first place.

**Love and Logic**

In reading the principles behind the Love and Logic approach to management and discipline, I’m apt to say that its tenets fall in sync with my personal philosophy of discipline, which I feel should be a building-up—rather than tearing-down—process. Built on the foundation of relational trust and consistency, Love and Logic asserts that almost all misbehavior can elicit a positive response from the teacher, while stressing that the relationship between student and teacher remains intact. This may be accomplished by sending a positive relationship message to the child whenever a negative message (aka behavioral observation) is sent. In this way, the worth and dignity of each child is preserved while boundaries and limits are set. Through techniques like enforceable “I” statements, shared control and the use of thinking words, students are empowered to make choices within limits and in so doing feel more in control of their behavior.

Love and Logic tenets call for a sort of paradigm shift in our approach to discipline, offering kids an internalized control versus external enforcement. “Rather than viewing discipline as something we do to kids, it sees discipline as something we do with kids, allowing them internalized control over the situation” (Fay, 1995, p. 35). And it is when we feel we have some sort of control over a situation that we are better able and more willing to function.
Integrating the perceptual and practical interpretations of the above literature themes into the foundation of my study, I embark on this journey, remembering the words of Joe McDonald (1992), who writes to the collective audience of teacher researchers and reflective educators in proposing that we “reflect on our practice, converse with our peers, look critically at the circumstances of our work, and finally, attend to the voices of experience” in making sense of this uncertain craft (p. 122). And so it begins…
Clarifying My Action Research Project

This action research self-study explores the evolution of the teacher self by examining the ways in which perception and practice emerge throughout a seven-month timeframe. It is a comparative analysis that explores the relationship between a teacher’s foundational assumptions and her practice as it considers the question, “What role does self-development and identity construction play in the emerging practice of the pre-service teacher?”

To explore this question, I collected data over a ten-month period to include thirty daily self-reflections, twelve lesson observations obtained from cooperating and supervising teachers, five VHS videotapes documenting actual lesson delivery, and twelve examples of seventh and eighth grade student work.

The data was assembled and categorized into four areas: discipline, management, lesson plans, and perception, and then were tabulated in chronological sequence. After categorization, the data was triangulated with artifacts to include student work, third-person observation and first-person reflection. Then the results were compiled to complete a data set. After compiling nine completed data sets, the prevailing themes in each set were deconstructed, reframed and tweaked, based on knowledge gained from later sets.

In addition to tracking the practical development, the perceptual transitions are monitored through analysis of daily self-reflections that document the perceptual changes and paradigm shifts through a narrative format. These self-reflections, taking place from November 2003 through March 2004, offer insight into the dynamic interplay of identity construction and the evolution of the teaching amidst the constraints and challenges of the pre-service teaching context.
Roadmap of My Action Research Project

The primary methods for data-collection used in this self-study include the analysis of data sets comprised of artifacts, observations and reflections collected and compiled throughout the course of my student-teaching experience. Housed within each data set, I gathered a copy of the lesson plan, observational data drawn from either videotape or actual observation, a self-reflection detailing my thoughts on the lesson, and student work collected after the lesson. Using observations collected from my CT and supervising teachers, I thoughtfully and consistently reviewed and interpreted the data using the triangulation method of data analysis. From this point, I went about the task of deconstructing the data and reframing the experience in light of new insight gained by careful reflection on the new sources of data. From here, the data set was synthesized into a written narrative highlighting the main themes that emerged.

Journals

Undoubtedly, my daily self-reflections provided rich insight into furthering my understanding of the truths of good teaching as noted in my evolving practice. (Note: The journal entries also provided therapeutic release after a tense day!) On a daily and weekly basis from December through March, I documented general thoughts and reflections on each lesson in the creation of self-reflections that discuss the dynamic conflicts of the craft, including topics such as management mishaps, philosophical quandaries, didactic dilemmas, lesson plan lulls, communication conundrums, organization struggles, and discipline dogma. Essentially, my journal entries allowed me to clothe my practical experience with sentiment,
thus offering a subjective lens by which to gauge and document the intangible, immeasurable part of teaching as manifested in the changing perceptions and attitudes therein.

Observations

To document my evolution as a teacher and chart my preparation and progression toward resolving disequilibrium in the classroom, I relied heavily on the verbal and written feedback given by my cooperating and supervising teachers. As such, I was observed once every two weeks by either my CT or my supervisor with a brief meeting after the lesson when we shared notes and came to some conclusions as we cooperatively analyzed the lesson in search of the good and the not so good. In tackling the challenges that presented themselves in the lesson, we devised a plan and set goals for working on this problem in future lessons.

After each observation, I pooled the comments and suggestions from my advisers with my daily reflection on the lesson and interpreted the data, while looking for common themes and suggestions that stood out. Taking this input into consideration, I then went about the task of planning my next lesson in light of this new data. An example of a sample observation made by my master teacher is in Appendix A.

Video Lessons

As a means of honing my teaching and reflection skills further, I set up a videotaping schedule whereby I taped one forty-minute seventh-grade lesson each week. After the lesson, I played through the whole tape once, paying close attention to anything that stood out upon first viewing. Then I watched the tape again, this time, taking notes on what I said and did, and the students’ response. After note-taking and note-making, I categorized my observations into three specific areas to include: lesson plan delivery, management style,
discipline tendencies. Once the notes were categorized, I began the task of journaling and writing down my internal observations of the lesson—what I was thinking as I taught the lesson and how this thinking influenced my teaching, etc. There is a sample note-taking/note-making table in Appendix B.

Artifacts

As a third source to consider in this study, I examined artifacts of the student work produced from the lesson. Because I had not the time or the wherewithal to examine every child’s work, I randomly selected five students from my third period class and analyzed their productivity in relation to my observations. With student artifacts, video observations, and journal entries, I completed my data set by synthesizing the main points extracted from the triangulation of the data and planned for my next lesson in light of these synthesis observations. A sample synthesis statement and notes on student work are provided in Appendices C and D respectively.

Alterations and Limitations in Design

One alteration to the research design included my intentional seeking of another perspective with which to observe and constructively critique my video lessons. My aunt, a seasoned teacher with more than fifteen years of experience, was kind enough to provide feedback on my video lessons and employed a “Teacher says/Student does” note-taking procedure. This method proved useful as it closely paralleled the nature of observations made by my CT and supervising teacher.
A limitation in my research design fell under what I considered to be the accountability arena. Upon deconstructing the data and experiencing an epiphany of sorts, there was no real assurance that I would necessarily alter my lessons in response to this behavior. On several counts I tried the intervention but when it didn’t work as I’d expected, I too often “overlooked” that particular tendency and moved on and tended to others—that is, I learned right away that it’s much easier to recognize the truth of something than to actually integrate the truth into one’s daily teaching life. And so there were some counts when my new understanding of the situation produced no real tangible response in my behavior, and I continued in the “offense” day after day. Perhaps had I orchestrated a plan to hold myself accountable to acting on new perspectives (especially as they related to management!) I would have experienced less frustration/greater success in particular areas.
The Story of My Action Research Project

Before beginning the perilous endeavor of writing this section for this study, I looked long and hard at my data sets and synthesis statements in an effort to structure my narrative around the key events and revelations occurring over the last ten months. After careful tracking of both the perceptual and practical transformations in my journey of becoming, I’ve compiled a running dialogue that highlights the main discoveries in areas of personal and professional development.

Each bold-faced caption represents a snapshot of a particular stage I encountered in my journey and offers a glimpse into the specific struggles, paradigms and epiphanies with which I wrestled during this time frame. Although the narrative depicts these changes in chronological sequence, it should be noted that some stages did not follow this linear fashion and occurred rather simultaneously with others. In offering another perspective on the matter at hand, and a break from the introspective prose, the narrative also includes brief third-person vignettes which are noted by the use of italics.

The Enchantment of Idealism, September 2, 2003

In the beginning was the dream—the dream of authenticity. To approach the table of learning with open minds and open hearts and engage in authentic learning experiences rich in meaning, breadth and scope. So rich and edifying the experience that as a community of learners, we will wonder, ask, probe, fiddle, and fall back on the throes of curiosity and imagination. Our thirst for understanding will be coupled with a passion to connect with
something real, something tangible as we create meaning through direct experience with the subject at hand.

Students will learn to read the text of a fallen log, and recount the stories of a forest floor. They will embark on a knowledge rooted in the immediate locale, and cultivate roots that grow deep, while re-discovering themselves embedded in a lasting sense of place. They will actively question the precepts that once were only passively accepted and find themselves, perhaps for the first time, buckled into the driver’s seat of their own learning.

Desks will be used not as places of sedation, but as tables for open-ended discussions that are fanned by the odyssey of understanding and a drive to know more. To taste, squish, smell, spy, ponder, and praise the wonders of the natural world while growing in humility and perspective and community is the reality that lies in the not too distant future... And, above all else, it will be called engaging.

“It will be hands-on, interactive, student-directed and chalked full of potential...and wit,” she replies boldly to a wondering audience of skeptics. “But how?” they implore. “Passion,” she solidly replies, “for it is ultimately passion that drives a lesson, drives it all the way into the hearts of inquiring minds who are then challenged to wonder, challenged to question, and challenged to take an active role in shaping their own learning.”

Ultimately, the basic tenet followed that in my first stage of this journey, I was the bold, venturing idealist seeking—no, almost expecting—to find myself playing a pivotal role in inspiring my students to seek knowledge for the edification of themselves and their community. As suggested by one of my favorite writers and a master teacher, Parker Palmer, to practice obedience to truth and know as we are known, was my humble vision in entering the education field.
And at the pivotal point of genuine learning, we find the dreaming idealist with a vision of living out the cliché-ish notion to change the world one child at a time. Upon first stepping into the classroom, I had a dream—a dream of presenting powerful lessons that integrated reason and emotion, while stamping lasting impressions in the mind and heart. A dream of bringing the wonders of nature into the classroom through hands-on lessons that accentuated guided inquiry and provided an infusion of progressive novelty into the curriculum. And in presenting these lessons to a student audience, I assumed the students would be so thankful (and dare I say, empowered) by the opportunity to indulge in learning experiences that were directed by their own curiosity and scope, that they would cast off inhibitions and jump in with both feet.

**Historical Underpinnings**

Before jumping to the point in the story where ideals meet reality, I want to take a moment to offer a glimpse at the nature of my pre-classroom teaching experience to give insight into the history behind the ambitions and presuppositions that I carried into the program. Prior to my boots meeting the linoleum, I played a teacher in an environment under wide-open skies, performing a role that (so it would seem) more closely resembled a camp counselor/interpretative ranger than a classroom teacher.

Having spent three years hiking trails with kids clamoring at my heels, anxiously awaiting the next adventure and the next trick to be pulled out of my bag, I got the clear message that kids engaged meant kids on target, kids too busy to misbehave. Through direct experience in consensual learning, I readily interacted with children who were too engrossed in the learning process to wander to the nebulous, foreign land of “off-task-dom.”
Assuming it was because I had done my job right, discipline wasn’t an issue and the students enjoyed themselves—and all was right with the world. And if, for some reason, I wasn’t quite up to my usual perky self and kids got a bit “sidetracked” during a lesson, then I’d redirect. And if, on the few occasions the problem persisted, I’d scrap the lesson and just keep hiking.

So, what part did I play in bringing kids to the critical point of engagement? I was the facilitator, the guide, and the entertainer of sorts. How did I keep kids engaged? By radiating that deep can’t-keep-it-in joy that welled up within when I found myself doing that which I love—teaching kids about the unbelievable, incredible, magical world around them. I’d also kept their attention by facilitating team-building initiatives, leading interactive, hands-on lessons, cracking a few jokes here and there and just being an all-around fun person. And so, up until this point, my assumptions of good teaching mirrored my experiences working in outdoor education—experiences which I saw to be authentic, experiential, and the only way to go.

Now we return to the dreaming idealist and find her looking rather wide-eyed, apprehensive and totally befuddled at this new landscape in which she is surrounded not only by four walls, but also by a sea of faces that look rather death-like. They wear lackluster expressions that could only be described as pure and utter bemusement, with eyes transfixed by the tick, tick, tick of the clock as they wait…wait in hope of that glorious moment when grace smiles down on them and the freedom bell rings.

Going into my student-teaching experience, I saw engagement as the key to unlocking the door—that illustrious door where edification, inspiration and classroom management equilibrium reside in a lovely little package, waiting to be opened. All I had to
do was beckon the students to unseal and take part in the celebration of learning. And in the
back of my mind (no, more like the forefront) I believed that students would wholeheartedly
appreciate the opportunity to throw off the shackles of “old school” education—the
textbooks, quizzes, individual assignments—and embrace the modality of progressive
thought as they found themselves doing stimulating projects, simulations, collaborative
group work, etc. All driven, of course, by engagement.

This engagement-is-the-answer camp counselor-like philosophy took up residence in
the back of my mind during my first few weeks in the classroom…and stayed the course
throughout the onslaught of the Resistance Movement, finding further justification in any
classroom issue that surfaced. And what was the problem with the classroom scene, you ask?
In one word: boredom. These kids were bored out of their minds! Surely, the lack of
motivation, which was evident in their work, displaced chatter, and discipline proclivities
pointed to this “fact.” And if I still wasn’t convinced, I’d just pause to consider the evidence:

1. The urgent attempts to leave the room as noted by the all too common, absolutely-
   have-to-go and can’t-wait-another-minute bathroom plea.

2. The unbelievably imaginative excuses contrived for locker visits: “I need to get my
   notebook out of my locker because on the fourth page is the problem that my cousin
   needs to solve before math class next period.”

3. The clamor of multitudinous groans that raged in protest to the “Please open your
   textbooks to…”

My ideology was further confirmed by the routine behavioral problems exhibited by
a token group of students’ (many of them reveling in their eighth grade year) rising defiance
in their refusal to work on textbook assignments. So instead of figuring out what happened
to Bill and Margaret when they tried to push a 555 N refrigerator toward a wall, they created colorful doodles—masterpieces of sorts—on notebooks and binders, while sneaking a listen to their forbidden Discmans. Or they put their heads down in an attempt to cash out of their sleep deficit. Or all too often, they found a spot under the teacher’s skin and stayed there, swiveled and poked, prodded and shimmied until they’d manage to perpetuate a disturbance ranging anywhere from a mild rash to a severe case of hives. And all the while I thought: To what end? What are the students learning in all of this?

As Frank Smith says in *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*, “We are learning all the time—about the world and about ourselves. We learn without knowing that we are learning and we learn without effort every moment of the day. We learn what is interesting to us because we are members of the club, and we learn from what makes sense to us” (p. 31). So where’s the sense in presenting a curriculum that bores students to tears with its monotony and detachment from reality? From what I could see, the main message kids were learning in their class was that abstract, one-dimensional learning from a text was life-sapping and (the dreaded junior high adjective) “boring,” but must be endured for the end goal. But more than that, they were also learning how to “cheat” the system, how to skip the radar of the policing teacher’s gaze, how to be sneaky, cunning, stealthy.

And so amidst the clever note-passing strategies that went (un)detected by roaming eyes and the blank stares into space or the eyes skimming across a page, I imagined the day in which the culvert would break, the tide would turn and real learning would emerge with authenticity to compete with the raw energy of “real” middle-school life that happened outside of the classroom. The kids would so appreciate the upheaval of the daily doldrums that they’d
thank their teachers for it with a positive attitude, self-motivation and work ethic. And from
the earth where the text had been laid to rest would sprout the fresh, lush tendrils of free
choice, nourished by the curious musings of a mind alive and the mysterious “dendritic”
bursts of active, student-directed learning endeavors built from the heart up.

Yes, I began planning for the future, anticipating the day when I would begin my
work sample and unleash the power of passion into these deprived kids. And passion would
make all the difference. So with the ideal firmly in place and holding close to the past
successes of my outdoor education experiences, I began the task of planning for my work
sample—planning for the lesson of all lessons—the lesson that would instill some drive into
these underwhelmed middle schoolers, and rekindle their love of learning. And so we enter
the stage of teacher development where idealism runs smack into… practicality.

**Reality Check #1**

| Draft one turned in. | Yes! FINALLY finished… |
| Draft one returned.  | Bummer.               |
| Days go by…         |                      |

| Draft two turned in. | OK, this time I’ve got to be done. I feel good about this one. |
| Draft two returned.  | Double whammy.       |
| Days later…         |                      |

| Draft THREE turned in. | Surely this one will be it. |
| Draft three returned.  | So when did planning a lesson become so difficult?! |

“Writing riveting, life-changing curriculum is like pulling teeth,” she muttered after receiving yet
another draft of her curriculum marked up and jotted on and still in need of revision, augmentation or
complete overhaul. The task of planning lessons, she was learning, required a great deal of vision—yes, this
she had—but also called for patience and fortitude in working out those not-always-easy-to-see details. It was
the seeing to the details part that overwhelmed her and created a tense knot in the pit of her stomach. Rather
than seeing TO the inclusion of details, more often than not, she found herself seeing THROUGH the wide

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open cracks in her lessons when they were left out. Tending to details, she was learning, was not one of her strong points and something she’d have to work on.

With time exhausted and feeling the heat of deadlines, she sifted through her stack of lessons only to find herself suddenly feeling as if she stood on the verge of a precipice. Behind her lay the past and the wonderful memories of a job that she’d done well. Before her lay the uncertain future, with the scratchy lessons she held in her hands providing what she considered to be the map for her journey… yet, somehow, even holding the papers close by, she felt rather directionless and a sense of loss over the realization that her plans paled in comparison to the riveting lessons that still idled in her mind’s eye. But she’d run out of time to think, much less do otherwise. And so, late in the game, with lessons tacked and tied with as many details as she could possibly muster, the stage was set for the opening “act” of her work sample to be presented at 9:25 the next morning.

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Data Sets I–IV speak to the role that the engagement principle played not only in influencing my perception of good teaching, but also in my planning and presentation of lessons.

Considering my past teaching experiences in the outdoors, I suppose it wasn’t altogether too alarming that I held close to these assumptions. And so lacking in perspective, history and the wisdom to know any different, I adapted to this new environment by calling on the faculties that had worked so well for me in my last environment. As such, I entered my work sample with the plan of tapping into the engagement factor if ever in a crux. But surely, I would not encounter the apathy that spews as a distasteful byproduct of a disenchanted audience reading a dead curriculum. When I teach, things will be different.

Reality Check #2

When the rubber meets the road, Work Sample 1 - Day 3
Cold sweat. A brooding sense of anxiety over words. Will they come at the right time? What will I say if such-and-such happens?

“Relax. Why all the worry? They’ve just GOTTA love THIS lesson. You spent hours on it. Remember, Anticipation is the name of the game, Carrie. Keep your eyes peeled and alert.”

But I can’t take another day like yesterday. Please, God, help today go better than yesterday.

A quick glance at the second hand followed by an intense stare down at her lesson. Would the students like the lesson? Oh gosh, I hope they like it...Will they listen to my words and heed them? What kind of attitude will I get from so-and-so and how will I handle it if it’s not in my favor?

“Just be clear—say what you mean and mean what you say (and do?), and smile, and, oh yes, be confident. Confidence, yep that’s it...exuding confidence to each and every student is what I’ll do...”

It’s what she must do.

Her words of self-empowerment were squelched by the ruckus-like crescendo of laughter, casual chatter, shuffling feet, and the chirp of the bell.

By the third day of the unit—my work sample lesson, which I’d spent countless hours preparing—I was beginning to look longingly out the window at the life I’d left behind. The feeling I’d gotten from the kids ever since Day One of the work sample felt much like resistance, a tension of sorts, passivity, and, oh yes, antagonism, which I had not anticipated. After my soaring on the wings of anticipation, I found myself flightless and grounded as all my efforts ran smack into the chain of events that is every teacher’s management nightmare.

Day One: Technology mishaps left me springing from a time crunch. Expectations talk cut short as result of the crunch.

Day Two: Class discussions resulted in students talking out of turn and frequent interruptions. Calling class to order took seconds—no minutes—longer than expected, and became a frequent occurrence.
Day Three: Watching the movie, which laid the foundation for what I saw to be authentic, engaging project-based learning found students talking out, mocking the actors and ridiculing their clothing of all things! And then there was the bell. It sounded and they were gone. And I was left to search for the remnants of my obliterated ego and plan for tomorrow’s lesson, all the while feeling the weight of defeat welling up within.

Why did these lessons fail? A million little technical mishaps flooded through my mind, but these surely couldn’t be the sole reason for the kids’ unruly behavior—could they? And there had to be a sole reason, one sole factor to blame—right? My *a priori* assumptions still sizzled in the back of mind as I straightened up to assemble the last piece of my ego, only to detect a small, faint voice echoing its resounding taunts of dis-engagement.

That night in my self-reflection I wrote, “Engagement is a whole other matter and I already anticipate that I’ll have to make some lesson plan changes to keep the kids more involved and engaged.” Herein lay the curious and subtle truth beginning to surface in my ideology that my lesson plans were to blame for the student behavior. The insidious assumptions that rang true in my ears throughout the first few weeks continued to work their magic in confirming what I feared to hear, but hear them I must. The lessons just weren’t captivating enough. So what was there left to do except make them more exciting?

**Lingering Laments—Engagement Revisited**

*It was dark outside, the kind of inky darkness that lets you know that time has slipped by without your consent. How many hours had passed since she’d stepped into the lab in search of one great, interactive lesson? She glanced down at her watch to see the long hand reach toward the double digits…What?! Closing time already? But she’d just gotten started…*

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Eyes darting across the screen, she hastily printed out just one more lesson for good luck, added the website to her favorites list, turned away as the screen jumped to black, and shoved her pile of papers into a growing folder. Gathering her belongings, she leafed through the myriad of lessons and breathed out a long, hopeful sigh. In her hand lay potential. Potential to inspire and drive a point home. Potential to get kids so wrapped up in activity that they’d lose the opportunity to fall into idle chatter. Surely, within her grasp she held the lesson that would alleviate her troubles and captivate student attention in a memorable way…and maybe, just maybe, this lesson would be entertaining enough to shake the students out of their sleepy states of learned helplessness and fan the flame within…

If I could just make it entertaining. This proposition, initially inscribed on my mind during my work sample, proceeded to penetrate into the soft tissue recesses of my brain in the days and weeks to come. When the day found me floundering in the classroom, the night found me searching, scouring the Net for a lesson that would raise the entertainment value to the third power and alleviate some of this stress. Meanwhile, the management crusade raged on within the four walls of Room 34…Until one day, prudent self-reflection brought to the surface another possible remedy to fix what was “wrong” in my class.

The extension of ending enlightenment

Epiphany! After watching a videotaped performance of the day’s lesson, she noticed that with each transition that happened in the lesson, she would readily discuss her academic expectations (ex: the nature of the assignment) but often avoid stating her behavioral expectations. She noticed that the one time during the lesson that she did make reference to behavior, it was in response to displaced behavior exhibited by a couple of students in particular, and her comments appeared to be made in the form of a side comment, a casual
suggestion. Thus, her informal, indirect tone probably may have suggested to the rest of the class that her words were not only a mere afterthought, but open for debate.

Then it stands to reason that the kids didn’t know what she wanted of them and so they acted as children. Aha, it surely made sense. She would need to state her behavioral expectations to the kids at the start of class and make it incredibly clear what she expected.

This business of teaching, she was learning, was more than just candor and flare and enthusiasm. It was an intentional act. As such, it would require expectations stated clearly and boldly.

During this stage in the journey, I began relying heavily on the spoken word. I stated my expectations clearly. I called kids back on task. I restated my expectations with astounding clarity. And I called kids back on task… This vocal, reactive approach required not only a great deal of patience on my part, but also a great deal of patience on the students’ part as they had to wait for me to address a particular situation with a particular student and then return to the lesson. But this wait time usually offered a prime opportunity for the other students to catch up with a classmate or two, and the talking spree spread like a virus.

When it became clear that vocal reminders to please listen up were not working, I then resorted to a quick change of plans—a change of lesson plans, that is. I quickly nixed activities or moved on to other more engaging parts of the lesson when and if the talking persisted, despite my attempts at rhetoric.

The subtle chain of events that occurred in this process may be noted in my archive journal entries when, time and time again, I changed my lesson plans as a result of management “concerns,” most of which involved students talking out of turn and interrupting the teacher. Taken to its rightful end, it would seem that if my philosophy of
good teaching (resting on the principles of engagement) faltered in the face of reality, I was left with nothing and no one to blame but myself.

And yet, throughout the students' displaced behavior and talking out of turn, the internalization began to take root in her that—little did she know—would stick with her through thick and thin in the coming months: This was all her fault.

I'll Take the Blame

Clothed in sentimental introspection, I didn’t readily see my frustrations in classroom management to be linked to anything but my own inability to teach an engaging lesson. Working under the outdoor education paradigm, I saw behaviors like excessive talking out of turn, rude remarks, mild heckling, and the occasional outburst to be symptoms of plain and simple disengagement. And since it was my role to entertain and maintain group engagement, the index finger would eventually find itself pointing at me and/or my teaching inadequacies, which seemed like one and the same to me.

Around this time period, in an effort to regain a semblance of control, which I think I thought I was supposed to have, I began trying out a few (passive) interventions. Perhaps, I’d cast knowing glances in the general direction of the disruption in hopes that the culprits would get the gist and straighten up. Or maybe I’d just stand in front of the classroom and wait, and wait—and oh, still waiting—for a group of students to once again get the hint. And these remedies worked…sometimes…and temporarily.

But definitely my most common response came in the form of the oh so sudden change in the shape of my plans in response to the degeneration of student behaviors, which precipitated a chain of events that began with losing my place in the lesson and ended with running out of time, the bell chirp, and a serious lull in the confidence meter. Data set V
speaks to this chain of events that emerged from an impromptu lesson plan change in what I
dubbed, “Displaced-Behavioral-Induced Alteration” or DBIA for short:

...Still struggling with timing and making last-minute changes to lesson plans. What’s the
relationship between the two of them? I think confidence issues usually precede the change
in lesson plans and then the change in lesson plans affects timing and closure. It seems to
take on a chain of events sort of flow. Behavioral stimuli—authority questioned—
fluctuation in confidence—lesson plan alteration—lack of time...a vicious cycle.
(Data Set V, 1.20.04)

In the journey of identity-construction and self-development, this first stage of
development in which I was currently living is what Mead (1999), as cited by Lipka-
Brinthaupt) calls the survival stage. During this stage, the teacher’s concerns center on his or
her own well-being, more than on the teaching task or the learners. Common concerns
during this stage begin and end with self-preservation and common questions that focus on
performance and student acceptance.

It is also during the survival stage that the teacher tends to view the students as an
extension of herself and proof of her adequacy as a teacher. This preoccupation with the self
was certainly evident in my thinking and writing, coming out loud and clear in my self-
reflections, which were riddled with a running dialogue on my preparation, on my lesson plan
delivery, on my response to particular behaviors. But what was also evident upon further
examination of my journals was my underlying need for student acceptance, coupled with
my perception of student behavior as extensions of myself. Thus, when students enjoyed
class, my self-worth was affirmed. But when they talked and distracted and carried on, my
self-worth was on the line. And with all this battling going on, with the self receiving all the
blows, I felt the strong urge to preserve the affairs of the self, and so I did.

In the issue of fairness, though, I think that upon the initial deployment of a
disruptive act by a cantankerously mischievous student (and not just a casual talker), my
rather passive approach to addressing the issue stemmed not just from my preoccupation with myself. Rather, it stemmed from the assumptions I held in regard to doing what I knew to preserve the self-concept of the perpetrator. And although I *did* occasionally view the unruly child’s behavior as an extension of myself and therefore reflective of my abilities as teacher, I firmly believed that it was my duty to safeguard the self-concept of the child, no matter what the crime. So I suppose there was a bit of altruism laced in with the narcissism evident in this stage. Note: I also believed—and still believe—strongly in empowering students to regulate their own behavior. I guess at the time I assumed that if children were shown the respect extended to an adult, they would begin acting like adults. Not to mention, I harbored a huge fear of confrontation and a sincere dislike of school discipline policies, which I discuss in a later section.

**Discipline Dilemmas**

After a few weeks (or was it months?) of responding to the agony of classroom mayhem with passive antics that probably came out looking more like pitiful pleas than anything, there came a point when a bolder approach became essential. However at this point in the game and after months of passivity, the students and I had fallen into a routine of sorts, dysfunctional as it may have been.

The kids knew my track record in that they knew what I’d tolerated yesterday and the day before. And they wouldn’t hesitate to refresh my memory in forgot what I would and wouldn’t allow. That is, I was confronted by the face of inconsistency and the pervasive thought that, yes, I had allowed this little outburst to occur, so why was I putting my foot...
down for this minor infraction? Point noted. Offense dismissed. Thus, I was further indicted by my own history and confronted with little hope for reformation.

Another factor in all of this was my own strict adherence to a state of ideals held tightly in reference to the nebulous realm of classroom discipline. I “knew” enough to know that discipline shouldn’t be an issue if I was doing my job right. And I knew that I was no fan of passing out referrals to students, as was the custom of other teachers at my school. As a result, the kids began to see me as the teacher who didn’t pass out referrals, and I became paralyzed from responding to “discipline” issues that presented themselves. Instead I vowed to observe the classroom dynamics in trying to figure out who was doing what and why they might be doing it.

It was around the time in the semester when kids’ identities become less fluid and more closely linked to their general classroom antics that I started taking note of those students who consistently got in “trouble,” as suggested by the number of referrals collected in a week’s time. I noticed the resilient you-can’t-break-me look on their faces when they were handed another referral slip, and I got the sense that for some kids, the referral slip stood in the middle of the relationship between teacher and student.

It was around this same time that I began establishing relationships in an attempt to build trust with these students who had a history of demonstrating displaced behavior. And learning their histories and hearing their stories further squelched my desire to throw a referral at them. These kids suffered greatly. Dysfunction, fragmentation and neglect posed some of the hardships endured by these young children, not to mention the travails of emotional disturbances and learning disabilities that flourished therein. Knowing enough about their background to invoke my emotion and empathy, I vowed that whatever
discipline approach I’d employ would not break the relationship I’d worked to develop with each child. In other words, referrals were out of the question.

The Language of Love and Limits

As a firm believer in the power of relationship as the greatest proactive discipline tool, I turned to Love and Logic tenets in search of validation. After reading up on the Love/Logic approach and learning that relationship could be preserved through discipline, I sought to use these tenets to speak a message that conveyed to the child, “You are an accepted and integral member of this classroom, but your behavior needs modification. Here are my expectations. What should we do to solve this problem?”

After using that approach on a couple of occasions, it became clear that there was something lacking in my words. Simply put, it lacked a consequence. And so, my message was received as: “You are an accepted and integral member of this class…and your behavior? Well, it’s distracting from the learning process, but it’s my problem—not yours.” That is, although I’d intended to speak the message of love and logic, my avoidance of imposing actual limits or consequences sent the logic part out the window. I was left floundering in a limit-less sea of rhetoric, assuming the sole responsibility of reacting to each student’s behavior.

The Mask of Authority

Truth be told, up until this point, I had allowed enough of my easy-going, upbeat (non-confrontational) personality to show that the kids knew what I would and would not tolerate. And because I had gotten into the habit of not “calling kids out” (giving detentions)
in response to general classroom disruption (overt chattiness during inopportune moments), it appeared that I tolerated most things. I was using the language of love and issuing statements that encouraged kids to solve their problems, but more often than not, discovered the message lying by the wayside, trampled and forgotten when the bell chirped.

After observing a class taught by my CT one day and noticing the ease of his transitions and the way the kids quieted down when he asked for their attention, I had sort of an epiphany. Perhaps speaking a new language was not what I needed. After all, the kids were used to what Mr. X demonstrated. Perhaps I should start doing what Mr. X said and did—minus the referrals, of course. To make a change and combat this history I was in the midst of creating would require seeking the assistance from outside sources. And so began my thirty-day risk-free trial period of trying the mask of authority on for size.

Because my Cooperating Teacher was the only adult with whom I daily made contact in the classroom setting, I looked to him as the prototype model of what the teacher authority figure might look like. So, I began approaching behavioral issues in the manner that he would—straightforward and to the point. However, I learned quickly that I could say the same words that were uttered by my CT, but with little effect.

An example of this would be a student with whom I used the direct approach often employed by my CT in asking the student to please stop talking. Said student might temporarily respond to the stimulus of my words and cease the conversation, but then continue after not even a moment’s breath. I would return to the lesson and may or may not respond when the stimulus presented itself again, which it surely did. It wasn’t long before I began to realize that my words were not only failing to create the desired effect but also that essentially, the students were modeling the behavior that I was exhibiting. That is, a stimulus
of displaced talking would result in a responsive verbal warning from me. The effect of this verbal warning would be a temporary relief from the talking stimulus in the same way that the student’s talking stimulus would yield but a temporary response from me. Completely and utterly ineffective.

All this to say, the mask didn’t fit. It didn’t fit on two counts. One, the approach felt awkward and unlike who I knew myself to be. And two, it lacked follow-through.

For example, in response to a child who was not making a good behavior choice to cease and desist, or I’d simply stop instruction and wait for the student to get the idea as I’d seen my CT do. However, my attempts would usually be met with either resilience, resistance, or the look of compliance followed by a repeated offense. I was continually being interrupted, and experience suggested to me that whatever authority my CT had was earned through years of chasing his words with actions. As a result, his words got the appropriate response—most of the time. I, however, lacked not only the history but the boldness to follow through, based somewhat on the fact that I still sought the students’ approval according to my assumption based on the “liking versus respect” principle.

They like me, so why don’t they respect me?

She glanced around the room as the students hurriedly packed their bags to head to their next class.

She went from child to child, to each one, offering a commentary on the relationship she’d worked to forge over the last few weeks. After several minutes of reflection, she heaved a long sigh. There was not one child with whom she did not feel a rapport, a solid rapport at that. Yet here she was engaging in what felt like vying for control over the class. “When I talk, they talk,” she reflects. We talk about what it looks like to respect others and how one way of being respectful is listening while another speaks. Yet upon the discussion’s end, I
begin the lesson where I left off and they continue to talk. All the while I wonder: What’s wrong with the relationship to have made them behave in this way? Surely one wouldn’t continue to act disrespectfully to someone they liked?! What has gone amuck here?

Reframing describes the familiar process in which an event over which we have puzzled for some time suddenly is “seen” differently and in a way that suggests new approaches to the puzzle. The significance of reframing is that it sets the puzzle differently, and it frequently does so in a fashion that is not logical and almost beyond our conscious control.

“Are you done eating, M’am?”

“Yes, thank you,” she stammered, taken aback by the sudden voice that drew her out of deep thought as she ruminated over Chinese food and the events of the day. She sipped the last bit of tea and gingerly unwrapped the cookie wrapper, making sure to keep the fortune intact. If only her trials and tribulations in dealing with classroom mutiny could be answered in the form of a fortune, she thought…wouldn’t that be peachy? Breaking the cookie in half and unfolding the small slip of paper, her eyes narrowed as she squinted down to just barely make out the lightly printed words dredged out of the cosmic cookie. She gulped, and read: Actions speak louder than words.

Around this time, I started looking—really looking—over the words scribbled across the lined paper of my self-reflections in search of some patterns and tendencies and hope of redemption. I began the act of reframing my observations by drawing conclusions, considering them from a different angle, and then analyzing these conclusions based on my underlying assumptions. With regard to my “actions speak louder than words” epiphany, I began wondering about the truth of this statement in the classroom. That is, I began to
examine my statements made in each entry and asking the question, where’s the action? And looking within this frame of mind, I began to see that no action existed in or through my words. The excerpt below, pulled from a journal entry on 1.26.04, highlights this action avoidance tendency embedded in my observations during a lesson one day.

M: Bathroom: Tomorrow give tardies to kids that are late.
D: Counted three kids going to bathroom. One kid going to locker. Start giving tardies for late kids! Just do it! Enforce what you say.
M: Kids up and out of their seat visiting others during work time. Explain that it’s OK when doing group work, but not OK if just visiting. Make transitions distinct between direct instruction and group work. Muddying the fine line between the two (yet again) causes confusion in kids. They want to know what you want them to do. Make it clear!
M: Give time limits for turning pages. Don’t allow kids to squander time. There should be no talking between pages. If so, assign minutes to be held after class.
LP: Write directions on board whenever possible to smooth out transitions. I’m repeating myself again and again. I should only have to say it once. Call on kids to repeat what was said so as to avoid the repetition.

The first thing that stood out from the page was the unique way I recalled the turn of events but readily forestalled the imposing of a consequence that would bring about an effect to the cause….and instead wrote it off with “tomorrow I should do this,” or “I must do this…soon,” or “I will do this if this happens…” while taking very little action. I realized this was because, ultimately, I really did not want to do it. After much reflection I began to look at my non-confrontational tendencies showing up in myself, and began deconstructing at the point where these proclivities arose. It didn’t take long before the answers came rushing out.

The greatest factor influencing my decision not to act? Fear. I feared losing the kids’ respect and ending up in a worse state of affairs than that which preceded the action (aka, power play). I feared bearing down on kids, not wanting to send negative messages to them. And after all, who was I to change their behavior? I feared the prospect of fulfilling a fuzzy authoritarian role that I felt ill-prepared to fill. I feared that this mask of authority, which felt
as foreign to me as a lampshade placed over my head, would be found out by kids and they’d quickly discover that it had been contrived all along, that I really didn’t have any power over them…nor did I really want power over them! But didn’t it really come down to power and control?

I readily saw the flaws inherent in the traditional code of discipline, saw too many kids “punished” by the system, and subsequently desensitized to anything short of a suspension, and even that offered a nice vacation. I feared that in taking part in a discipline code prescribed by the school’s collective code I would somehow lose my passion and scruples to teach. I feared that acting would break some kid’s heart—the kid who’d been labeled by every other teacher as being this way or that, whose six hours spent at school offered an escape—temporary as it may be—from the hell of home life. I could handle it, really, and I certainly wasn’t desperate enough to forsake my ideals and walk that path.

In scouring over these fears, I began to see that my avoidance of action in the classroom hit on three levels: the preservation of self/ego (kids as extension of self, serving ego?), the preservation of ideals (avoidance of mainstream collective code, assumptions of good teaching), the preservation of child’s self-worth (avoidance of negativity, empowerment).

So now what? I knew all this about myself but it didn’t help me any. So, I’m an overly sensitive person who’s fearful of putting her foot down and saying that enough is enough. All the while, everyone tells me to just bear through with the messy stuff of discipline, and then I’ll marvel at the newfound ability to enjoy life in classroom, not to mention welcome the return of my sanity. But I fought it still.
And the questions rose up in my mind—big questions and petty questions alike. Do middle school kids inherently only respond to actions and threats? What effect does the way we do school have on children’s development and behavior response? How have we as teachers and as an institution contributed to their socialization into the passive sit-in-the-desk-and-avoid-contact-with-teacher response. Where does the antagonism I sense from students come from? How would it be different if kids planned the curriculum agenda and decided what we’d learn? What’s the nature and role of power or control in the classroom? Who really holds the power? Is management inherently teacher-directed? Can I still embrace my ideals and survive in the classroom?

She’s got the whole world in her head, but where’s the map?

Now around this same time, while the management war continued to fester and I avoided action, daily reflection drew attention to yet another observation that required my attention—one that paved the way into a new transition stage in my identity construction and development. The area of lesson plan development began to emerge as a potential hold-up in my instruction protocol, and the connection was growing ever clearer between the fluency of the lesson and management concerns.

This thought surfaced after an observation by my supervisor, who noticed that my objectives were being eaten up by the length of the class—seventy minutes to be exact. I was trying to cover too much material in this time and needed to break down the lesson into chunks and focus—really focus—on what I wanted to get across to my students.

After class one afternoon, I recall attempting to explain to my supervisor what I wanted the students to “get” from the experience and realizing that I couldn’t adequately
articulate the heart of the lesson. And if I couldn’t even say it, how on earth was I to expect the kids to understand the objectives? Prior to this point in time, I’d gone about the task of planning lessons similar to the task of dreaming a dream. I grew this sort of Disneyland in my head, complete with Space Mountain and Donald Duck waiting by the Matterhorn, but hadn’t really figured out the physical layout of all these clever features, or the execution of the plan that would include the thinking through and mapping out of every transition.

Instead, I often considered my own understanding of the material as primary to my success in delivering the lesson. In so doing, I perhaps relied too heavily on the spontaneity of the moment to carry me through potential quakes. And the quakes came and with them, the management manifestations, and after that? The all-too-common feelings of frustrations and yes, self-defeatism. Truly, crucial explicit planning would help in preparing for the quakes.

And so I began the process of looking not only to where I wanted to go but also figuring out how to get there through the construction of a clear road map…all the while feeling the déjà vu-ish sensation that I’d been here before, oh, some two months before during my first work sample. But this time it would be different. It was different. This time I was anticipating the start of my full-time teaching responsibilities. Thus began stage two of my development where my efforts centered around the art of lesson planning and presentation in writing the map of clear, concise instruction.

Here was the chance she’d been waiting for—the opportunity to start fresh and build her own classroom management approach grounded in her own beliefs…although she wasn’t yet sure what these beliefs would look like exactly, she knew what they would not be. What freedom and excitement she found in this endeavor, but what work she knew she was in for.
She read back through old journal entries of yesteryear in search of glimmers of wisdom and perspective. She read through past observations that stated or rather paraphrased, You’re taking on too much! And she listened to her gut, which reiterated her tendency to think big and let the details tend to themselves. She drew a deep breath, bolstered up all her resolve, took out her laptop and began the work of thinking out the details, calling the ideas out, one by one, away from the Disneyland dimensions in her mind and onto the flat, one dimensional screen.

And then came the checklist…

**Procedures in place? (check).**

**Routines accounted for? (check)**

Come on, Carrie. You can do this.

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**Taming the wild beast. Bit by bit and chunk by chunk…the birth of a classroom,**

**January 1, 2004**

There was something freeing and wonderful and altogether daunting about the start of my full-time teaching. I worried about my track record of management and DBIA and wanted so desperately to just “get it right” this time, although I wasn’t sure what the getting it right part looked like, but I surely couldn’t be there yet. It felt too uncertain.

I’d learned that the first key to classroom management was in preparation, which meant thinking through all the stops—the creation of the lesson, the routines and procedures established within the classroom, and the step-by-step flow of every transition. To accomplish this, I would need some serious help, and I headed to a wiser source in search of creating a predictable, steady, consistent routine to establish in my new class.
After a brainstorming/pep talk session with an adviser, I learned the central importance of practicing procedures with intention and purpose, and sticking to them. I was also encouraged to alter my lesson-planning approach so that I accomplished two things prior to presenting. First, I framed my lesson’s objective around the text. Secondly, I wrote out every transition for the kids so I could read it over and also practice, practice, practice the flow of each one so as to always keep one step in front of the students and create a much-needed routine.

Although I initially deemed the proposal of planning around the text a fate worse than taking a big bite of ice cream with your sensitive front teeth, I later breathed a sigh of relief over the fact that no longer would I spend late nights in the computer labs in search of worthy lessons. Rather, I would allow my sometimes other-worldly lessons and ideas to be capped and corralled by the text. Yes, though it felt rather static and generic and something of a sell-out, I’d seen enough of reality to know that there’s a time and place for practicality…and this was one of those times, I wagered. I would need to start small, forge some kind of friendship with the text, and establish routine in the hopes of creating a sense of order in the classroom.

A clean slate, a hopeful beginning

OK, now here’s the time to lay it on thick, Carrie. Be clear, confident and try not to smile so much. She leaned on what she hoped looked like the foreboding lecture table, reviewing her plan of action, thinking through each transition, anticipating potential antagonism and gearing up for what was to come. The bell tolled and moments later, the first student walked in.
“Good morning, and welcome!” she greeted, extending her hand. “I’m Ms Moyer and who might you be?”

“Francisco,” the child replied while shaking her hand. “Is this going to be a hard class?”

“It is what you make of it,” I replied, not at all intending to sound trite, but empowering.

Another student walked in, sporting a broad grin. Ms Moyer greeted her warmly. What was that she recalled hearing about the first few days of school? Starting off tough, not smiling ’til Christmas—or was it Thanksgiving? In the back of her mind she heard her adviser’s words, “hold them accountable… enforce boundaries.” She had every intention of doing this when the situation called for it, but in the meantime, her smile beamed wider with each student who filed into the classroom.

My first two weeks of the semester were great, behavior-wise. For a moment in time, it felt like I was teaching again, like I could talk to the class and be heard. As a result of fewer interruptions, my own ability to succinctly articulate a lesson sharpened threefold. I began to notice and welcome the personification of respect played out in my students’ conscientious behaviors. They spoke nicely to one another, listened to each other speak, raised their hands before blurting out (a novelty!), and generally completed classroom activities—even textbook work, bless their hearts—with not one complaint.

Oh what a joy, and quite the contrast from last semester when buying the attention of the entire seventh grade group took much patience, coaxing and (I hate to say it) occasional manipulation. As a whole, the class was night-and-day compared to last semester’s seventh graders—and I was duly impressed.

To what could I attribute the big change in student behavior? The establishment of routine? A new class with different group dynamics? Perhaps my lessons were less “out-there” and more grounded due to the emphasis on following the text curriculum? Was last
semester just an exception to the rule? Could I expect this behavior as “more” indicative of a seventh grade class? I’d written the last group’s excessive socializing during class time off as “normal” junior high behavior, but now I could see that I was totally off on that count. What can I realistically expect from this age? What do expectations really mean? Will students follow them only if I enforce them? What does it look like to enforce limits while still being true to myself? These questions still percolated in the back of mind until…

After a few weeks of this, the routine was kind of wearing. The text seemed more stale than usual. And the kids were getting fidgety. Heck, I was getting fidgety! Here again, I was challenged to examine the nature of the activities we were doing in the classroom. Teaching science out of a book was, indeed, a far cry from what I had expected to be doing when I entered the classroom. And yet it was true that the class was running much more smoothly now.

Ultimately, I would have really liked to have seen kids learning something that intrigued and stimulated them from a curriculum that was more student-directed, productive and focused on real-world problems and events. And yet I avoided changing things up and instead, stuck with the status quo in fervent hope that the routine and structure of today would lay the foundation for meaningful, collaborative learning experiences for my students in the not too distant future.

A brief contest…But I’m a teacher, not a micromanager!

She was tired. She couldn’t help but feel like the more she “managed,” the less ownership the kids took in their behavior. “I think I’m doing something wrong here,” she thought. “I get no joy out of managing a classroom, not to mention teaching lifeless lessons out of a text. Could it be that I’m not so much managing as…micro-managing?” Responding to the antics of kids by frequently calling them back from talking.
hiatuses—it all seemed like petty policing. “I mean, I know management’s essential to a functioning classroom, but it just feels so dry and uninspiring (not to mention un-empowering) and teacher-directed.”

Continuing the Conversation

Brief look at security…But what about the students?

She turned to the literature and read, “Almost all surveys of teacher effectiveness report that classroom management skills are of primary importance in determining teaching success” (Wong, 1998, p. 84).

“Super…I’m doomed,” she thought.

She turned to another page to read, “Students want a well-managed classroom more than the teachers do because a well-managed classroom gives students security. There are no surprises, no yelling in a classroom where everyone, teachers and students, know what is happening. It comes from installing procedures and routines.”

Now this was a new perspective on the matter—the kids wanted it? All this time, it felt like I was trying to impose a semblance of classroom order that would serve me more than my kids. But perhaps kids did want order and consistency. Perhaps they wanted me to be the teacher, with a capital “T,” who would enforce the limits of unruly conduct. So perhaps she wasn’t so far off course as she thought she’d been.

Although she still wasn’t doing the amazing projects that she’d hoped to be doing, she was doing something proactive and significant in and of itself, right? Right. Establishing a sense of routine, a sense of order in the classroom, perhaps, lent itself to some color and flare of its own in that it paved the way for a safe, harmonious learning environment???

Setting or going with the flow, February 10–25
After I’d gotten a handle on lesson plan development and established a fairly solid routine, I thought I was ready to begin the projects that represented student-directed learning at its best. Yet there was a troubling occurrence that still poked its head out to bite me on occasion.

Although I’d established a routine and the kids had a sense of the ebb and flow of the typical science lesson, I’d begun this sort of habit of not always insisting that every child listen during instruction. That is, my more recent trend was to get so excited about the lesson (even if it was being taught from a text) that I’d continue plowing through it in spite of the talking that happened in the classroom.

After further probing by my supervisor, it became clear that my avoiding making the big moves (i.e., asking a disruptive student to step out into the hall) was becoming a roadblock to my teaching.

“But when I stop and wait for a student, or call a disruptive student out, it disrupts the flow of my lesson and I lose my place, and I just want to keep ‘teaching’!” I stammered. My supervisor qualified my statement with the suggestion that when I allow students to disrupt, the disruption serves to significantly break the flow of the learning that could occur in the students. She reminded me that essentially the other learners are unable to grasp what was being taught because of the distraction of those talking.

Ouch. This made a great deal of sense to me, but the truth hurts. As a teacher, my focus should be with the kids and ensuring that they are given every possible opportunity to be successful. As such, I can’t simply go with the flow—I need to set the flow. I needed to put my energy not so much into doing what felt good to me, but in doing what was right for the kids with the hope that eventually the two needs—what was right for both the kids and

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myself—might intersect to find themselves in a mutualistic relationship enjoying the company of a safe, consensual learning environment. I hoped for that day, all the while wondering: How do I go about the task of creating an environment that is truly safe for all? And with this question, I transitioned into a third stage of development known as the task or impact stage.

    Now in one sense, I began my teaching journey in this third stage as noted by my desire to offer student-centered, authentic learning experiences. My extending heightened concern for the student in preserving and affirming the self-worth and dignity of every child indicated the “arrival” of this stage in development that was soon to co-exist with the other two.

    During the third stage, a teacher’s gaze looks outward as she becomes less occupied with the goings-on of the self (How will I respond if such-and-such happens?), or the actual presenting of the lesson (Did my transitions flow?), and concentrates on the task of creating a safe, affirming learning environment so the students have the greatest opportunity to be successful. And isn’t this what it’s all about? I thought. Isn’t it about creating an atmosphere where student learning can flourish and grow?

**(Note: By no means are the stages mutually exclusive. Rather, I would argue that a teacher’s ability to co-exist in all three of these stages, avoiding polarization to a particular side, shows not only tremendous maturity but an even greater propensity to create a productive learning environment for students.)

**Common Tragedies**

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Now’s a good a time to briefly step away from the narrative to highlight some persistent assumptions embedded in my teaching experiences, and specifically lesson presentations, up to this point. As much as I’d been stressing a clear routine, procedure and the like, I still slipped up now and again with common practical mistakes. So, here are the most common technical mishaps noted in observations and highlighted in Data Sets I–IX:

**Seven things you can do to increase the likelihood of management crises in your classroom:**

1. Talk to the class with your back turned while you’re working at the board.
2. Display nonverbal body language that suggests vulnerability.
3. Use lots of superlative words that muddy up the main point.
4. Stop the lecture and think out loud about your decision-making process: “Maybe we should… Or perhaps we’ll…”
5. Run around in search of overheads.
6. Forget part of the directions before dismissing kids to independent work and then hurriedly call them back to share the remaining directions with them.
7. Assume that kids know what you expect.

And below are some of those closely-held assumptions that guided my classroom conduct in Data Sets V–VII. Note the slight alterations in thought in italics—thoughts that were drawn to reframe the supposition in light of experiential knowledge. Note: At this point in time I had gained cognitive awareness of the value of the italics statements, but had not yet begun acting like I valued them.

- Teacher’s passion can drive any lesson and take care of classroom management issues. *What about limits?*
- Encouraging words go a long way with kids, and if students know that they are respected, then they will align with your expectations. *True to some extent, but limiting. What about following words with action?*
- Speaking the language of love and mutual respect is just as effective as showing “tough” love. *Speaking only words throws logic out the window… kids need (and want) boundaries—and follow-through.*
- Lesson plans in my head will come out fine if I just review them on the day I plan to teach from them and allow spontaneity to drive the point home. *I need a road map.*
• Kids will be excited to listen and discuss ideas in class and will stay within boundaries if they are engaged. That is, management concerns will take care of themselves as long as engagement is taken care of. Discipline is not always linked to engagement. Every child’s unique. As such they’ll come to you in many different shapes, forms and antics.
• Teaching is about empowerment of students. Yes I still agree, but how can I empower students if I have not created a classroom conducive to learning?

A Look at Dissonance

She opened the text to read, “When reconsidering their personal-professional knowledge, teachers may experience some cognitive dissonance before altering their ideas and beliefs” (Henderson, 1999, p. 12). Mmhh…she blinked and read on. “Cognitive dissonance is a feeling of discomfort [Hey, I can relate to feelings of discomfort!] engendered by experiences that are perceived to be in conflict with fundamental constructs.” She re-read the statement and returned to the conflict part. Conflict, yeah, she knew this feeling too. It seemed ever since stepping into the classroom, all those assumptions she’d once held onto so tightly were losing their charm, losing their appeal, but most of all losing their effectiveness. Her world of cards from yesterday’s environment had long since capsized and imploded, compelling her to construct a new structure that would withstand the new rules of a new environment. But this new ground just seemed so shaky.

Not only that, but her assumptions of the type of teaching that she would be doing was in jeopardy of crumbling…along with her notion of the teacher that she thought she’d been all along…the teacher who would be successful at this new challenge. But what did success really look like in her classroom? Although her routine struggle to “manage” seemed to occupy a great deal of her teaching time, by no means did the teacher consider a well-managed classroom to be the end-all, be-all. She couldn’t necessarily convince herself to buy into the idea that the more control she had in the classroom, the more productive the atmosphere because this ideology simply did not gel with what she saw to be good teaching. Good teaching, she still asserted, came from within, from the students. After all, it was our classroom. And now she wondered about the nature of the dissonant harmonies that flowed out of a classroom…
It seemed there were few things to be sure of now in this profession. But now she had a name for it.

Cognitive dissonance. Indeed this was what she was experiencing in the classroom—the unnerving intersection where her assumptions and philosophies met a reality of sorts, but whether it was the reality, she was beginning to doubt.

Out with the old; in with the new: Re-visiting prevailing assumptions in light of new questions

I was beginning to see a clearer portrait of my role as teacher. And what a tremendously busy and complex one it was becoming, as each new experience brought the rise of a myriad of questions that grew more involved over time. But with each question and with my experience and the literature on which to draw, I began noticing that the replies to the questions most often began with the five-word sequence, “Well, it all depends on…”

How do I honestly and effectively meet the learning needs of everyone in my class? How do I embrace the uniqueness of my students while offering engaging curriculum for a collective whole? What does a safe, learning environment really look like, and how do I help create it? What’s the essence of classroom control and behavioral accountability in light of such a huge range of behaviors, tendencies and histories represented?

Aren’t there occasions when we call upon the one-size-fits-all philosophy, requiring that each child holds his/her own weight in a particular area? Yet when is it OK to provide exceptions to this rule?

What message does my behavior send to students who are off-task? What about those who are on-task? How do I embrace the modality of social learning theory and integrate it into a passively-trained population? How do I discipline in a constructive and positive light? What are some ways to successfully run a student-centered, student-directed...
classroom? What’s the nature of procedures in the classroom, and to whom do they benefit and in what circumstances? Is a harmonious environment the end-all, be-all? What’s the balance between “hold students to developmentally appropriate standards and kids will rise to the expectations” philosophy? Why don’t I hear more “Show me your thinking” and fewer “Do it this way” statements? How do my assumptions of good teaching align with my students’ twenty-seven ways of learning? Where is the line that separates fantasy from reality and whose fantasy/reality is it?

And with each new experience arrived a slew of new roles and responsibilities to consider as teacher. What, really, did my role involve? Teaching lessons, grading papers, and taking attendance accounted for one teeny part of it. Inspiration was another. Moral and character development, yet another. Accountability, another. Encouraging, modeling, supporting, scaffolding, and the action verbs go on and on…And then we get to the creating a classroom culture endeavor part which really, truly, seems much like an all-encompassing job description in itself.

Using whatever faculties, tricks, stories, gifts or gimmicks in my possession, I had been given the challenge to conscientiously “educate” more than twenty-seven human beings. But of what exactly was “education” comprised? Surely, there had to be more than following directions, writing names on papers and studying for standards-based tests.

Though the exact shape and function of the enigmatic “education” still remained unclear in my mind’s eye—and with my assumptions of genuine learning still holding fast—I tried dearly to reconcile these in light of my current situation. Yet with the enormity of my current task coming into view, I began to feel the heavy load of responsibility pressing down on my shoulders. Perhaps I was in over my head here.
Typecast, February 11, 2004

She felt programmed, with a connection full of static sending fuzzy messages to the control center. A sort of lackadaisical blah-ness permeated her being when she thought of doing it all over again the following day. Why was she feeling so drained and uninspired at the end of the school day? Because her attempts to offer a student-directed project fell by the wayside when the students routinely forgot their responsibilities or talked during other students’ presentations, and some still exhibited a lackadaisical blah-ness toward these “fun” projects. Teaching felt much like a tug-of-war to her with student and teacher pulling in opposition.

While mulling over reflections and videotapes of her teaching, she began to see a pattern emerge in the dynamic interplay between herself and her students. On those rare days she approached her third-period students with a “let’s get down to business without a smile” attitude, discipline concerns were usually minimal, or at least lower than average. However, on those days when joy and enthusiasm were her allies and she radiated enthusiasm for the exciting privilege it was to facilitate a dynamic learning process with a great group of kids, the students responded with more chatter, an occasional outburst, and off-task behavior. It seemed to this disenchanted teacher that something was seriously amuck here. Why did things go awry when she expressed her natural personality traits and taught from her heart?

Surely, it appeared that her demeanor played a significant role in management. On days when she expressed, they digressed. On days when she repressed, they, well, they didn’t digress as much. And so in the effort to maintain a sense of control—which she really didn’t want, but felt she was supposed to have—she resorted to pushing away emotions and projecting what she felt to be a stale, generic teaching style that lacked personality, wit or charisma.

As a result, it was not long before the passion she once felt for teaching faded to gray as her vision of drawing kids into authentic, inquiry-based discovery waned in silent defeat. And she had not the liberty or the strength to contest.
I presumed that when I entered the classroom environment I could still retain my sense of the “I,” who teaches, and be “me” in all circumstances and with all children. (After all, it had worked in my outdoor school days.) However, experience lends itself to a wealth of discovery, and I soon found that to be my happy, go-lucky, excited-about-teaching self bred a lackadaisical “we can do whatever and get away with it ’cuz the teacher’s in a good mood” attitude that often led to inappropriate classroom behavior and continual management issues. Actually I should qualify that statement and put the happy, go-lucky self in an environment lacking the language of limits (spelled r-e-f-e-r-r-a-l-s).

So, indeed, her presence and personality did yield power in shaping the classroom culture and climate…but how do I come to use this power to make a positive mark in classroom atmosphere? How can I still teach from the heart and enjoy the act, while harnessing the energy kids expend in bouncing off the walls toward more productive means?… She opened the text and read a proposed account of the teacher’s power taken to both extremes and cringed at the weight yet returning to rest on her shoulders.

“I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized, or de-humanized” (1999, H. Ginott, as cited by Lipka-Brinthaupt, p. 100).

Certainly this depiction drew her back to that nebulous role that she found herself facing yet again. On one end of the spectrum she saw a teacher who could leave a scar with fury; on the other end, a teacher who could remove a stain with kindness. Certainly there was no fury in her demeanor, and yet still there was power. Whether she knew it or not, or wanted it or not, she held power in her countenance. And though she
shrugged at the responsibility, still it lay in her hands or across her shoulders. She was a teacher with potential for huge impact in the lives of her students for better or worse. So, in what ways was she acting like it?

Rage against the Machine

Around this time period, I entered a dry period of uninspired teaching when the weight of the world came crashing down in one full swoop as continued frustrations (“I’m not getting through to these kids!”) and disillusionment mounted. I found myself struggling to make sense of my role, not just as a member, but as the teacher in the classroom.

My efforts felt contrived, my pride weakened, my sense of self remained obscure as I lived each day in the classroom battling between being who I knew myself to be (and feeling it wasn’t enough) and being someone who hid the smile to keep the order (but still that wasn’t enough). Comparing the stark contrast between authentic and actual as noted in Appendix E and F, followed by the quote penned by Mortimer Adler (1995), further heightened this frustration and came like a slap in the face, reminding me of the truth that still I clung to, though it seemed such a far and distant stretch from my current state of being: “All genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is a process of discovery, in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher” (as cited by Fried, p. 70). Yes I knew this to be true in the fabric of my being, and so wanted this reality to take up residence in my classroom. But how could the students and I shake off our cloaks of passivity, embrace our respective roles and just get there?

It felt like I’d crept back into survival mode, vying for control of what seemed to be a passively antagonistic class, and concerning myself once again with matters of control.
Although my lessons were sharper and narrower now, I’d begun planning our upcoming project unit and subsequently focused less on procedures and routines, such that somewhere along the way, chaos theory coupled with a passive audience and typecast teacher staked its claims.

And what had become of the routines and procedures that had started out so strong? They’d withered down to a scanty form of missed potential, now resembling but a vague semblance of the initial protocol. It seemed that passion was my curse.

I knew going into this whole endeavor that my ideas about learning differed somewhat from my school’s collective code, but I was willing to at least try to keep an open mind in learning the language enough to integrate life-giving experiences into the classroom. However all at once, it seemed all the philosophical and pedagogical differences I’d ever held against public education were exacerbated to the point of exhaustion. If I had to throw a referral at a child in order to be heard in a classroom, if I had to issue threats and resort to petty “Skinner-ian” incentives for kids to do anything, if antagonism and pushing limits posed an inherent tendency in students, then I wanted no part of this type of education.

I wanted to rage against the code and bring about engaging learning, but felt plagued by the realization that this new dialect would be received as a second language for my students. They’d already been socialized by the school system, and readily spoke their native tongue and responded to threats and gimmicks. And so it seemed my words, my hopes and ideals seemed futile as I etched words of sour disillusionment into her reflections.

My once-held notion of the dynamic, confident, steady, inspiring teacher with a capital “T” is meeting the teacher I see in the mirror who is…not quite there yet. Perhaps I’m feeling a sense of loss over the
imagined teacher of pomp and circumstance born out of my mind’s eye…and coming to grips with the inexperienced teacher before me who still has much to learn.

Much to learn, yes, but did I want to learn? Did I really want to learn the ins and outs of a system with which I could not reconcile my differences in a peaceable manner?

After I vented my rage and the dust settled, I resolved to finish up the year to the best of my ability and take it a day at a time. After all, I didn’t have to necessarily end up teaching in a public school. There were other options. But I couldn’t think of those at the moment. Right now, I needed to finish writing this story—a story of uncertainty, but my story, just the same.

I rounded up the last of my courage that’d been backed into a corner upon initial glance of this new environment, and resolved to step onward as my thoughts drifted back to Dewey’s qualifications of a reflective practitioner. As I considered each of the qualities in light of current experiences, I realized that each was embodied in my current struggles.

Open-mindedness. Was I open to remaining fluid in my assumptions, or had I already etched my beliefs in stone and closed the book?

Responsibility. How was I approaching my responsibilities of teacher, and which roles did I welcome, which did I avoid?

Wholeheartedness. Was I wholeheartedly searching to do what was best for my students, or what served my own purposes?

And whatever tactic I employed, how did I come to know it was best or worst? Heck, what did it mean to do what was “best” for students—and did that adjective still apply?

With these questions in mind, I resorted to keep putting one foot in front of the other in this quest of becoming, in the hope that upon getting to a place of stable ground, I
would know I was there because it was where I was content, and the students were being nourished—and all was right in the world. But something inside me suggested that this end point could perhaps mark only a beginning.

**Reading the student; reading the craft**

After reading through a self-reflection on one particular evening, I began to see a couple of trends in my writing. One, I readily pointed out the “flaws” in my lesson and the “management mishaps” that resulted, but rarely did I mention those positive, life-giving moments that came about during the day through positive interactions with kids.

*And why was this?* I wondered. Why the attention to criticism and negative happenings? Perhaps I still saw the small group of wayward students or in some cases, the *one* wayward student, representing my shortcomings as a teacher. Somehow I just couldn’t reach these kids and I wanted desperately to know why.

Because of my intentional efforts to connect with the “outsiders,” I rarely mentioned those kids that were consistently working hard, demonstrating solid rapport within our community and showing themselves to be conscientious citizens. As a result, my self-reflections were colored and tinged with trying to pull the outer kids in, while neglecting to revel in the many others who were already in.

*When she looked out onto the sea of faces, she knew in an instant that someone was missing today.*

*Ah, and it was the keystone in the group whose very presence dictated the course of events in a typical day—the student whose comments, like a shot at a horse race, set off the rest with words that rang out across the room and perpetuated a chain of events deflecting out from its trajectory, leaving a ravaged wasteland in its*
path. The child whose behaviors, antics and personality occupied a great deal of her waking thoughts and teaching time. And to think, all this power was housed in a thirteen-year-old child.

I wanted desperately to be on the same side as this child, to figure out the why behind his disruptive behavior and draw him toward feeling like an integral and productive part of the classroom community. I figured if I could just get this student on my side, I would have won half the battle. Yet learning to read and interpret the disruptive child’s antics would require from me a well-orchestrated response, as suggested by my current “read” of *Love and Logic*.

This response would have to be guided by honest observation, reflection and the principles of shared thinking and accountability, which offered the student the opportunity to take ownership of his behavior. The opportunity to... This approach differed from past discipline approaches, which invoked top-down approaches that usually led to stiffened resolve in the student, and a forced compliance in teacher. Below you’ll find an excerpt taken from Data Set VIII that speaks to the reflection-as-response approach and accompanying questions considered as I began the art of applying both choice and consequence in my behavior toward the token precipitators.

*Gavin’s disrupting again with loud comments—granted they are usually in response to the class discussion, but still disruptive. His behavior says to me that he wants control, he wants to be heard. He interrupts other students and myself and calls out answers (some of them on-topic) when he should be raising his hand. These symptoms have worsened over the last few weeks. They seem to have precipitated around the time we changed seating arrangements. I think he sensed a loss of control when I placed him near the front of the class. Yes this could be. A couple days ago, he openly told me that he didn’t want to sit in the front of the class, that he felt uncomfortable there. I wonder if I changed the seating arrangement—and made a deal with*
Gavin that he could sit there as long as it didn’t become a problem for anybody else—if the disruptions might subside. I could try this approach and see where we go with it.

The behavior seems so antagonistic—a sort of struggle, a fight for control of the class, like the student and I are on opposite sides of a tragic game (a tug of war of sorts) and no one really wins but we both end up with sore arms.

How do I help the student know that we are both on the same side? Is this even possible? Will discipline always feel so oppositional? Is the very act of discipline inherently oppositional? What about the Love and Logic approach…OK, let’s see what happens if I do this: Go to the child after class, “Gavin, we’ve got a problem here. Do you know what it is? I’m finding that I get really distracted and can’t teach as well when I’m being interrupted with comments shouted across the room. What should we do to solve this problem? Let’s see… some options include…(list them)… You decide and then get back to me.”

Mmh… And if he doesn’t decide within a certain frame of time (by the next day), then he is telling me that he wants me to decide for him. Yeah, I think this could work (2.11.04).

**Finding voices: A word on community**

“We are usually too close to our lives to see what’s going on. Because it’s our story we’re trying to understand, we sometimes don’t know what’s true or false, what’s real and imagined. It often takes the eyes of someone to whom we can tell our story, bare our souls” (Eldredge, 2002, p. 125).

There is something nourishing and life-giving that happens when we disclose bits of ourselves through the seeking of truth in and through mutual community. I’m reminded of Palmer’s admonition of consensual truth-seeking when he writes, “The consensual process of truth seeking is based on the simple assumption that all of us thinking together are smarter than any one of us thinking alone” (Palmer, 1971, p. 94). I found this to be self-evident in the way in which my perception of the teaching realm broadened four-fold as a
result of numerous afternoon dialogues with a trusted colleague over the life and times of the public educator...with chocolate offering additional counsel.

The centrality of relationship and the value of mutual collaboration in this field cannot be understated. Through relationship, we vent and dream and share our frustrations, joys, and conundrums with another person who not only hears but relates to our stories while providing a breath of fresh air to a weary soul. I wager to say (with my limited scope) that the teaching endeavor is a vulnerable one in that your very self—the strong and the weak parts—is exposed daily to a volatile audience in an unpredictable environment...and when things don’t go as well as we’ve planned, the self (at least this self) experiences the brunt of the blow.

And yet dialoguing with this teacher with four years of teaching under her belt gave me affirmation that perhaps my struggles were not necessarily unique in myself and/or indicative of personality “flaws.” Rather, I listened to this teacher’s story and learned of a competent classroom manager with four years of experience who’d integrated authentic learning experiences and created amazing collaborative projects to boot. Yet she still struggled to identify what strategies worked (and for whom), when to act, and why the difference.

My passion for teaching revived, though in a new state, as a result of my experience co-teaching a forest unit in the sixth grade classroom across the hall. To stand in front of the students and share a story about beavers or jack pine pinecones or forest fires and to feel as if I was getting through to them felt like the flow of cool, living waters tumbling over a parched land. The kids were jazzed about what was going on, they actually wanted to share their stories and contribute to class discussions and take part in collaboratively exploring the
subject at hand. How refreshing. And it wasn’t long before the dyadic effect took effect and the energy from the kids’ questions cultivated my delight and rekindled the flame within.

I found myself reveling in a new reality or rather new perspective, in what McDonald dubbed, “a wild triangle of relations”—the unpredictable state of affairs where teachers find themselves playing a role that has a thousand and one effects on what seems like a thousand and one different students in an uncertain environment of energy fluctuations and multi-faceted hinges and complex corkscrew coordinates. And there is really no door that leads me to this state of affairs. The classroom environment is what it is. But my perception changed in the most unexpected ways.

All this to say that I couldn’t say whether it was simply development, and/or class structure already in place, and/or rich fellowship with the teacher, and/or simply the novelty of a new face in front of the class that contributed to the change in climate, but I had a hunch that the dynamic interplay among all of these variables had something to do with it. In using management strategies already established in this new classroom, I reveled in the newfound freedom of re-integrating emotion back into my craft, and being able to laugh with the kids and not have it escalate to the point of no return. And looking back now, perhaps another facet to this experience involved the affirmation of self that arose when my entertaining self of my outdoor education days—the passionate, fired up, dynamic self—could be expressed and perhaps even felt needed once again.

She read them over again, the words originating from the pen of Esme Codell, who wrote a humorous/painstaking account of her first-year teaching experience after enduring a most tumultuous ten-month drama teaching fifth grade in the inner city.

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“Even if I fail, I have to try and try and try. It may be exhausting but that is beside the point. The goal is not necessarily to succeed but to keep trying, to be the kind of person who has ideas and sees them through.”

Yes, there was something in Esme’s experience to which she could relate. Perhaps perseverance or follow-through should be one of Dewey’s preconditions of sorts, right up there with wholeheartedness, responsibility and openness. Surely there was something great and noble to be said for the art of persevering in spite of the tenuous uncertainty of the moment, and the lack of knowledge or assurance that our efforts will prove to be fruitful in the end.

********************************************************************************

Hope restored, March, 5, 2004

On this, the last day of her placement, she shuffled through the myriad of notes ushering sentiments of thanksgiving for teaching sixth, seventh and eighth grade classes. She sifted through letters, marveling at the span of development that could be read through the lines on the page. Could it really be the difference of only a three-year spread in our development from sixth to eighth grade? In some ways, the time frame spanned but a brief moment. In others, it spanned a decade…in the same way that her last seven months stretched a century or a minute, depending how you looked at it.

And maybe the “depending how you looked at it part” was really what mattered in the end?

As she sorted, she wondered about the kids with whom she’d “connected” and speculated as to how the rest of their educational stories would play out. Her thoughts drifted to those kids whose names she did not see, those kids whose presence woke her at the wee hours of the morning as thoughts churned and twisted, deriving hidden meaning from interactions, confrontations and displaced behavior. Did she reach them?

And through each memory of face and voice, her thoughts turned to the common thread that wove each of these perspectives together, that central component in all of her academic, social and reflective efforts.
Relationship. Just as long as teaching begets paradox, so does relationship ring true at the heart of the craft in and through which she believed miracles could happen.

“Sometimes it’s best to stop vying for control, to cease cluttering the space with words, and listen,” she reminded herself.

Listen to the voice of experience and the voice of reason and emotion.

Listen to the voice of the students.

Heeding these words, she turned to the words of Abbey, a sixth grade student with a passion for horses and the ability to make the mysteries of teaching seem, well, quite simple really. Reading over the child’s advice on “How to be great teacher,” she was reminded of her own tendency to turn teaching into a checklist of do’s and don’ts, rights and wrongs, and general rules of thumb. But she was also drawn to reading her students’ words and behaviors in search of underlying truths manifest therein in the attempt to move ever closer to the sacred union where teacher and student needs intersect—to move to a place, to a new stance where she hoped to find perspective. And so she read the advice on being a great teacher, steps one through five, recalling those parallel themes and uncertainties she’d encountered along her own journey.

1) Be fun. (authentic, hands-on, engaging learning experiences)

2) Love your students no matter how bad they are. (love your students through consequence)

3) Be a little strict when you need to! (kids want and need it—enforce boundaries with word and deed)

4) Bring a little something only if your class is really good. (incentives?)

5) And the most important is, Be Yourself! (?)

It was statement number five, the bit about the self that caught my eye. It seemed even a child recognized the value and merit in being true to the precious gift of self. But who was this self that got up in front of 100 kids every day and clamored on about stems and
protists and energy flow and respect? And how did this self ebb and flow and change in unimaginable ways in response to every single interaction and circumstance in her class? And if confronted by this changing self, how then will I know that which comprises the authentic, true self?

I wasn’t sure yet. And I’m still not sure. But something in the words of Joe McDonald (1996) ring true to the stirring in my heart when I consider the complex contraries of self in the teaching moment. He writes, “Although I never learn exactly where to stand in relation to my students, I develop a reliable sense of what is too close and what is too far. Within these limits, I craft a workable relationship for the moment—now here, now there. I tune my stand continually to the values that seize me” (p. 59).

I’ve heard it said that it takes a lifetime to learn to be fully human, and to teach. After this self-study, I’m inclined to agree. The fact that I survived the student-teaching experience to tell about it does not make me a better teacher. But rather through trying to make sense of the moments of dissonance—through active questioning and reflective listening—I have sharpened those skills readily called upon in the teaching discipline. And I’ve gained insight into the teaching moment while further defining my role as a teacher-learner in this dynamic process of growth, stabilization, disequilibrium and re-growth.

Although it might be more appropriate to “end” this narrative with question marks, I’ve decided to “end” it with periods and provide a look at those truths to which I’ve laid claim during my experience with middle school students, keeping in mind that these truths are apt to change into something wholly other as fulcrums shift and a new moment is lived.

With that disclaimer, I offer these personal snippets, not intending to sound like trite, well-fashioned, lovely wrapped packages of how-to-ends. But I offer them as general
themes, how-to-means, and reminders of those things with which I continue to wrestle along this journey.

**These things I know to be true…at this moment.**

- Observe. Be a fly on the wall who’s not afraid to swoop down and act.
- Flexibility. Stay limber in both thought and deed.
- Community. Each classroom is a community unto itself. Work hard on building it.
- Procedures. Respect my students enough to create -procedures.
- Learning. It’s mysterious, dynamic, and eternal. Let it be what it is.
- Culture. Each classroom is a culture by itself. Work hard to shape it in a positive light.
- Balance. Find the balance between offering a kid every opportunity to succeed without costing the class its opportunity.
- Differentiated learning. Tough stuff, but imperative. Welcome the uniqueness of each learner and scaffold the learning. Plug into the power of peer collaboration!
- Communication. Practice this skill to make it clear and concise.
- Details. Be about the business of details but keep the vision.
- Model. Model thinking, acting, questioning, responding. They’re always watching!
- Question. Seek, live the questions. Question my own practice, the collective code, and my role in all of it.
• Read. Read my students. Read good books.

• Listen. Listen to what I know. Listen to my students.

• Security. Create it so that kids have greater opportunity to flourish.

• Empowerment. Delegate responsibilities to students, tap into social learning and principles of democracy. With limits, this can happen.

• Transitions. Practice these…a lot. These make or break a class. Minimal time spent doing means more time learning.

• Enforceable statements. Use them often. Say “I will only call on people with raised hands”—and do it!

• Expectations. First things first, stated clearly and concisely. No room for error.

• Actions. They still speak louder than words.

• Limits. Kids want and need them. Try not to fear them.

• Confrontation. It’s going to happen. It needs to happen. Stay positive, but direct.

• Love…always.

• Consistency. Say what I’ll do and do what I say. (Easier said than done.)

• Humor. A must. Stay light whenever possible.

• Language. Understand that students speak first the language of the system. Know enough of the system so that you know how to reach students where they are, so that we can collectively move to where we could be.


• Self-Criticism. Celebrate the good in each day, and be gracious.

• Learning space. Don’t overcrowd this. Give my students private think-time.
• Teacher’s voice. Practice it and make it authentic.

• Discernment. Know when to speak, know when to ignore, know when to act.

• Collaboration. Seek it out. Find the much-needed support from sharing stories and strategies with colleagues and peers.

• Courage. It takes courage to face the crowd. Display it daily and allow myself to be known and transformed in unimaginable ways by my students.

• Imagination. Don’t censor it!

• Humility. Remember, there’s always something to learn.

• Patience. A rare gem. Display inexhaustibly.

• Relationship. The alpha and omega. Above all, preserve it.

• Flow. Set it, go with it, but don’t be swept away.

• Ideal. Dare to integrate and find the “Real” in it.

• Paradox. Expect it, and maybe even love it while trying to live within it. Seek solace in the dissonance, stay away from the poles.

• Passion. Learn to dance with my subject and translate it into a recognizable beat my kids understand. It may not be the be-all and end-all, but it’s contagious.

• Mercy. Show it to myself and to my students.

• Heart. No matter what, don’t lose it.

And what have I discovered in all of this? Overall, I’ve found that in teaching and reflecting and teaching again, my deepest joy becomes my deepest struggle. Despite my longing for absolutism in search of that happy, stable ground where dreams come true, it seems that I’ve come to see the teaching art as woven through with threads of gray as it
creates and is re-created with every new experience—both practical and perceptual in nature. And no matter how much I try to get it all figured out, I have an inkling that it will remain gray in its essence. Yet this grayness does not preclude those moments of clarity and the surprise of joy that arise when scrupulous deconstructing of uncertainties brings us to the reframing of foundations and the re-emergence of craft, and our ever drawing closer to humanity.

I see more clearly now that in the teaching moment, we daily bear witness to the unimaginable contrasts of human life—the rawness of behavior, the intricacies of thought, the exhilaration of defeat, the heartache of triumph, the confines of language, the novelty of prose. And it is when I am lost in this moment—in all that is and all that could be—that perhaps I am truly found, and very much alive.

And so I draw upon the very faculties that make me human and begin this journey, with the words of Parker Palmer providing a most appropriate preface for my story, suggesting that perhaps we stumble into the heart of the teaching moment when we find ourselves in the fellowship of uncertainty, “living faithfully within the paradoxes and tensions themselves, refusing to resolve them by collapsing into one pole or another, and allowing them to pull us open to that transcendent love in which all opposites find reconciliation” (p. 111).
Further Reflection and Questions

This journey seemed much like an upward crawl through rough, craggy terrain in search of stable ground...only to discover that stability is in the eye of the beholder. The study led me to expansive heights and drudging depths where I confronted my long-held assumptions behind my practice and philosophy and also considered the facets of personality and history that shape my identity as teacher.

In so doing, I’ve been called to deconstruct and reframe notions of good teaching in the effort to be able to stand up tall and shout, “I know this to be true!” And though I did discover a fair amount about myself and my students and the perceptions that hold us fast, I see how good, reflective teaching emerges not so much when we seek the answers in effort to get “there,” but rather when we reflect on the process of living out our questions and allow our questions to create and define our moments.

I’ve come to see that the classroom offers a setting in which the scientific process may be played out on a daily basis in that we conjure up ideas about life and learning, enter the classroom to test them out, and then go about the task of tweaking, trying out, and deconstructing what notions we once prided ourselves in attaining—all the while striving to glean some “sense” out of the events of the day. And I would speculate that in growing to live and love questions and embracing contraries, we are drawn ever closer toward the heart of good teaching and the heart behind what I was trying to do with this project.

Because I’ve already written a “book” that speaks at length of the personal and professional insights unlocked in this study, I’m going to skip to the “if I were to do it again”
part. My initial AR design looked not so much at the self as the author of perception and reality, but rather examined the methods by which I might become an effective place-based (project-based) educator.

However, with time of the essence (as is usually the case with me!), I was forced to switch my study to something requiring a little less “together-ness.” Knowing my propensity to dwell in the introspective realm of things, I jumped at the opportunity to design an AR study that would explore a pre-service teacher’s professional and perceptual development. But if I were to do the project over—and given I had all the time in the world—I would have liked to have infused a great deal more student input into the study. It would be fascinating to document the perceptual and academic transformations of the middle-school mind and compare their course of development with that of pre-service teacher.

Ultimately, this self-study leads me to the place where I now stand, having arrived at a point in time when I am considered by the State of Oregon to be “prepared and competent” to take on the challenges of managing my own classroom. And although I have no script to read nor trail to follow; and only a myriad of conclusions and questions sketched in pencil and, goodness knows, holding more questions than answers, I am pleased to say that I approach this endeavor with hope and confidence, having gained enough perspective into the paradox that is teaching to boldly proclaim that when we are weak, then we are strong.

Yes, I’ve arrived at a good starting place. But one question calls out, louder than the rest: “Where to now?” And to reply, I hear only the words offered by the Cat in Alice’s Wonderland: “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”
References


Appendices

Appendix A—Video Observations, Mentor
1.28.04

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What you said/did</th>
<th>Response from Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“May I have your attention?”</td>
<td>Students quieted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hold on.”</td>
<td>No change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Guys, I hear other conversations and it’s hard to hear people.”</td>
<td>Students quieted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We’re stopping way too many times—it will be a minute if we stop again.”</td>
<td>Students quieted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You repeated and wrote on board their observations—good feedback from students.</td>
<td>Students talking. Were they supposed to recording their observations too?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“OK—We’re listening right now.”</td>
<td>Students quieted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Listen up—no more talking.”</td>
<td>Students quieted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave assignment-work with partner, draw critter with adaptation to environment. 5 minutes—then we’ll make presentations?</td>
<td>Lots of talking. Kids moving around room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You moved around room answering specific questions—good. You stayed on far side of room most of time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You added more details to the assignment halfway through—“present in story or poem.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“OK, have a seat, guys.”</td>
<td>Some sat down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You announced about progress reports, missing assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You had them sit quietly for 1 minute</td>
<td>They were very quiet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“OK, guys see you tomorrow”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were they supposed to do with their work?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B—Video Observation, Self

1.28.04

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Note-making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Daily Science—students working on it. Some talking. 3 minutes for DS</td>
<td>Giving too much time for daily science.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Asking questions during daily science. Using lots of words like “appropriate,” “classify.”</td>
<td>Yes, I talk a great deal. Feel tension in getting control. Adjust daily science to get kids more involved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. David makes a comment about tundra.</td>
<td>David’s comments tend to go on and on, but the class has been quite respectful of what he has to say. He is a wealth of information, that’s for sure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Jamie makes comment.</td>
<td>I have a difficult time listening to one kid talk and not losing the rest of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Clarifies potential and kinetic energy to review from yesterday.</td>
<td>This talk went fairly well. Kids seemed to get it at the time, but know there are many who are still confused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Ask questions. Breanna has hand up. I don’t call on her. She puts her head down on the table.</td>
<td>Favoring hand-raisers. Begin calling on those who don’t have hand up to more equitably distribute attention to all kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. David answers question.</td>
<td>Called on David again. Struggle with this because he raises his hand a lot and I call on him a great deal because I want everyone to feel included. I don’t want to not call on him because he always knows the answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Breanna raises hand again. Allow people to call out to get through the lesson.</td>
<td>Ignoring people with hands raised. Allowing loud folks to answer questions, dictate flow of class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Circulate around the room. Gabe yells out “dangerous” energy. I ignore it.</td>
<td>First detectable “smart” remark by Gabe goes ignored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Using lots of words to explain energy conversion. Yelling out in class.</td>
<td>My actions say that I don’t care if you yell out in class. What cannot be seen by my outward appearance is the growing frustration within. I’m getting harried and frustrated at myself for my resistance in addressing it. Truly, it was no longer the child’s problem, but my own.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C—Sample Synthesis Statement
2.11.04

I think the big thing missing from today’s lesson was something for the kids to *do*. I did have one activity from the text that they were to do, but ultimately, there wasn’t much engagement happening. For about 30 minutes, I really gave them nothing to do but listen and discuss. Surely, this tried their patience.

Another folly I engaged in (greater than the former) was to not call Gavin out for his comments. He was being disruptive and mildly rude at times, and I should not have tolerated it. But I continued through the lesson, ignoring the conflict and subsequently had numerous students come up and ask me what we were doing during group work. There seems to be a trend happening here. I do my best to make it perfectly clear what the kids should do and still I get the “huh?” look from several students.

In the last two weeks, three of my lessons brought the response, “What are we doing?” from five or six students, which suggests to me that we have a problem. Either

1) the students are not paying attention, or
2) I’m not explaining myself well enough, or
3) someone around them is talking and making it difficult to follow along.

Considering there *was* a bit of chatter happening in the back of class today, I’m inclined to think that chatter was a factor and, therefore I am not doing my job in insisting and waiting for quiet before instruction.

I am going to watch the videotape in search of insight on this matter. On Tuesday when I watch the tape of my lesson, I will make a point of keeping track of student activity, focusing on the behavior of the students and really homing in on student

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behavior and conduct. I must 'fess up to the reality that I tend to avoid points of confrontation and/or conflict in the classroom and get sort of wrapped up in my lesson. But I need to remember that even small bouts of talking are distracting to students so that they miss the directions. I must keep an eye out for this and hold kids accountable.

I think a couple strategies that may work to alleviate some of the confusion and repetition on my part is to more readily call on kids (especially if they’re talking) to repeat what was said before dismissing students to their task. I really need to start being intentional about this because there is no reason why I should have to repeat directions umpteen times because kids weren’t listening. One more thing I must start doing is to prepare overheads with the directions written out so that the kids can read what they are to do as a class and it comes from their lips—not mine. Yes, I think this may be an effective tool that will require a bit of proactive planning on my part. (2.11.04)
Appendix D—Artifact Analysis

2.11.04

Student A: Completed assignment in entirety—included energy conversion problems, map and dimensions. 4/4

Student B: Completed assignment in entirety, but had some confusion with classroom dimensions. 3.5/4

Student C: Completed map and dimensions but didn’t do problems. 3/4

Student D: Completed assignment in entirety—energy conversion problems, map and dimensions. 4/4

Student E: Completed assignment in entirety—energy conversion problems, map and dimensions. 4/4

Student F: Incomplete. Did energy problems, map, but not dimensions. 3/4

Student G: Student completed classroom map and dimensions but didn’t do energy conversion problems. 3/4
Appendix E—Authentic Learning

How to Teach Learning

Sing it
Seal it in an envelope
Twist it under a bottle cap
“You are a Winner!”
Tie it to the leg of a carrier pigeon
and let it soar.
Hoard it greedily, with your back turned
Then share it with a magnanimous grin
And glittering eyes
Make it a surprise,
shining like a quarter
under a pillow
Whisper it,
Like the tow of summer’s breath
through the willow
Or
Hide it
just between the tart skin and sweet flesh
of an apple
Make it
Forbidden
Make it
Delicious
Then
let the children
bite.

by Esme Raji Codell

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Appendix F—Actual

Grasping for Air

Four papers
Three worksheets
Too little time
I should have planned ahead
As time passed by
    Tick
    Tick
    Tick
Where are my papers
    And my pens
I better begin
Fore the day ends
    Too much work
    Too little time
Why
Isn't quality
    More important than quantity?
I know, because it's easier to change lead to gold
    Than a curriculum that's old.

by Richard Bordeaux