

## INTRODUCTION

### *Becoming User-Centered, Reflective Practitioners*

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The morning of August 21, 1986 promised to be very hot. I was up early, at 0530, to jog and get ready for the drive over Storm King Mountain to teach my first college class. My destination was a classroom in Thayer Hall, a magnificent old stone building that had once been the largest riding hall in the world, containing the stables for cavalry soldiers stationed at this prestigious fort along the Hudson River known as West Point. I wanted to get in the classroom early, knowing the students would show up promptly at 0730.

Since completing my first graduate degree and moving with my family from California to New York, I had spent two months preparing for the first-year composition class, reading all of the essays I would teach as models, studying the syllabus, which asked the students to write nine assignments resulting in five completed essays, and talking to new and experienced faculty. But even with that preparation, I was nervous; I didn't know what to expect, having never taught writing before. The only classrooms I had worked in during the previous nine years were located in tracked vehicles, as soldiers working for me prepared to fire ninety-seven pounds of steel at targets six to twelve miles away; in staging areas or headquarters' buildings and tents, as we prepared to deploy to our next position; or in motor pools, as we stood in front of (or more often crawled under) vehicles that weren't working properly. In these "classrooms," I had worked with many men and women from varied backgrounds and socioeconomic situations; I knew they liked to talk given a chance, and I had discovered that if they felt they had a say in the matter at hand, they were more likely to respond and learn. I also learned that they had a lot to teach me, if I would listen.

As I stood in the front of the room, with Annie Dillard's words on the board behind me ("Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it" [30]), I watched as young men and women in crisp gray uniforms marched in quickly and silently and performed something known in the vernacular of West Point as "taking seats." Thus, we began. To their and my relief, the formalities, although never absent, faded quickly as I asked them to talk to me

about what they had learned during the past ten weeks of their introductory military training and initiation, affectionately known at West Point as "Beast Barracks." And talk they did. That first day of class, even though we didn't actually discuss the material, proved to be important in establishing a context for future discussions as well as for building a classroom community. Much happened in class, and I tried to be attentive to it. After class, and after sharing some "opening day" stories with other new instructors, I thought about what had happened, and realized that something valuable had occurred in my class that I might want to remember, something about learning from students, about studying not only the material but also the context of teaching, seemed to be important to a class devoted to writing about ways of seeing and of knowing. I made some notes in the journal I kept.

Two days later, the department chair, Colonel Capps, came in to observe my 0730 class, unannounced. We were discussing Annie Dillard's essay "Seeing." The cadets were struggling with the essay. But realizing that the Colonel was in the room, they perked up and seemed to try even harder. Even with that extra effort, the discussion seemed rather lackluster, particularly when I compared it with their efforts the class before. Most of the students found Dillard fascinating, but they had a hard time finding connections to their own life or to their writing. Watching them struggle reminded me of the stories Dillard tells in the essay of the newly sighted, patients who had cataract operations that restored their sight. These patients often found the "tremendous size of the world" overwhelming (27).

I tried several strategies, including making connections between events in my life, such as watching my young children grow, learn to see, and articulate what they saw. I tried introducing a few poems, including Robert Frost's "Design," into the discussion. I asked the students to talk about walks in the woods or staring up at stars at night, activities Dillard discussed. Nothing worked well.

Afterward, when speaking with Colonel Capps in his office, I had a chance to talk about the class. He was positive about the class and my efforts, and I shared with him my concerns. We talked about ways to help students use the essays we were reading and wondered whether or not such professional models were the most effective means of teaching writing. We didn't reach any conclusive answers, but just talking about these issues seemed to help me as I struggled to make sense of what was going on inside my classrooms, as I wrestled with questions familiar to many writing teachers: Should you use models from professional writers? How explicit should you be when faced with confusion or what seems to be a lack of understanding? Should you resort to lecture when the dialogic, Socratic method seems to be stagnating?

I didn't know it at the time, but I was very lucky. As I talked with Colonel Capps, I was learning about teaching in ways that continue to serve me well today. In that classroom and afterward in Colonel Capps's office, I learned the importance of valuing my students' experiences, of creating a dialogic and democratic classroom, and of teacher talk, of trusting a person who due to

"his long acquaintance with [his] subject [has] a right to judge" (Newman, qtd. in Dunne 35). Donald Schön calls what I was beginning to do "reflective practice": the practice of teachers proposing and investigating problems themselves (1983, *Reflective Practitioner*).

Colonel Capps, a veteran teacher, obviously believed that teachers could learn about teaching and become more effective in the classroom. Not everyone shares his belief. In *The Vocation of a Teacher*, Wayne Booth describes an encounter with a recent winner of the Quantrell Prize for Undergraduate Teaching at the University of Chicago. The teacher, roused by a poster that advertised a presentation about "The Student as Text," said to Booth, "You know and I know that all that stuff is crap. Nothing is really known about how to teach well; the most that could be known would be how to make students like the class and the professor and thus believe, probably erroneously, that they have been taught something worth learning." As Booth, a teacher who believes in the value of reflective practice, continues the story, he adds that he asked another colleague to explain "what is really *known* about teaching," and the colleague said, "'Not much! . . . There's really not a lot of hard knowledge to report'" (209).

There may not be much "hard knowledge to report," and perhaps little or nothing is known, but it's odd and even a bit unsettling to hear college teachers, especially those who win teaching awards, make such assertions or hesitate to make pronouncements about teaching. My guess is the reason lies within: although they may know their content area well, few have ever taken a formal seminar on teaching or reflected upon their teaching (Eble; Allen et al.; Grossman). As Gilbert Highet said, "most people are clumsy at learning and teaching, not because they are stupid, but because they have not thought about it" (5).

### THE MÖBIUS LOOP, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Assertions such as the one Booth's colleague made are anathema to those of us who teach technical communication. Ours, much like the field of composition studies, is a pedagogical discipline. We focus on ways language can be used to create meaning and effect change. To understand the complexity of our task, which involves an understanding of both language and strategies of use, I propose that the teaching of writing be refigured as an "art," a *techné* in which the form/content dichotomy becomes a Möbius loop. In such a loop, which is continuous and turning constantly on itself, theory becomes practice, and teaching becomes research. Refigured in this way, teachers shift from an instrumental approach to teaching, focusing on forms and genres, toward a rhetorical approach that explores how these forms and genres are adapted and appropriated by specific discourse communities to fit specific situations. By so doing, we can recognize not only the complexity of our discipline but also the knowledge-generating element of teaching and the fact that because what we do is so intimately tied up with how we do it, we benefit from

studying and reflecting on our teaching. This work will help us become graceful teachers who reflect on and think about our work.

Few of us, even those very qualified ones who may even have been technical writers, come to the field with prior teacher training. Although some of us may be born teachers, most of us aren't. Those who aren't can, however, become more effective and learn our art by working with other teachers, those whom Aristotle calls master-craftsmen. As Kenneth Eble says, "teaching skill is not so much taught as it is nurtured into existence" (154). By working with others, what I've called *researching with teachers* (Dubinsky), and working collaboratively with our students, we can learn more than "how to" teach. Through dialogue, observation, and practice with those who have gathered an implicit knowledge over time, we can begin to acquire "know-how." This work would augment a course in methods or theories of teaching writing that you may be taking.

As we are nurtured and learn to think about our teaching, we begin to understand the methods by which we can become *user-centered, reflective practitioners*, a term I use to describe competent, knowledgeable practitioners (Dubinsky). Linking teaching and reflection is not something new, but it is critical to success in the classroom. Reflection, in terms of judgment and forethought, has long been associated with the concept of pedagogy, which, etymologically, is linked to the study or practice of guiding or rearing children (van Manen). Dewey, building on the notion of forethought, explained that reflective teaching "enables us to know what we are about when we act. . . . convert[ing] action that is merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive into intelligent action" (211, *Selected Writings*). He recognized, however, that reflective thought does not occur naturally; it involves an attitude and a method consisting of steps, which usually begin with "perplexity, confusion, or doubt," move through "conjectural anticipation" into "examination . . . exploration, [and] analysis," and, after clarifying the problem and tentative suggestions, concludes with "a plan of action" (1973, 494-506).

Embedded in this attitude is the importance of being aware of the theories behind your practice and taking the time to observe and reflect upon the practice of those theories. Through study and practice, we learn that teaching is more than a "technology that can be mastered; it is an art, and the artist is the researcher *par excellence*" (Rudduck and Hopkins 60). At that point, we occupy the Möbius loop of theory and praxis, and become graceful, reflective craftpersons who are mastering the *technê* of teaching.

### TECHNÊ AND PRAXIS

Teaching is both a making (*technê*) and a doing (*praxis*), concepts with roots in classical rhetoric. For many teachers and scholars in our field, classical rhetoric, which once was at the center of pedagogy in our country (Halloran), has again become central to our work because of its emphasis on the connection between the effective use of language and the public good. Because technical communicators work in the public forum in areas such as business,

industry, and government, the work they do has a hand in shaping the affairs of human society. Thus, to prepare our students for the responsibilities they will face, we need to teach them not only to create good arguments and well-thought-through discourse, but also to consider the difference between "what is" and "what ought to be" (Whitburn). Our work involves more than teaching our students strategies or forms; it also involves asking them to consider the impact of those strategies and forms on public policy. We teach them to become user-centered practitioners, to take their audience and its needs into consideration always.

Aristotle was one of the first scholars and teachers to attempt to create a logical framework to explain rhetoric and its uses. For him, *technê* was an intellectual or rational state that was concerned with making, and to be an artist, he believed you must reflect upon your work by studying (*theorein*) how something is made. The interesting distinction he makes is that the end (*telos*) of productive knowledge (*technê*) is not in the product itself, but in the use of that product by the user (Johnson; Atwill). Therefore, the best judges of the *making* are not the makers but the users. As Aristotle said in his *Politics*, "There are some arts whose products are not judged of solely, or best, by the artists themselves . . . for example, the knowledge of the house is not limited to the builder only; the user, in other words, the master, of the house will actually be a better judge than the builder, just as the pilot will judge better of a rudder than the carpenter, and the guest will judge better of a feast than the cook" (*Politics* iii, 11, 1282a, 18-24).

This idea presents two difficulties for teachers. The first is that what we *make* isn't something tangible. What we *make* is an environment rich with possibility and ideas that we hope will lead to an awakening, a change, or some growth in the students themselves. The students may be the best judges of that awakening, change, or growth because they are the ones who will *use* what we have *made*. Unfortunately, we can't always *see* the change; we can't easily gauge the quality of our work. There is no way to *test* it consistently or effectively (although many have and continue to try). We, therefore, need to rely upon the users.

The second problem is that much of what we, as teachers, do is often directed toward some social goal relating to the function of education or the students' role(s) in society, which puts our work in a permeable zone that combines both *technê* and *phronesis* (the virtue of moral life that allows and enhances the prospects for ethical character). Joseph Dunne argues that for the kinds of fields that involve a "shifting field of forces" (315), where the material is not stable (as is woodcraft) but human, then what the artist must deploy is a "'phronetic' *technê*, i.e., one whose responsiveness to the situation is not fully specifiable in advance and which is experiential, charged with perceptiveness, and rooted in the sensory and emotional life" (355).

If we accept these conditions, then our art, the teaching work we do on a daily basis, becomes a matter of conduct. The questions or dilemmas we face concern *whose good* and *for what end*, and the teacher's ethos or character is always in the forefront (whether explicitly or implicitly).

These dilemmas or problems are quite real and often profound. There is a difference between the end a student may desire and one the teacher may seek. Because we are limited and our material and context are constantly changing and indeterminate, we can't *know* for certain what is best. Therefore, to achieve an end that can be evaluated by the user, we need to depend upon a clear knowledge of our students, which is usually achieved over time via reflection and dialogue with others (both other teachers and the users who will use that which we produce) to achieve an end that is good for them.

### LEARNING FROM STORIES

Maxine Greene has said, "The sounds of storytelling are everywhere" (ix). One reason is that storytelling helps human actions become intelligible by providing a means for people to negotiate their personal experiences. Such negotiations are important because experience is "the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed" (de Laurentis), and this construction happens, whether we like it or not, in our own classes. We could ignore it, but by not doing so, by making it public, we can begin to deal with the vicissitudes of human intentions (Bruner, qtd. in Witherell and Noddings 3)—and, by dealing with those intentions, we can begin to come to terms with consequences resulting from those intentions. Dealing with the concepts of intentions and consequences is especially important in a narrative in which the author wants to acknowledge his goals openly.

To examine this notion of intentions and consequences, illustrate what it means to learn from and with someone, and emphasize how important it is for teachers to be aware of their students' needs, I would like to examine a story about learning and teaching from *Taran Wanderer*, a book in a series by Lloyd Alexander that I read to my children when I returned again to graduate school, after teaching at West Point, to learn to become a teacher in our field. Near the end of the book, Taran, who has been raised by a foster father, goes off in search of his identity, hoping to find knowledge of his parents and birthright. As he does, he apprentices at a series of different professions: blacksmith, weaver, and potter. What he learns is essential both to how he sees himself and to my discussion of *technê*, teaching, and learning.

Taran's first encounter is with the blacksmith, Hevydd. He greets him by calling out, "Master Smith . . . I am called Taran the Wanderer and journey seeking a craft to help me earn my bread. I know a little of your art and ask you to teach me more" (221). The smith is reluctant to help at first, but Taran persists and is given a chance. After an initial trial, the smith claims, "of the art, indeed, you know little. And yet . . . you have the sense of it" (223). He takes Taran on as an apprentice due to his possessing that "sense."

What happens next is important. Taran isn't put to work making a sword (his goal) immediately; instead he must learn the materials of the craft: the forge, with its roaring fire, the bars of metal, the hammer, and the anvil. The two work side by side, and after many ill-fated tries, Taran ultimately produces "a blade worth bearing" (226). However, he is not

happy, claiming that he has learned that he is not a swordsmith (a master craftsman). Hevydd's response illustrates a key point about the idea of teachability. He says: "How then! . . . You've the makings of an honest swordsmith, as good as any in Prydain" (227). What he tells Taran is that the art of swordsmithing *can be taught and learned*. It may be true that Taran may not be a natural artist, born to the craft. But, he can be "as good as any" if he continues to work at it.

In this example, Taran is able to achieve a relative mastery by learning the materials, practicing his skills, and testing them, while in a dialogic relationship with the master craftspeople. He achieves a measure of success because he studied, reflected, and dialogued with the masters of the individual crafts. At the same time, he also learns that what he was working toward couldn't be mastered and set into stone, so that if one followed a set of prescriptions, the result would always be the same. One must be flexible, willing to learn as the situations change.

Taran's teacher also demonstrates his skill of teaching. In each instance, the master takes time to talk with and listen to the young apprentice. Hevydd gives Taran a chance *because* he took the time to learn enough about him to recognize that he had "the sense of it." He studies his student, reflects on his abilities, and sets up a program of study to develop that "sense" into an art. That study involved another important step in the process: reflection. Joseph Dunne argues that "in being initiated into the practice of teaching, student-teachers need not only experience in the classroom but also the right conditions for reflecting on this experience—so that reflectiveness (which we have all the time been clarifying under the name 'phronesis') can become more and more an abiding attitude or disposition. . . . The main aim of 'educational studies' should be to contribute to the development of this disposition" (369).

### INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Isocrates, speaking about teaching rhetoric, says, "For ability, whether in speech or in any other activity, is found in those who are well endowed by nature and have been schooled by practical experience. Formal training makes men more skillful and more resourceful in discovering the possibilities of a subject; for it teaches them to take from a readier source the topics which they otherwise hit upon in haphazard fashion" (48). Isocrates recognized that there are those who are naturally talented and who will succeed without much help, but he argued that "formal training makes men more skillful," *even if they are naturally talented*. This training is what leads to knowledge of the skill, for it helps one to think about it, which for Aristotle was a critical component of *technê*.

To become reflective practitioners who create knowledge, we have to learn about the art of teaching, which means understanding the concept of *know-how* and becoming aware of the theories we subscribe to and embed in our practice. Then by instituting changes that reflect the classical roots of rhetoric we

draw from, we can become *technitai* and create a discipline devoted to dialogic practice.

### TEACHERS MUST ALSO LEARN

I use the title of an article by Charles Gragg as the section heading to emphasize that just as there is a theory/practice binary we need to overcome, there is also a teaching/learning binary. Teachers who believe they have mastered a subject thoroughly will often become complacent about opening doors to new ideas or theories. This complacency is detrimental to developing a *technê of teaching*. Because, as Gragg says, "teaching is a social act," (15) it necessarily involves fostering relationships among people, and to successfully create such relationships, one must adopt an attitude of openness, of collaboration with our students and with other teachers (Comeaux; Dubinsky). We saw such an attitude in both Taran and Hevydd, and we need to develop it in ourselves and our students.

This book is designed to help you learn about the discipline by gaining an understanding of the critical issues those in the field face. My hope is that it will help you become more informed, more receptive to change, and more inclined toward reflection. One needs to understand that most situations are uncertain, unique, and require space for what Donald Schön calls "reflection-in-action." While the connection between "reflection" and "self-critical enquiry" may seem evident and while the two terms are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction highlighted by Robert Tremmel. Citing Schön, Tremmel argues for a broader approach to "reflection," an approach with roots in the Zen Buddhist tradition of "mindfulness" (435). He calls it "the art of paying attention," and argues that such an art, akin to "thinking on your feet" (Schön, qtd. on 436), has roots as far back as Plato's belief that "'learning' is really 'recollection of what the soul has encountered in other worlds'" (435). "Paying attention" or "mindfulness" prods the teacher to formulate her implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge, which can provide her with the skills she needs to solve problems she encounters. It is this capacity for "mindfulness" or reflection that enables one to discover "know-how."

Thinking about this responsibility for "mindfulness" brings to mind lines from "Incantation," a poem by Czeslaw Milosz:

Human Reason is beautiful and invincible  
 No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,  
 No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.  
 It establishes the universal ideas in language,  
 And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice  
 With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.  
 It puts what should be above things as they are.

As teachers, we always are working with things as they are but pushing toward things as they should be. We work in and with language, and regardless of our

feelings toward the enlightenment or the "universal," most of us believe we're working on issues of justice. To accomplish our goals, we must recognize that the knowledge of the classroom is valuable because it is theoretical. We recognize the tension between "is" and "ought," between "theory" and "practice," all the while knowing that the our ability to understand those tensions, as well as the contradictions caused by these tensions that result in the classroom, can lead to a more productive knowledge. There is nothing certain about teaching, but there is a knowledge that is generated as a result of it. Recognizing that teaching is an art that generates knowledge for use by people will take you a long way toward becoming a reflective practitioner.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Introducing Theoretical Approaches*