

On the Edge of Chaos: In Search of a Process

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"Accepting the ways of others while figuring out how best to interfere". That advice haunted this teacher turned professor turned writer as she struggled to find the best way to actualize this mandate given her by the dramatist, Dorothy Heathcote. The personal journey of the fine tension between acceptance and interference is the tale told in "On the Edge of Chaos".

Introduction

The scientific search for the definitive method, for the components of teacher effectiveness, has challenged researchers for decades. The search fails. Teaching is too complex, too elusive, too intimate for one simple answer. Only a personal journey can provide the meaning educators seek. Such searches meander and take a life-time to complete. Mine included an upbringing by a radical family which shaped my attitudes. Teaching high school at a young age gave me hope and experience, studying led me astray and brought me back again, a professorship provided broader perspectives, and becoming a writer provided a voice I could trust.

The journey, and the narrative inquiry of this paper, ends in the art galleries and theatres of Spain with a graduate student. Together we recognize how the journey, more developed and integrated, brings us to that wonderful edge of chaos.

In the Beginning

I was nineteen when I began teaching composition at Riverside Collegiate in Prince Albert Saskatchewan in 1963. I had very little knowledge to offer my students. But I had a great attitude. It was one given me by radical parents who believed to the death in the right of free choice.

As a consequence, when it came to selecting topics to write about, I never subjugated my students to the proverbial, "What did you do over your summer holidays" or even worse, "pretend you are a penny and write about your travels."

I offered my students the choice of writing about things they knew and cared about. I was to learn the significance of this decision years later when I began to study the teaching of writing in earnest.

The freedom I afforded students was a genuine one, born of a deep belief in self-expression and personal growth.

The Self must ... be allowed the freedom to engage in expression in order to realize itself. Because the Self is realized by fulfilling its own chosen structure or form, any externally imposed structure or form, any external restriction, limitation or requirement will necessarily exclude some part of the Self and will prevent its full realization. (Van Bergen, 2007, p. 37)

The method I used to have students "improve" their writing involved one basic model – learn from the experts. I combined the study of literature with the teaching of composition and while we practiced the skill of reading as writers, we discovered that abstract writing didn't excite us. Writing that excited us was concrete, alive, full of detail. We applied the "show don't tell" as a golden rule. It seemed so simple then.

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on one point it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the reader is to be specific, definite and concrete. (Strunk, & White, 2000, p. 21)

Another discovery we made by reading as writers was that good stories were both specific and general. Specific to the writer, but in order for the reader to respond, the work had to be generalizable, having universal appeal. Ah, a bit more complex. Universal suggested we had to understand life from more than a personal vantage point. Therein lies the power of metaphor. Without it, we cannot imagine the life of the Other. We cannot imagine what it is to be someone else. "Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force; it makes possible the power to envision the stranger's heart" (Ozick, 1989, p. 279). "Metaphor is the lifeblood of all art if it is not art itself. Metaphor is our vocabulary for connecting what we're experiencing now with what we have experienced before. It's not only how we express what we remember, it's how we interpret it - for ourselves and others" (Tharp, 2003, p. 64). "If you want to make people cry," instructs writer and teacher James Bonnet (2006) as he defines the universal necessity in writing - "separate or reunite two characters the audience cares deeply about, and that will put them in touch with the tragedy of separation deep within their own souls" (p. 243).

Both the mantras of “dramatize” and “have universal appeal” were important discoveries, made all that more important because the students had discovered them themselves. My students produced excellent work, which won the school prizes and appeared in the school year book. I was pleased, but not satisfied. It didn’t take me long to realize that I could take students to a certain point in their writing but that was it. I couldn’t make good writing even better. Dorothy Heathcote once described the job of teaching in a manner which has stayed with me ever since: “To remain accepting of the ways of others while figuring out how best to interfere” (1978, pers. comm.). I had been raised “to be accepting of the ways of others” but I wasn’t trained in the world of how to interfere in the writing. I was stuck. So many pieces to the puzzle, so many aspects to the world of creating opportunity for students and leading them, giving them skill and ownership. What did it take to be accepting? A generous heart. What did it take to interfere? An informed mind. No simple tasks. Looking inward and outward and sideways. Looking up and down and around. Being aware with everything you had, body, heart, mind, soul. Discovering processes. Interfering without blocking. Creating liminal spaces. A spiritual curriculum moves beyond the rational and analytic ways of understanding the world and favors intuitive and emotional ways of knowing as we focus our perceptions on building connections, seeking unity and feeling centered; in other words, being mindful. Artful research (and teaching) are spiritual because they are evidenced by care and compassion, joy, responsive mindfulness, and an embodied esthetic awareness (Irwin, & Sameshima, 2008).

I was aware that the kind of work I needed to do was transformative, not manipulative. Manipulation is when you act to change others. Transformation occurs when you change as an act of empowerment. Because it is the nature of meaningful relationships, when you change, your students change (Kyle, 1998, p. 83). This “interfering” was to embark me on a lifetime journey. A journey that was to lead me to embrace the archetype of the magician, the creature who lives in the In-Between, “where we are inherently magical because we cannot help being catalytic agents in the transformation of the culture (Pearson, & Seivert, 1995, p. 7).

The journey I had to take was itself, a hero’s journey, a journey in which I was presented with a problem, a challenge, which prevented me from remaining comfortable in my present position. Studying texts on the teaching of composition provided little help as I earned a BA and B.Ed. Grammar, spelling, sentence-combining, imitating prose models were still the song of the day. During my studies for an M.Ed. the writing process movement reached its height but I found few actual ways to “interfere” in the notions of write, rewrite, edit. My students already revised drafts. That seemed common sense to us. Hadn’t all the great writers said it?

We had read Hemingway’s explanation of why he rewrote the last page to *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times. “Interviewer: What was it that had stumped you? Hemingway: Getting the words right” (The Paris Review, 2006, p. 39).

As a PhD student, I happened upon two aspects of my education that reshaped my life’s journey. First, I studied more psychology, especially the work on perceptual psychology by Combs and Soper. Their research revealed that successful professional

helpers (educators, counselors, medical professionals) are self-revealing rather than self-concealing; are freeing rather than controlling, are altruistic rather than narcissistic and are concerned with larger goals rather than smaller ones (Combs, 1965, p. 84).

How one perceives the world matters. I was able to be accepting because I had been taught to perceive purposes in an open accepting way. Choose your parents carefully, is all I can say about that. It is the luck of the draw. It is also one of the most complex issues facing educators today. How can we learn to be open and accepting of the ways of others if we do not feel accepted ourselves? And how can we change our self-concept if we were not valued and respected at an early age?

I felt validated in my ideas around trusting my students and giving them ownership. It explained why the first half of Heathcote's seemingly contradictory idiom of "accepting the ways of others" came so easily for me. It would be awhile before the "while figuring how best to interfere" would follow.

I studied with the southern writer I had fallen in love with when I first read his touching novel, *Gypsy's Curse*. I was lucky enough to study under the gentle hand of Harry Crews. I began to write fiction.

I was coming closer to discovering some truth around the teaching of writing. I was close to learning "how best to interfere". It had only taken me 10 years...but I was closer. I almost lost my way when research consumed me as I prepared for my comps and the writing of my own dissertation. Work by brilliant researchers who had become the gods and goddesses of the study of composition such as Scardamalia, Bereiter, Hillocks, Hayes and Flower, Rosenblatt, Applebee, Goodman, Emig, Shaughnessy, even Graves gave good insights, demonstrated so much understanding about composition, but still did not give me what I needed.

We are trained to think, at the university, that the answer lies in study, in examination, in rational inquiry. But that path is a slippery slope. It leads us to believe that the answer can be found, applied, tested and then all is well. It gives the illusion of a relatively simple intellectual process. But teaching is far from simple. There is the tension, always, between acceptance and interference. It is a matter of timing, of knowledge. And it is a matter of the heart. Your heart and the heart of each and every individual student. "Effective teaching of imaginative expression calls for a special commitment to artistry in addition to a set of informal instructional strategies and styles that are effective for the rest of the English curriculum" (Wagner, 1991, p. 800).

I was aware of the sensitive nature of putting pen to paper, of expressing ideas important to you that are going to be put to public scrutiny.

The first steps of a creative act are like groping in the dark: random and chaotic, feverish and fearful, a lot of busy-ness with no apparent or definable end in sight....For me, these moments are not pretty. I look like a desperate woman, tortured by the simple message thumping away in my head: 'you need an idea.' (Tharp, 2003, p. 91)

I was familiar with the notion of "cooking" an idea when one begins to write. It was my responsibility to give students the tools they needed to "cook". "Cooking is the interaction of contrasting or conflicting material" (Elbow, 1985, p. 40). It is no easy thing to give students the sense of personal power necessary to "cook" an idea in this way,

when “one piece of material [is] being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another” (p. 41).

I studied syntax and form and held onto my belief that teachers need to stand back and let the students work on their compositions while the teacher creates opportunities for learning. I wanted to give them freedom to discover their own creativity, find their own purposes; yet I knew I needed to direct much of what they did. And still, still, I did not have a good enough method of ‘interfering’, of providing useful feedback that students could apply to the revision process. I could not open the floodgates of creativity and enable them to get to that place of “flow” so well described by Csikszentmihalyi as “exploring the limits of abilities and trying to expand them,” and “a feeling of novelty and challenge” (Provost, 1990, p. 29).

I felt, so often, almost on the edge of chaos. Almost, but not quite. “The edge of chaos is where new ideas and innovative genotypes are forever nibbling away at the edges of the status quo, and where even the most entrenched old guard will eventually be overthrown” (Waldrop, 1992, p. 12).

Instinctively, I turned to the words of writers more than of educators and researchers. And there it was, the book to become so crucial to my path to transformative interference: *A Writer Teaches Writing* by Donald Murray. He defined a teachable process identified in seven specific skills sets. “...writing may appear magic, but it is our responsibility to take our students backstage to watch the pigeon’s being tucked up the magician’s sleeve. The process of writing can be studied and understood” (Murray, 1985, p. 4).

I had found my Holy Grail. “The highest level of personal writing is a global skill that is made up of a handful of component skills” (Van Bergen, 2007, p. 2).

Experience

As a professor at Simon Fraser University I enjoyed twenty years of teaching writing and developing programs, honing the process, reducing Murrays’ seven skills to four which I define as:

1. Discovering a subject: finding the topic that you want to explore, the story you need to tell, the truth you want to discover and reveal. It is no easy task. It is related to what Jean-Paul Sartre discovered, that “when I began writing, I began my birth over again, except that this time I took an active part in the outcome, by wrestling with all the color and shadow in my body and soul – both the dark and the light” (Lee, 1994, p. 75).
2. Sensing an audience: taking responsibility for making your subject clear and delivering what it promises with impact and integrity and voice as you create a relationship with your reader through your words.
3. Searching for specifics: finding those necessary and concrete details that permit the writer to tell her unique story or argument by providing meaningful symbols

and metaphors and preventing the work from being vague, abstract, convoluted and without individuality.

4. Creating a design: putting the various pieces together in such a way that eliminates anything unnecessary, makes clear what is at stake, enhances meaning and leaves the audience satisfied (Mamchur 2001).

My students, many practicing teachers, began using the methods in schools. My own research on the application of teaching the four component skills was working. Teachers could apply them; students could learn them. I thought, perhaps, I had arrived.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*
(Robert Frost)

The Archetypes

As part of my journey into education and into life, I studied Jungian archetypes at the Jung Institute in Switzerland and I became a screen-writer. This combination led me to using archetypes to teach directors and producers to create authentic characters.

A new dimension of my discovering process was born. I began to think in terms of archetypes, of those universal images that have existed since man felt the need to paint on cave walls and dance to the movement of the moon and sing to the sound of the wind in forests and rolling hills. I learned to see the archetype in terms of a “means of expression for the transmission of collective contents originally derived from the unconscious” (Jung, 1990, p. 5).

My graduate students almost intuitively moving in harmony with my new thoughts began to apply the four elements of creative writing to other art forms. Would the essential skills be universal to all the arts? Apps (2007) found that “the elements identified by Murray and Mamchur...suggests a similar pattern in process across disciplines” (p. 120).

Kurnaedy (2009) found that “This model (the four elements of discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design) provides the unique opportunity to organize, discover and produce quality work for both writing and choreography” (p. 148).

If these elements were present in all art forms, why had it taken me most of my teaching life to discover it? Could it be that I was really that blind? “Any approach depends on the diligence of application of the practitioner. You must continuously do the work” (Van Bergen, 2007, p. 37). And you must consciously do the work!

It is important for you to consciously know and choose what you are doing . . . one must have something concrete that one can consciously identify, name, and know how to do . . . and the name must be attached to the activity (p. 40).

I felt I had embraced the archetype of the Magician, the archetype that weaves magical change; and like the Magician, I was following the typical pattern of taking years to hone my craft until it could appear seamless and easy.

Everywhere We Looked

Because we were going to Portugal to present a paper, my daughter, graduate student and I decided to take advantage of the trip to do a cultural study tour of Spain. During that trip, without my realizing it, my unconscious became a natural part of my conscious understanding of how I began to look at the world of art and music. The archetype of creative process began to beat in our hearts.

Every art exhibition, every ballet, every photographic display whispered the four essentials (discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design) to the three of us as we moved from museum to museum and city to city.

Artists had been using and talking about these essential components since the beginning of recorded time. If only one were to listen. How much more exciting and rewarding was our trip as we explored the art world from this vantage point. If you had been with us, you would have heard us exclaim, "Oh what he suffered for his subject." "Look at those specifics. They are gorgeous." We began to gather examples we could bring home to our teaching. We began to appreciate the increased understanding we were developing as we moved from city to city, enjoying the powerful works of art and performances we were privileged to see all condensed into 10 days.

Along with the excitement of the analysis we were consciously making, was the joy of awe. The arousing of intuitive feeling from the archetypal symbols given to us again and again. "No one story...contains the whole truth. The process is accumulative" (Bonnet, 2006, p. 28).

We returned to Canada satiated, ready to return to work bearing the gift of hundreds of examples to share with our students and a feeling that the search had really just begun. We felt on the "edge of chaos" and compelled by the beauty and complexity; the structure and non structure of what we had experienced. We saw "a certain kind of balance between the forces of order and the forces of disorder" (Waldrop, 1992, p. 293). We had been privileged to see a system in action, complex enough to be "stable enough to store information, and yet evanescent enough to transmit it" (p. 293).

From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching-questioning theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5)

As we struggled to find ways to teach this magical amorphous messy creature called creative process, I felt as did Brian Arthur that we were people who like process and pattern, as opposed to people who are comfortable with status and order. And "I know

that every time in my life that I've run across simple rules giving rise to emergent, complex messiness, I've just said, 'Ah, isn't that lovely!'" (Waldrop, 1992, p. 334).

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