



Room for Learning

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Every day thousands of teachers and thousands more children spend part of their lives together in classrooms. Every year teachers return to their classroom before school starts to get ready for the day when their new students will enter. Experienced teachers get right to it. They organize the room, materials, and displays, and still have time to check out what other teachers are doing. They spend time in the staff room getting reacquainted with other staff members, talking about what they did during the summer, and expressing hopes and concerns for the coming year.

But what about the first-year teacher? How does this novice experience the classroom for the first time as a teacher?

I walked into the room and looked at the desks, and at my desk, and didn't know if I should touch it. I hung up stuff—took it down, moved desks, looked at them, then moved them back—and kept doing it throughout the year.

That which is taken for granted by experienced teachers is often a confounding experience for the novice. How can such a simple activity be so overwhelmingly difficult? Desks are desks and books are books—aren't they? It can't be that difficult to organize one room—can it? How is it that an experienced teacher can often accomplish this in a day or two while the novice may spend most of the year and still not feel that it is right?

Perhaps there is more to the classroom than the organization of physical elements. What experience does the novice teacher need in order to be able to create a room for learning? What experiences have veteran teachers had that enable them to create an environment conducive to learning without a second thought? Or is it their thoughtfulness that enables a pedagogical space to develop? Is an educational environment created by the teacher, or is it developed in harmony with the students in the class?

A classroom is a special type of space with which everyone is familiar. Almost everyone in our culture has spent several years within a variety of classrooms and can easily describe what a

classroom is—a room with desks and books and a teacher to teach you what you need to know. But how does the teacher, especially the first-year teacher, experience this classroom?

First-year teachers talk about wanting to create a “comfortable, friendly environment” but often find that their attempts to do this lead to “lack of control.” How do they resolve this dilemma? First-year teachers also talk about “my classroom” with great expectation, pride, and vision. How do they experience translating their ideals into a comfortable room for learning?

Dwelling as a Teacher

A few weeks ago, as a faculty consultant, I entered a grade 1 classroom with my student teacher to meet the cooperating teacher before the actual practicum began. We entered the room after school. The cooperating teacher was at the outside door dismissing her class. On entering the room as an experienced teacher, I saw a room filled with learning. My student teacher thought the room was empty. How differently we “saw” that room!

I didn’t notice where the teacher’s desk was. What impressed me when I entered the room was the neat, informal arrangement of small round tables. Chairs were carefully upturned on the tables, resting their legs for the busy day tomorrow. On each chair seat was a pair of neatly placed running shoes waiting patiently for their owner to return the following day, standing guard and marking silently the place to which each child would return. As my eyes focused, riveted on the tables, I could see the small shoe-owners returning in the morning, taking down chairs, putting on shoes, and greeting classmates with eager anticipation of what the day had to offer. I saw flexibility, integration, individual interests being met at those tables. The room was warm with caring. When I returned to that classroom full of children, I was not disappointed.

When I described what I saw to my student teacher, she stared at me in disbelief. She was seeing the room as an apprehensive student, wondering what type of experiences and evaluation this room would hold for her in the next eight weeks. I was dwelling as a teacher, she as a student.

Heidegger (1977) speaks of dwelling as “the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth” (p. 325). Because I *am* a teacher, I dwell as a teacher in the world. I see the world as a place of teaching and learning and view most things from that perspective. I see building our new

home as a learning experience. My husband, an engineer, sees it as a construction experience.

Even after student teaching experiences, first-year teachers need time before they are able to dwell as a teacher.

The transition from student to teacher is abrupt, yet it isn't. Abrupt in the sense that all of a sudden you have to stand in front of a room full of eager faces and you have to work, teach, grow, and learn with these people. At the same time, the transition is slow in that teaching and becoming a teacher is not something that happens overnight. What makes me feel like a teacher? When do I become a teacher? Even in my second year I feel very much a novice.

As one begins to dwell as a teacher, to be a teacher on the inside, one also begins to see as a teacher and thus is more able to build, design a room for learning. First-year teachers are attempting to dwell in a seemingly familiar environment, but in a new way of being—being as a teacher rather than a student. "I had certain ideas about what a teacher was, but I was feeling my way around, constantly grasping at straws. Am I this image of what a teacher is?"

First-year teachers in one sense are returning to familiar territory. They are homecomers expecting to find the classroom to be the familiar, comfortable space that they experienced as a student. However, they are returning in a different role, one they have never experienced before, and they are unprepared for the foreignness of their position in this "familiar territory."

I just started feeling through the materials and getting familiar with that. I took stuff home to look at, but I didn't even have a grasp of "Here are the materials, now how am I going to interpret those materials in the classroom."

Heidegger (1977) states, "*Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build*" (p. 338). However, this is exactly the dilemma of the first-year teacher. The first-year teacher has spent at least 16 years dwelling in classrooms as a student. In order to begin to dwell as a teacher, and thus build a room for learning, the first-year teacher needs to become familiar with the experience of dwelling as a teacher. To do this the novice needs a place to start.

A Place to Start

A friend of mine, at a job interview, got up enough nerve to ask, "If I am offered a contract, when would I know my actual placement?" The interviewer callously replied, "Isn't having a job enough? It doesn't really matter where you go. Teaching is

teaching.” My friend Trish felt totally deflated by this remark. An experienced teacher, one who dwells as a teacher, may be able to create a pedagogical space anywhere. But someone just beginning needs a place to start. The first “placement” is extremely important. A contract is a piece of paper; it is not a place—the thing my friend was searching for in her placement. Heidegger (1977), in speaking of location, refers to a bridge and states that “a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge” (p. 332). Isn’t this also true of the classroom? Until a teacher knows, even sees, the existence of his or her classroom, he or she does not have a location, a place to start.

Trish expressed her anxiety in not having a classroom at first, even though she had a job, a contract, a school. Her assignment was to teach French, but it wasn’t determined before school started whether she would have her own room. She had been assigned a position, but no place to carry it out. Not having a room left her in limbo. When the decision was finally made to give her a room, relief was apparent. “Having a room made me feel a lot better. This is *my* room, *my* place. That was really important.” Trish needed a room as a starting point, as a concrete reality that affirmed her acceptance into the teaching profession.

According to Heidegger (1977) “*Raum, Rum*, means a place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary” (p. 332). Teachers need to be made room for, to have a space within a boundary from which they can begin their essential unfolding as a teacher.

While having a room as a place to start can provide a sense of security and belonging, turning that room into a classroom for learning does not happen immediately for the first-year teacher. “I was secure within the four walls, but I wasn’t secure with what I would do within those four walls. That took a long time.”

Making the Classroom One’s Own

As Bollnow (1961) states, “the space where a man finds himself at the moment may not be the space to which he belongs” (p. 32). While first-year teachers may initially feel secure in having a place, a location to call their own, making it feel like their own is difficult.

Ruth took over a kindergarten assignment in January, replacing Mary who was on maternity leave. Her first impression of the room was its disorganization and messiness. “I can’t teach in a room like that.” She spent many hours cleaning, throwing

things out, reorganizing. During this exhausting task she was confronted by another teacher, who said, "Mary won't like what you're doing." Of course Ruth was devastated. In one sense, Mary had never left. Ruth was attempting to "make the classroom her own," but she was only there to "replace" Mary who was on leave and would be returning. This was still Mary's place. Ruth's cleaning, throwing out, and reorganizing were an attempt to make the room her own—to create a room where she would be able to begin her essential unfolding as a new teacher, to begin to feel at home and start to dwell as a teacher. However, the other teacher's comments reminded Ruth that she was only there to replace Mary. This was Mary's room, and Ruth's essential unfolding shrivelled.

Mark expressed his feelings about having his own room. "It's my room. It was a self-centered attitude. Protective. Comparing. It was great." However, his assignment was also to teach French, so he spent part of his time away from *his* classroom teaching French in other classrooms. "I had a mixed feeling because of my assignment. It was my room and it wasn't. It was mine just for the times I was here." And what about teaching in those other classrooms? "It was difficult teaching French in other classrooms. Putting up stuff. Invading space. Invading *their* space. Simple things like boards—what was on them—if I could erase it or not. Frustrated when I couldn't."

Mark felt out of place in those other classrooms. The boundary was not his boundary, and he felt restricted in unfolding as a teacher. To make room for himself meant taking room away from the other teacher. Work on the blackboards showed Mark that this room really belonged to someone else. To erase the work was like removing the other teacher's presence. The guilt of defacing the other's existence, combined with the need to clear a space for himself, led to frustration.

In order to feel that one belongs in one's classroom space, one must search for how one can dwell comfortably as a teacher. Until one begins to dwell as a teacher, the classroom will continue to feel foreign. One must become familiar with all aspects of the room, including what is likely to happen in that room, before one can claim it as one's own. Most of the first year is a period of exploration. Exploring and thus becoming familiar with the room as a teacher is necessary in order to own the room and feel comfortable dwelling and building as a teacher.

Trish expressed a lot of anxiety about the need to be familiar before being able to really plan. "I know I have to come up with

long-range plans, but first I have to familiarize myself with what's available and the students I'm going to have."

Diana also had similar experiences.

Just getting the room ready took a long time. This year it took me a day. Once you've done it once—then you know "Well next year I want to try this." I knew where I wanted my monitors set up—the area I used last year didn't work. Now I have something to compare to.

The whole first year is a process of exploration, of becoming familiar with how the arrangement of the room fits the needs of what one is attempting to accomplish; the ability to really dwell and thus build a room for learning.

In order to really belong, to make the classroom one's own, the teacher must begin by building "a cosmos in a chaos" (Bollnow, 1961). The inability to dwell as a teacher, to see as a teacher, makes this extremely difficult. "I walked into the room, and looked at the desks, and at my desk, and didn't know if I should touch it. I felt incapable of making any concrete decisions. I didn't know what to do."

Fitting the pieces together to meet a particular purpose, learning, building a cosmos out of a chaos is extremely difficult when you are unfamiliar with the real purpose and unfamiliar with the pieces that are available.

Search for Comfort

"I was never totally happy with how I had the room. I changed it around many times and kept feeling my way around seeing if it would be more comfortable." The physical aspects of the classroom reflect the first-year teacher's desire to dwell as a teacher. This searching for physical comfortableness, or at-homeness, wanting to feel like a teacher on the inside as opposed to just looking and acting like a teacher on the outside is a long and stressful journey.

The feeling of chaos can be overwhelming. Finding a place to start within the classroom is extremely difficult. First-year teachers use many physical props as crutches and signposts to help them begin to establish an order to the chaos they are experiencing.

Before Trish had a room of her own, she felt that "everybody else was so busy doing things. They were all in their classrooms and I thought, 'What am I supposed to be doing?' I was ready to start decorating a room." Decorating a room is essential to finding comfort. It allows one to make one's own presence

physically known. Decorating can also provide signposts to help the first-year teacher see where he or she is going. It is the beginning step in creating a cosmos in a chaos.

Often the room seems to taunt them, reflecting their own feelings of inadequacy.

This was the biggest, ugliest, emptiest room in the world. I found it really hard to make it what I considered a comfortable and inviting atmosphere at the very beginning. Any poster that I had was up on the wall somewhere whether it was appropriate or not.

Trish remembers "this empty classroom! The walls, they were so empty. Even though I had some charts, I put them up and they covered one corner, but the rest was still empty. The walls seemed so big and empty."

Because the first-year teachers have not begun to dwell as a teacher, they cannot see the pedagogical possibilities that will fill the classroom when the students are present. They are so concerned with making their own presence felt that they are blind to the interactions that can be planned for. Their insecurity in themselves as teachers leads them to search for self-comfort. In focusing on comfort for themselves, they are often unable to create a comfortable environment for their students as well, but they often cannot place where the problem lies.

First-year teachers need to move from the initial security of their room in order to find, collect, and organize the things that they believe may help them to make their room more comfortable, more secure. Bringing in things that one has chosen helps make the room one's own and provides a sense of comfort.

A nesting instinct seems to take over. The first-year teacher must begin to feel at home in this strange, secure space before being able to invite students in. "You have to run around looking for things that nobody wants. You have to be resourceful. I went and looked. Hunted around and when I found something I wanted I dragged it back to my room." Trish recalled, "I was so afraid to give anything up. I remember thinking that this moveable room divider would be so handy. I should really think of something to do with it. Finally, around the middle of the year, I got rid of it."

As Trish began to feel more secure in her placement, she was able to give up the false security that the moveable room divider provided, the sense of hoarding that came with the lack of physical and personal resources for teaching. She was able to feel more comfortable and become more discriminating of the

physical resources that she wanted to become part of her room. She was becoming more familiar with how to make room for herself as a teacher and began to dwell more peacefully within her classroom.

As one gains a sense of comfort and begins to dwell as a teacher it is possible to begin to see the needs of the students and make room for them as well. "I was able to give these students something that they might have lacked before—a comfortable, non-threatening environment to work, enjoy their daily routine."

Seeing as a Teacher

Even after student-teaching experiences, first-year teachers may envision teaching from a blindly idealistic, self-centered perspective. "I thought that there are going to be 20-odd children who are going to be constantly attentive and never fiddle about in their seats and they're going to be with me constantly on whatever I do." While seeing teaching from this viewpoint, teachers concentrate on creating their own room with their own lessons and displays that will be presented to the students. The students' needs and abilities are not taken into account. Indeed, they are not even seen. "I was so busy teaching that I didn't have time for the kids." What a sad statement!

Teachers who do not dwell pedagogically assume the exterior trappings of a teacher.

I saw bulletin boards as teaching and I saw flashcards as teaching. I did not see appropriate seating as teaching. Strengths and weaknesses of seating—those kinds of things. The kids are sitting and I'm teaching them, but I didn't see that as a whole.

Those who do not dwell pedagogically use the exterior props, the displays, books, and curriculum guides as their means of teaching. Relationships are ignored. "You start to plan your lessons sometimes not really thinking about who you are delivering it to, but just thinking about the delivery of the lesson." The props that are used for teaching can become a barrier to learning if they are the sole focus of the lesson. Often the trappings that the first-year teacher uses for guidance can become shackles that inhibit real learning. "I had an end, but I didn't see all the sorts of branchings off you could have with that end like a web. The kids would try to branch and I was trying to force them to go straight."

As teachers begin to see pedagogically, their view of learning changes. "I began to appreciate the students more—with less hangups about curriculum needs and more concerns about individual needs." At this point, the novice is beginning to dwell in

a pedagogical way. As Carole, an experienced teacher, commented, "When I have to leave my plan and be flexible because of the kids' needs, that's when I feel like a teacher."

In order to dwell pedagogically, the teacher must have a sense of the individual students, must be able to see the students in and through their reality. Only then is it possible to reach out to the needs of the students and thus make one's presence felt throughout the room. When one focuses only on the props that have been strategically placed for *good teaching*, the teacher's presence is trapped within the props and an invisible barrier is created between *teacher* and *student*.

"I have put up a new display for our unit on Spring. You may look at it, but please don't touch it. I don't want the pictures bent," illustrates this invisible barrier.

I have put a new title on our bulletin board—What Spring Means to Me. Please bring or make something that will let us all know how Spring is important for you. We will display your things on the bulletin board and from that decide what we might want to study in our Spring unit.

This teacher has created room for learning. She has provided the students with a place to start and has allowed an opportunity for finding out something about how each student dwells. By allowing the presence of the students to be shown, she has imbedded a spark of her own presence in each student.

Being Seen as a Teacher

The first-year teacher needs to be seen as a teacher but is often unsure of what it is that needs to be seen. There is a concern with seeing oneself as being seen as a teacher. "I got too friendly with the kids and they'd punch me in the arm or throw their arm around my neck and give me a hug and I thought, 'I don't think you should be treating a teacher that way.'"

Being seen as a teacher when one is not sure of what should be seen can cause a great deal of anxiety. The exterior trappings are very fragile and are often inconsistent with what the first-year teacher is feeling on the inside.

I got a lot of recognition for my program and I wasn't really comfortable with it. It was like "I don't know if I deserve this. I'm just kind of struggling through." I know there's lots of things I'm doing really badly that I just want to sweep under the carpet.

Until one begins to dwell as a teacher, one may feel like an imposter, always afraid of being found out. "I have to start producing and I don't know if I can do this. I write good résumés

and presented myself well in the interview, but I feel like I have kind of bluffed my way in here. What if I can't really teach?" Again, the first-year teacher gathers props to help him or her be seen as a teacher. If those who are seeing focus on the props, they may not notice that the teacher is only posing as a teacher.

The teacher's desk can take on paramount significance, symbolizing status as a teacher. It is often seen as the focus of teaching competence. It provides a concrete "place to start" within the classroom. "The teacher's desk, that was the way it was when I came in here and I thought, 'Yeah, that's probably the best spot for it.'" There is a need for reaffirmation by others in the profession that they have "made the right choice."

My desk was sitting right over there and I toyed with the idea of "Is it a good idea to have it in front of the blackboard?" until I moved it to the back. And then what came up was, "Oh, so-and-so had it back there too." So I thought, "Well, I made the right choice because so-and-so had it back there too."

Proper placement of *the desk* can show the new teacher that he or she is able to make appropriate *teacher* choices.

There is also concern with the appropriate placement of other "props" in the classroom. "I hung up stuff, took it down, moved desks, looked at them then moved them back—and kept doing it throughout the year." At first the props or properties of teaching are seen to exist within the physical properties of the classroom. The beginning teacher does not feel the internal possession of these properties and thus relies on choosing the appropriate physical properties that make a good teacher. If one has the *right* displays, bulletin boards, and textbooks, then one will be the *right* kind of teacher. However, first-year teachers soon find out that this is not the case. The props often have little real meaning; they are just the outward trappings that allow one to be seen as a teacher and may lead to even more anxiety. Even though one is capable of creating a room that looks like a room for learning, it still does not feel right.

Eventually, as one begins to dwell as a teacher, the artificial props or crutches begin to take on pedagogical meaning. "I know my kids now. It's a lot easier to do a quick preview and say 'yes' or 'no' it's going to work." At this point, the artificial physical props become real tools for learning because the true properties of pedagogy have begun to be internalized by the novice. One begins to dwell as a teacher and *being seen* as a teacher is no longer threatening. One is no longer an imposter surrounding oneself with the trappings of pedagogy. One becomes freed from these trappings and is able to become master

over them, using them to create a true room for learning. The physical space is no longer just decorated; all objects within the classroom become meaningful pedagogical tools.

The Nature of Pedagogical Space

Pedagogical space is a shared space—shared by teacher and students. It provides room for collaborative learning to take place between teacher and students. The space is filled with the tools, expressions, and results of learning. It is not developed for outsiders to come and view as a display of what the teacher is accomplishing. The contents of the room hold personal meaning for all who inhabit it, and visitors, unless they also dwell pedagogically, will be blind to the meanings that have been built by teacher and students. The presences of teacher and students pervade the space, not as isolated individuals, but as a mingling of thoughts and actions, each enhanced by the other.

Pedagogical space is a space in which to get started. A place that encourages questioning, curiosity, and wonder. The contents of the room provide the beginnings that students and teacher can carry to their own individual ends, picking up along the way help and guidance from others. Pedagogical space is educational space, not instructional space. Shipley (1964) provides an interesting comparison between instruction and education. *Instruction* (piling in) grows from a theory of child training that is the converse of *education*, which is from *e-ducere* (to lead out). “Pack the information in; or draw the talents out. The former does not spare the rod, but may *destroy the education*” (p. 114).

Instruction, from *struere*—to pile up, build, construct—focuses on building as technical constructing, not as dwelling. The teacher and students become constructors, using the contents of the room to build external learning. The learning can be seen in the students’ workbooks and on bulletin boards. But often this is where the learning stays. At the end of the year, workbooks are destroyed, bulletin boards dismantled, and the learning is gone. The only thing that may remain is the teacher’s plan book, or blueprint, for constructing the same learning next year with a new group of constructors.

Education, however, has a different purpose. Education focuses on Heidegger’s (1977) view that “the essence of building is letting dwell” (p. 337). As teacher and students dwell, so do they build. The room for learning reflects this dwelling. In order to “lead out” and help students grow, the teacher must dwell pedagogically, must see where each individual student dwells in order to lead them forward. The teacher must also be familiar with where he or she is leading these students. The teacher

must see through the eyes of the students and allow them to dwell as they *are*. Only then can they build and grow together. By being seen, each student is allowed to dwell and build, thus making the room a space of his own. Because each student is made room for, each student can begin his or her own essential unfolding.

Through experiencing a place to start, making the room one's own, and searching for comfort, the teacher begins to see and be seen as a teacher. The long and stressful journey is necessary to arrive at pedagogical goodness.

[Goodness] is a mode of being which can be reached only through a steady and painful process of maturation in the confrontation with one's own suffering. Individuals who have thus arrived at goodness are able to open and share themselves with others. (Bollnow, 1989, p. 61)

Once goodness is arrived at, the teacher can be pedagogically open with students, and a shared room for learning comes into existence.

The beginning teacher must struggle through the internal metamorphosis from student to teacher. The physical props of the classroom can provide the cocoon that is essential for the metamorphosis to take place. But how many teachers remain trapped in the cocoon, isolated from their students? How many, with the "help" from others who are unaware of the necessity of the struggle, are maimed in their essential unfolding?

The ability to create a room for learning has extremely fragile beginnings. However, if these beginnings are nurtured and allowed to struggle through their essential unfolding, the room for learning becomes a powerful spark for all students and teachers who dwell in its light. They not only dwell in a room for learning, but room for learning also dwells within each of them, ready to be carried out into the world where it will continue in a growing search for enlightenment.

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