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CI 412W — Spring 2009

Jason Whitney
A Daunting Task (04/16/2009)

This is the final week of my pre-service student teaching experience, and the Thursday of that. Now that it is essentially over, I am free! Today I had a conversation with my mentor teacher that I had been expecting for quite a while, but not entirely certain we would have at all. The mood that I have tried to set for this experience has been such that I would try and do my own thing and when my planning was done, share that with my mentor to see if he approved. For all intents and purpose he has accepted this and gone even one better by letting me try virtually any style that I had a mind to, just to see if it worked for me. This paradigm of autonomy that we created between the two of us, I was afraid may have precluded a conversation concerning next year, when I will be student teaching full time.

We had that conversation today and during this I learned much of how he has conducted the class in his years. He begins with the first five chapters of the book, in a slightly revised order. Following these introductory materials he proceeds to the eleventh chapter and a discussion of plate tectonics. From here he develops volcanoes and earthquakes in random order using chapters ten and nine, which is where I entered the seen this semester in February. Next year I will only be student teaching for two academic quarters, I entered that classroom this semester in the third. That means that the introductory first five chapters of information, plus plates in eleven occupied more than eighteen weeks. He suggests between fourteen and sixteen for the first five. So I have direction, but little idea how I might go about stretching this material out that far. In my teaching experience, this class has been professed to be behind schedule as compared to where they normally are at this late a date. This being the case I feel I should shoot to be through plates at the end of the second quarter, putting my teaching slightly more than two weeks ahead of what I saw this year.
My question is not so much hitting that mark, I’m certain that I could cover that much material in eighteen weeks. In point of fact my concern is, can I make that little material take that long without obviously dragging my feet? I understand that this first five chapters’ worth of material lays the foundation for not only my course but the rest of their high school science career, but still it seems a small pot to draw upon. My mentor did tell me during this conversation that I had best put significant effort into gathering activities over the summer. These would help me draw out the time while still improving my students’ understandings to the degree that would simplify their future careers in my subject. He is right, I had best find quite a few for each chapter so that each lesson might have one or two attached. In addition to this, there are a few sidebars that are directly linked to the materials of this early year portion that I might use the time to expound upon if there is interest among my students.
Is Effort Enough? (04/09/2009)

Everyone has heard and probably been consoled with, on at least one occasion, something to the effect of ‘well, you gave it your best’ or ‘it was close’. I had occasion to hear this in a classroom that I was observing, but in this instance the student was fishing for a better grade with “I tried my best and I came close”. The teacher addressed this with a response in the light of ‘I’m sorry, but that wasn’t the answer I was looking for.’ The student asked me immediately thereafter what my opinion on the matter was. I gave it, and then contemplated whether I should have been more reserved. My response was “if ‘A’s were given for effort, how many people do you think would go to the surgeon?” A similar situation arose in another class when a student asked me if I was a perfectionist. My answer was along the same lines as the last and was “absolutely, who wouldn’t aspire to perfection? I see no reason or good that would come from attempting to answer questions only half right.” One of my current philosophies in life is that there is only one right answer to any given question, if properly and completely defined. Any answer other than that is either incomplete, only an approximation or else just outright wrong.

I understand that this is harsh. I know that perfection is not attainable by anyone, myself least of all. I’ll even go so far as to accept that perfection is fluid mark to hit as in many given instances the perfect model or paradigm differs from person to person. The question of this entry is in the spirit of this issue, there are occasional circumstances that many would consider extenuating and by these grant others leave to be incorrect or only mediocre. Is there really any good reason to allow anyone to aspire to mediocrity, is there really just cause under any circumstance to reward it and accept it as an end? I don't believe there is. I can see rewarding
improvement but only with the caveat of appending greater expectations for that person to grow into.

I do not, in this, intend to be rude I do all there is in my power and to the limit of my ingenuity to attempt to make that evident when presenting those expectations to someone on the rise. Likewise when they fail to meet the mark I am empathetic, I have missed the bar myself; but I do not allow them or myself to take that failure as evidence that the bar need be lowered. I don’t believe that there is anything truly wrong with or even bad about failing at a task, so long as in doing so you learn from your mistakes and try again with a different approach. Pardon the cliché, ‘the only true failure is failing to try again’. I believe that this outlook on things is perceived by others, and of that I am not ashamed; in addition to that though it may be part of the reason for me often being viewed as arrogant or pretentious. Of that I am not proud, but am uncertain of how to prevent or change it without lowering my standards and by that forgiving giving up on my students ever being their best.
The general philosophy or pedagogy that I believe to be most effective and even that which our university seems to laud is one that is not only student centered but very nearly student directed. It would be a world in which the learner is the one most culpable for the decisions of what material should be learned, or at the very least the order of such discovery and exploration. Granted, this system is evidently fallible from the outset; I need propose only one question to evidence this. ‘How does one know what it is that they don’t know, in order to seek to learn it?’ The nearest balance of the two vices that I find is a conversation, related to the subject that I am responsible for teaching and containing the substance thereof. This conversation would start out with a few guiding questions that would be intended to lead the students to reveal their own preconceptions, generally allowing for a form of conceptual interview. Through further development, via communal dialogue, those preconceptions that were held falsely would eventually become so encumbered by the evidences against them that they would change of their own. The goal of such teaching method is that it would allow the
students a freer hand in the direction that the conversation might flow as the subject grows, and as such it more nearly satisfies the noted theme of the pedagogy but sidesteps the pitfall of a year’s worth of awkward silence.

So, if teaching is an act of co-creation, what if the students refuse the reins? The above method mildly addresses the issue of prolonged awkward silence but still bottoms out if the students are either so self-conscious as to not participate from stage fright, or more simply, that disinterested. There is an old cliché, no, almost a platitude concerning the second of these possibilities. ‘You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.’ Since the advent of the IV the platitude has become somewhat untrue in and of its own but the intent still applies. This issue is, I believe, nigh on an impossibility to be true for every member of a given class but even one lost as I see it is one too many. A student’s reservations of this sort may be able to be overcome through the attractive nature of the subject as they would be able, or at least have more ability, to direct the lesson toward their interests; however, I still have my doubts for the first day which will likely set the stage for all the rest. The more likely issue to be seen would still be the first I mentioned though, stage fright or its kin. This much as the outright refusal to participate is unlikely to be a general characteristic within a single classroom, the probability seems so low I’d rather bet against it then on a parachute.

More along the lines of the planning problem, in this paradigm there is little to no possibility to plan and as such there is no concrete means by which you can demonstrate your timeliness to your supervisor as a teacher. The curriculum still needs to be covered within that year, and of further note, how does one formally assess learning in a classroom of this sort? These questions and caveats I must find a means to address, in order to ever teach as I would like to and even then I’m sure there are still other issues that I haven’t considered.
Helping!? (03/26/2009)

Some students, particularly in one of my classes, have developed the understanding that when they ask a teacher for help on an assignment, professing a lack of understanding will get that portion of the assignment done for them as an example. I can understand wanting to use this solution from the teacher’s’ point of view, it is the most efficient method as it demonstrates the technique to the student and removes the burden of doing it from that same student and as such simultaneously removes nearly all likelihood of being asked the same question by the same student on that assignment. For the life of me, I cannot understand why a student would desire this form, though they seem to in earnest, of attack as in doing exactly what I said above it also removes all form of self-assessment opportunity. In no longer having the issue-ous question(s) on hand they have likely perpetuated their own need and misunderstanding. (There are ways that the student could get themselves around this, like doing extra problems but I was speaking realistically.)

It is my practice that the method of problem solution should be re-explained, possibly in greater detail, when faced with a student issue in this and all classes. On occasion I have been forced to even itemize the process into very small steps, foregoing presumption in the development of each step and explaining the rationale of each. This method though is met with resistance on the part of these same students. My explanation for the resistance would be that they would prefer the ‘easy way out’ at the expense of improved understanding and potentially continuing embarrassment in having to ask for the same help with the same question type.

This ‘easy way out’ doesn’t seem it to me. This is a class of seniors, many of which are very bright and probably college bound. Don’t they understand that in many if not most college science courses these same techniques will be required, but not taught, demonstrated, or offered
to be helped with as the professors’ rightly assume that they have been taught it. These
professors only ever seem to ask themselves ‘Have I reason to believe that my students have
been taught this?’ and never its related ‘Have I reason to believe that my students have learned
this?’; the subtle but simultaneously all too clear differentiation of these may be the subject of a
later entry. I digress to my first point; if these college-bound seniors continue to slough off their
problem questions onto a willingly helpful teacher they only continue their own handicap, and
they don’t seem to see that! Aside from explaining or other seeming prattle is their anyway to
evidence this insanity to students?
All of us have, at one point or another, encountered a person that seems to have, or think they have, all of the answers. These people generally have a score of less than desirable nicknames associated with them in the minds of those that perceive them. It’s understood that no one actually does have ALL of the answers but with regard to given subject areas there are people possessed of far superior tomes of internalized information from which to draw. Some of these are just generally well informed people with a propensity for sharing; these, in the opinion of many, are the most annoying but equally useful. Others though are by some requiring faction forced to accumulate and absorb this data and form paradigms for its use and application in order to improve the condition of others. People of this variety I refer to as ‘expert’ if there area of expertise is also their livelihood for a substantial portion of time, then I call them ‘professional’. Teachers would, in my opinion, be of this latter category.

I recently was teaching a lesson to a class of twelfth grade students in which I posed a question to them. The answers that they supplied were wrong and, in one form or another, irrational answers to be even proposed according to information to which these same students had already been taught this year and before. My response was, to the best of my ability, the tempered response of a patient teacher but included a slight element of exasperation in order to illustrate my recognition that they should have known better. In this I do not mean ‘should have known the correct answer’ but they should have known, with a slight application of logic and prior knowledge that their proposed answer was inherently incorrect. Afterward, I helped them develop the correct answer, but the subject of this entry is more their reaction to my initial response.
Student response to my evaluation of their own was cool, which I explain with the generalization that ‘no one likes to be wrong.’ Beyond that though, one student represented what I believe to be their collective impression of me at that moment in time. She, in so many words told me that I was a ‘know-it-all’ or arrogant. I believe she was accusing me of hubris in its generally derogatory sense. I spared the class any reaction at that point as I felt I needed to examine the situation at greater length before making a judgment. After reflecting, I’ve decided that it was not insulting in any form, though it may have been intended to be. Motivations aside though, as the teacher I am required to be informed to capacity that allows confidence or presumption and so long it is aptly justified I should not hold being a ‘know-it-all’ against myself. In fact, if it were true it would be a source of great and justified pride. I could, though, improve my reception through my means of relating information to my students so as not to appear arrogant, which would in turn be less off-putting to them and so improve my own effectiveness. This is then something that I will try to do, as it is very desirable and would improve my success, but not truly requisite in order to succeed on the whole.
Planning versus Preparing (03/05/2009)

To date I have taught a few brief scenarios or clinics in the course of ‘Science Education 411’, one lesson at my placement for pre-service student teaching and prepared one for ‘Science Education 412’, as well as countless brief spats of what might be loosely referred to as teaching within my everyday life. All of these lessons have met with success, defined as the recipient of the lesson being able to put to some use the content material intended, in some degree. What I have found though, is that the degree of preparation that I arrive to the lesson with is not terribly indicative of the success of the lesson. Many of my most successful teaching incidents were actually those where I didn’t even arrive with the intent to teach or even any great content knowledge of my own. One specific example comes to mind.

I had gone to visit my brother and his wife for a weekend; they live in a suburb of ‘Nowhere’. You know the type; one of those where’s that it would be a safe bet that even a cow could think itself lost. Nonetheless, it was early mid-summer and I had taken their eight year old daughter, my niece, for a walk around the fields. On our way we happened across a patch of woods that had a passel of black-raspberry bushes growing in their berm. We picked a hatful, and I told her that under no circumstance should she ever eat anything growing in the wild; or at least not without bringing it first to me or her father. She agreed, at first, but later asked me why she couldn’t eat things that she recognized; “like those blackberries.”

I told her then that she was welcome to eat from that stand of bushes now, but only that stand of bushes, and I corrected her saying that “they were black-raspberries.” She said “how do you know?” and honestly I couldn’t give her a solid answer; I knew them to look at them, but couldn’t define my criteria. So we looked up the differences online and she learned, and
explained them to her sister afterward. She still follows the rule for safety, that she shouldn’t eat anything without checking first, but she’s never missed yet with picking them out.

My question though is, in my/our careers, what degree of planning will be required for every lesson. I expect some proof of prior thought and judgment will be expected, if only to back up our decisions in the event of a question, but I have yet to spend less than nine hours working on a single lesson for school, before I’ve taught it. In thinking about that I realize I can’t continue with that paradigm next semester during student teaching. To do so would require that I start writing lesson plans in mid-May and not sleep until late October, with all of my other engagements. I have asked my mentor teacher and some of my other subjects of observation what is expected in this regard. They have told me that lesson plans are required for every lesson but that the degree of preparation if very nearly negligible for most. The few of theirs that I have seen were in the ball park of a paragraph’s length. Is this going to be sufficient in my career, assuming it’s enough for my own needs? Is this degree of preparation sufficient for most student teaching supervisors as well, or should I buy stock in Folgers?
Teacher Biases (02/19/2009)

While in class two weeks ago the subject of teacher biases and predisposition occurred to me in reference through the students’ ability to both affect and effect them through their actions. The final comment concerning the ‘Community Mapping’ project was to the effect of [if you have any questions ask now so that everyone may benefit.] My thoughts upon this were that a dubious student would or may by nature attempt to skew the assignment in their favor by instead asking a valuable question in private, from a teacher separate from their own, so as to gain the advantage of additional information that would not necessarily be shared with their ‘competitors’, the other students, or accrue the disadvantage of their own teacher knowing their advantaged state. This relates to my stated topic in that their teacher not knowing their advantage would see this student’s assignment as fundamentally more on task and appropriate and hence better than other students.

This raises the questions of whether these biases are always a bad thing, and also is there any way to prevent them in cases in which they are. I can see that at times biases or prejudices of the teacher may be disadvantageous to students, such as in the earlier example, but can they not also be good things? A teacher that has information concerning a student in particular, or a generalization about a particular population from which their class is drawn may be able to use that to tailor lessons to those students own circumstances hence increasing the learning environment. I then reach the conclusion that they can be good things or bad things but then how does a teacher prevent their misuse, as some may be simultaneously both good and bad? Is there a particular strategy that is suggested or is instead the teachers advantage and solution only awareness and vigilance?
Erringly Anticipated Skills? (02/05/2009)

There are among my presuppositions of students’ skills almost inevitably errors in my judgment. Some of these errors are likely random, things that although reasonably expected and found to be present in all past populations are lacking in some individuals. Others though are more systemic, items that every teacher receiving them in the past had assumed the previous had covered. This error may very well be traced all the way back to their very earliest teachers who had ‘put it off’ to develop at a time that they then allowed to slip away; thus beginning the cycle entirely by accident. These lackings must be identified though and then subsequently remedied by he/she who takes notice. As stated in earlier writings I agree with the tenet that ‘the only one I control is myself’ and as such the someone referred to must be me.

To identify errors, both systemic and random, I will need to employ assessment strategies that are not even realistically capable of being administered en masse as the problems caused would not likely become evident in any way that would not simultaneously effect a student’s grades. Identifying problems via this manner deliberately would then once again systemically disadvantage the already hard-shipped student. These errors are best prevented from continuing to plague the student with failure by assuming the lack at the beginning of the school year and briefly reviewing the good habits desired. Beyond this preemptive method of enhancing success I will still need to be alert for students struggling with such skills that I might be tempted to assume. Some of these often overlooked skills include active listening, the correct method for reading a nonfiction text, concept mapping, note taking and my own personal vendetta: critical thinking and analysis.

These items are crucial to scientific study and research, and thereby are requisite to succeed overall within the field. Just as necessary are my own personal focuses as these two
together allow for problem and observation analysis, hypothesis formulation, experimental method design and insightful data evaluation. Essentially, they sum up the potential needed for an enormous part of the classic scientific method which is used instinctively in just about every personal learning experience both in and out of its proclaimed field. It is the method by which most explorations are made, and learnings internalized both in early childhood and through maturity. By the use of this method, students can devise their own best inquiries tailored to their strengths and best learning practices. It also allows them to evaluate consequences beyond the concrete and predefined, giving them an operational means to evaluate choices without absolute information.
Reflection upon *Spitwad Sutras* to Date (01/29/2009)

At the beginning of this book I found the author to be at best tiring and trying. He displayed an overt disdain/distaste for the profession that he found himself to be in, having thought that he would be, seemingly, the second coming of either Christ or Ghandi. I’m not quite sure which, maybe both. I found it hard to believe that he was surprised at his newfound lot in life, given his choice of pathways through it, despite his aspirations which were presumptuously profound. He was a post-graduate liberal arts student, really how many other directions are there to go. His best bet outside of teaching was writing, which he mentioned but quickly digressed from. This distaste for the man himself held true until the third chapter of the readings.

Up until then the man was pretentious and arrogant, without displaying any of the good qualities that often come with such position. He silently berated children for not being willing to learn and adapt to the situations around them in order to improve their lot, calling them ‘small minded’ and ‘petty’, while not himself trying to learn or adapt. He attended the school, barely tolerating his students, speaking with but only hearing, never listening to, his coworkers. Even in light of a pool of more greatly experienced individuals with a diversity of practiced methods to draw upon, the author seemed to continue to plod down the same path, with his head down, refusing to see the forest for the trees. That is until he had someone walk in and point out the obvious, essentially lowering a branch and forcing him to walk into it. That someone was the true prophet of the story, Brother Christopher.

Brother Christopher really never said much but what little he said opened windows if not doors in the author’s mind to allow him to see that the error in his ways was the way in which he could correct his students. He could teach them about life and philosophy through their own lives
and experiences. In other words, he could tailor the lesson to the student learning it, making the subject applicable, ergo interesting.

This revelation, assuming he finds it to be correct, offers to me confirmation of my own philosophy of teaching, at least in part. I have been taught that much of classroom management can be forestalled, if not prevented by creating a classroom environment and dynamic that is built around the students interests. In example, if I were to need to teach or reinforce a standard on the scientific method I would best serve the subject and myself to allow the students to design an inquiry of their own. This could be done either as a class or instead within small groups of similar interest. My hand would be used only to guide them through the design process using questions of my own in order to lead them to developing an adequate inquiry. Should a student propose a question and hypothesis, I could ask something to the effect of ‘why would that be a good hypothesis?’ in either the case of good or bad. In the case of ‘good’ I might point out the fact that it is falsifiable and ask them why that is desirable, in the case of bad I would instead ask how they intend to prove it true and at what degree, and of what sort, the evidence is it then irrefutable; serving to illuminate the fact that this judgment is an impossibility. In the student owning the lesson they have more of a stake in its effectiveness and more of an interest in its subject.
My Own Presuppositions and Concerns (01/22/2009)

1] What forms of skills should/may I employ during all of my teaching (pre-service, student and career) that would aid in managing a classroom containing students that are less disciplined or willing to be taught without disruption than the ideal?

Reasoning: Those skills that I have learned thus far have for the most part been intended to be exercised in longer term than our pre-service experience lends, in point of fact the model that I am familiar with is not designed, in my understanding, to handle a disrupter on day one at all but instead to preclude disruption through referent relationships. This I do intend to use in all of these experiences but if I receive a ‘dedicated troublemaker’ in pre-service or under supervision what would be suggested.

2] What are the activities and functions that I will or may be required to perform during my pre-service or student teaching placements? What tasks might be asked of me that I should avoid if possible?

Reasoning: There are tasks that have been asked of me in my past in-school endeavors such as C I 295 and my 80 hours that I have since learned should not have been asked of me at all. In example, I was asked while doing an observation with a female teacher on ‘hall duty’ to check out a suspicious circumstance in a male bathroom that she could not enter. This placed me in a position of heightened liability that I should not have been introduced to in my position at that time.