Maryellen Murphy — A Statement of Teaching Philosophy: a-work-in-progress…

Re-reading Dewey, has presented the opportunity to ‘observe’ how much I value experiential learning and appreciate the deep-seated layers of meaning embedded in the notion of teaching as being an important part of the life force. The act of teaching reflects qualities of ‘aliveness’, which attract me to this profession. Dewey wrote about teaching in this way “every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground that of what it moves toward or into…” Also, the way in which Dewey describes continuity and interaction, as intercepting and uniting,” qualifying as “educative moment(s),” inspires me. It is an exhilarating feeling to experience and witness, when a classroom becomes a hub of activity, full of life, attracting energy as well as giving off energy. When a teacher can string moments like these together, the learning environment takes on a generative life-force of its own, where teacher and student acting in concert, become engaged in a collaborative process of creating opportunities to explore — ideas, concepts and materials.

I believe it is important to honor the diversity of students — differences, interests, and experiences, as well as their cultural backgrounds, and family histories, in the context of the larger community and school culture. Invoking Dewey again by saying, “A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest.”

Operating on the basis of inclusion is as challenging as it is invigorating. Today, “teaching tolerance” has become a slogan in public education, as a call for all of ‘us’ to get along, in this increasingly complex world — the global exchange — called planet Earth. The real challenge is how do we [learn] to do this. One possible way to think about it is — that teaching is a work-in-progress, not a means to an end. A pathway to explore this notion is through the “scholarship in teaching.” When teachers are supported to maintain a constancy-of-learning in the ever-expanding loop of information and communication, both inside and outside their subject area, a re-formation can occur, creating an ever-widening spiral of growth and change…. in a community.

Penelope Washbourn shares insights into the idea “for experience to lead to learning…, we must reflect on our experience in a continuous process of “making meaning” out of our experiences so that they may contribute to our cognitive, aesthetic, and affective development.” Lee Shulman presents many ideas regarding the scholarship of teaching to absorb and implement — “we not only count and name in scholarship, we then recount and teach. And in recounting we transform and connect and integrate new forms and creations what might otherwise have been experienced individually and separately.” Teaching is a blend of curriculum design, storytelling, and passion for learning. It not for everyone, yet it requires a diversity of personalities, spirit, and empathy.

It is important to consider the classroom as ‘open-space’ for contextual learning where students and faculty are a community of learners, who construct, together, what has meaning and value. Reading Kenneth Bruffee, afforded many new insights into...
collaborative learning. As I embrace Shulman’s notion of “teaching as community property,” I am seeking a reexamination in the ‘value of collaboration.’ Bruffee reminds me “it improves student work by increasing students interest in what they are studying and their enthusiasm for studying it, and it draws them more deeply into relevant issues.”

Students can and do challenge a teachers knowledge of subject matter, in an effort to test the limits of experience and growth. When this is viewed as an integral part of the learning process it can become a powerful tool, fostering critical thinking and personal growth — of both student and teacher. It can become the thought-seed perpetuating a students desire to engage in life-long learning [and every teachers dream].

Motivation is an important feature of learning to consider. Understanding how and why motivation plays a role in the process of communication and exchange of ideas can become a teachers life-long focus; just one of the many driving forces in the life of a teacher. A teaching tip from McKeachie — “project your own motivation — for the subject matter and for the students. Take opportunities to describe your own intrinsic motivation for both research and teaching and your mastery orientation to learning.”

What may seem like common sense, is the idea that to be a teacher requires, continuous exploration and engagement in a given subject area of study. Yet teaching is also exhausting work, when it feels like work. When teaching feels akin to life-sustaining, nutritional-food-for-thought, learning moves us along at a fast pace, in a heightened sense of awareness, where time passes without notice and pleasure knows no bounds.

In proposing closing thoughts, I reflect upon Lee Shulman’s remarkable text “Teaching as Community Property.” He presents readers with the charge to rethink the role of teaching. He challenges the community of learners to re-consider “changing the status of the problem in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation as precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about.”

Below are selected quotes inspiring aspects of this philosophical statement:

I. Where we stand (of paradigms and epistemologies)

Dewey: “Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground that of what it moves toward or into….It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading.” (p. 38) “The two principles of continuity and interaction are not separate from each other. They intercept and unite. They are, so to speak, the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience.” (p. 44)

Shulman: “We not only count and name in scholarship, we then recount and teach. And in recounting we transform and connect and integrate new forms and creations what might otherwise have been experienced individually and separately.” (p. 165)

McKeachie: “Ethical dilemmas occur when multiple responsibilities conflict or have more than one right answer (Strike, 1988). (p. 307) “Giving students the ability to differentiate emotion from reason is an especially important responsibility of instructors, according to Hanson (1996). (p. 313)

Barab & Plucker: “From this perspective, ability does not reside (and talent development does not occur) in the head of the learner, but is best conceptualized as a collection of functional relations distributed across persons and particular contexts
through which individuals appear knowledgeably skillful. Through these relations, and the context in which these relations are actualized, individual and environment are functionally joined and in some cases talented transactions occur. (Snow, 1992). (p. 166)

II. What we teach (of subject matter, skills, and capabilities)

Dewey: “The educator’s part in the enterprise of education is to furnish the environment which stimulates responses and directs the learner’s course. (p. 180) “The ear is as much an organ of experience as the eye or hand; the eye is available for reading reports of what happens beyond its horizon.” (p. 186) “A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information calculated to develop social insight and interest.” (p 192)

III. Who we teach (of centeredness, diversity, and responsibility)

Arnett: “The evidence is provided to support the idea that emerging adulthood is a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity. (p. 469) “The characteristics that matter most to emerging adults in their subjective sense of attaining adulthood are not demographic transactions but individualistic qualities of character.” (p. 473)

Martinez: “intentional learners see intent, ability, and effort as critical determinants of achievement.” (p. 1) “Intentional learners” take risks, use a skilled, agentive approach, and intensive, persistent effort to achieve long-term learning goals.” (p. 8)

IV. How we teach (of engagements, experiences, and techniques)

Bruffee: “Value of collaboration- It improves student work by increasing students interest in what they are studying and their enthusiasm for studying it, and it draws them more deeply into relevant issues.” (p. 18) “Working effectively with peers and coming to terms with strangers are critical to higher education today, where the central issue is transforming strangers of many kinds into productive peers and colleagues.” (Bruffee, p. 18)

Washbourn: “For experience to lead to learning…, we must reflect on our experience in a continuous process of “making meaning” out of our experiences so that they may contribute to our cognitive, aesthetic, and affective development.” (p. 3)

May: “Learning to teach well requires being conscientious students of our own practice (Dewey, 1904).” (p 114) “We know that collaboration is soul-searching, labor-intensive work for anyone participating, that shared understanding and significant change takes longer than expected, and that nothing is perfect (Bolin & Falk, 1987; Hall & Hord, 1987; Jackson, 1988).” (p. 116) “With reference to neo-Marxist and feminist theories, several proponents of critical action research believe that through developed and enlightened understandings of those engaged in conversation, critical discourse, and inquiry that empowerment, social action, and reform are not only possible but desirable (Carr & Kemmis, 1986)” (p. 116-117)

V. How well we teach (of assessment, evaluation, and scholarship)

Martin, et al: “From a phenomenographic perspective it is argued that knowledge cannot exist in a context independently of the knower, rather knowledge cannot exist in a
context independently of the knower, rather knowledge is constituted in the relationship between the knower and the context.” (p. 104) “The teacher engages the students in challenging their discipline understanding/professional practice with the intention of helping students to change their conceptual understanding” (p. 110)

**McKeachie:** “Effective lectures combine the talents of scholar, writer, producer, comedian, entertainer, and teacher in ways that contribute to student learning.” (p. 52) “Sutton (1993), referencing the contributions of Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, states, “Education is part of a larger ethical, social and cultural enterprise in which teachers are morally responsible to help students engage in a struggle to a more humane world. (p. 163)” (p. 129-130) “Project your own motivation — for the subject matter and for the students. Take opportunities to describe your own intrinsic motivation for both research and teaching and your mastery orientation to learning.” (p. 126)

**Shulman:** “All our research on learning to teach really revolves around the notion that teaching, that incredibly complex and demanding activity, is the central focus of everything we do in universities and colleges and it ought to be the primary concern for all of us.” (p. 124) “Changing the status of the problem in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about.” (p. 150-151)