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## Experiencing Teaching

Passion, hope, doubt, fear, exhilaration, weariness, collegue-ship, loneliness, glorious defeats, hollow victories, and, above all, the certainties of surprise and ambiguity; how on earth can a single word or phrase begin to capture the multilayered complexity of what it feels like to teach? Today's college classrooms are more diverse than ever before, and the explosion of online learning and social media has thrown traditional conceptions of college teaching out of the window. The truth is teaching is a gloriously messy pursuit in which shock, contradiction, and risk are endemic. Our lives as teachers often boil down to our best attempts to muddle through the complex contexts and configurations that our classrooms represent.

### **Muddling Through as the Honorable Response to Uncertainty**

Muddling through a situation sounds like something you do before you've learned the truly professional response to it. It seems random, uncoordinated, and not a little amateurish. But muddling through should not be thought of as haphazard, nor as dishonorable. Muddling through is about all you can do when no clear guidelines exist to help you deal with unexpected contingencies. When a racially motivated fistfight broke out on my second day of community college teaching all I could do was to try and muddle through. No course I had taken had put me in a simulation or role-play where I had the chance to break up an imagined classroom fight, so I was clueless to

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know how to respond. Somehow (I don't remember how) I managed to calm things down enough to finish the class. And for whatever reason, I had no more fights break out in class that year.

As we muddle through different teaching contexts we usually draw on insights and intuitions borne of experience. Sometimes these serve us well, but sometimes we quickly realize their limitations. For example, when something that worked wonderfully in class last semester only serves to provoke anger or confusion in students this time around, the highly situational nature of teaching is underscored. Administrators and politicians don't like to hear that teaching is situational. They need to believe that standardized indicators of good teaching exist that can be proven to be reliable and valid across multiple contexts. I have spent my life in such systems and, while they may make the administrative task of assigning annual scores to a teacher's performance easier, any correlation they have with an accurate assessment of what actually goes on in a classroom is often purely coincidental.

As you can see from the paragraph above, this is going to be an opinionated, some would say polemical, book. But the skepticism expressed above is not just my opinion. Studies of teachers' lives (Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2000; Mattos, 2009) indicate how teachers muddle through their careers. They report their work to be highly emotional and bafflingly chaotic. Career counselors and popular films may portray teachers as transformative heroes skillfully navigating classroom dilemmas to empower previously skeptical students, but actual teacher narratives (Harbon and Moloney, 2013; Shadiow, 2013) emphasize much more how teaching is riddled with irresolvable dilemmas and complex uncertainties.

Some of these dilemmas, such as how to strike the right balance between being supportive to students and challenging them with tasks they resist, or how to create activities that simultaneously address all learning styles and racial traditions in a culturally and academically diverse classroom, exist in any contemporary institution. But many of these pedagogic dilemmas are compounded by

the market-driven, organizational effectiveness paradigm that has taken hold in higher education.

As colleges find themselves under more and more pressure to attract students, create new programs, and move up the league tables of good and bad ratings, faculty find themselves working longer and harder than ever before. It is hard to imagine how you can make a difference in your students' lives (something most of us probably want to do) when you're teaching five to six courses a semester, have long advisee lists, and are required to serve on important committees and attend endless (and often apparently pointless) department or faculty meetings. Add to this the pressure to recruit students in the community, the expectation that you will bring in grant monies to help cover your salary, and the injunction that you publish and display other forms of professional engagement, and the problem researchers in higher education should study becomes not why college teachers quit but why they stay!

Sometimes, however, there's a visceral joy in muddling through an unanticipated classroom situation. When the internet connection fails, your power point presentation dies, or your mind goes blank, when students viciously attack each other in a discussion or answer questions in ways that suggest they have completely misunderstood what you've been trying to demonstrate for the last 20 minutes, or when they ask you probing questions and you have no clue about the answers, you hang for a moment (sometimes for what seems like an uncomfortable eternity) above a precipice of uncertainty.

Of course this experience can be embarrassing or demoralizing, making you resolve then and there you were not cut out for teaching and should quit as soon as possible. But at other times an intuitive "gut" response comes to you and you find yourself doing something you've never dreamed of doing before and being astounded that it actually has positive effects!

An example of stumbling blindly into something approaching an appropriate response happened to me one day when I had prepared a series of dazzlingly provocative questions for discussion that I felt were bound to generate heated, rich, and informed conversation. I asked the first question and was met with blank stares and total silence. After counting off 15 seconds quietly in my head I then asked the follow-up question I had prepared. Again, silence. Now I started to panic and found myself answering the question I'd just asked. I stopped myself and raised the third question I'd prepared beforehand, the fail-safe one that I imagined I would be struggling to raise about 15 minutes before the end of the class after a vigorous and sustained conversation. Dreadful, shaming quiet met my question along with the sound of my own blood rushing in my ears.

With no forethought I found myself saying something like this:

I know that speaking in discussions is a nerve-wracking thing and that your fear of making public fools of yourselves can inhibit you to the point of nonparticipation. I, myself, feel very nervous as a discussion participant and spend a lot of my time carefully rehearsing my contributions so as not to look foolish when I finally speak. So please don't feel that you have to speak in order to gain my approval or to show me that you're a diligent student. It's quite acceptable to say nothing in the session, and there'll be no presumption of failure on your part. I don't equate silence with mental inertia or lack of commitment. Obviously, I hope you will want to say something and speak up, but I don't want you to do this just for the sake of appearances. So let's be comfortable with a prolonged period of silence that might, or might not, be broken. When anyone feels like saying something, just speak up. And if no-one does, then we'll move on to something else.

To my astonishment this brief speech, born of total panic, seemed to unleash the conversational floodgates and a veritable torrent of student comment (well, it seemed like a torrent after the dry spigot of student silence) burst forth. After class that day a couple of students came up to me and told me that they never usually spoke in class discussions but that because I'd told them they didn't need to talk they relaxed to the point where they felt emboldened enough to say something. Apparently, my taking the pressure of performance-anxiety off their shoulders so they did not feel they had to say something brilliant or profound to earn my approval had removed a barrier to their talking in class.

I wish I could say I thought this all out beforehand, that I knew in advance about the way in which performance anxiety constituted a barrier to student participation and had therefore worked out a shrewd pedagogic tactic to deal with this. That would be a lie. What I enjoyed seemed like pure dumb luck.

And yet to call it dumb luck is perhaps to underestimate the informed intuitive rumblings that lay behind this improvisation. My action was unpremeditated and instantaneous but that does not mean it was uninformed. On the contrary, there was a great deal of experience behind it, much of which concerned my own participation in discussion. As a college student I found discussions horribly intimidating and was highly conscious of the pressure to sound smart. I'm sure that an awareness of that pressure, and a realization that removing it would have helped me focus my energy on learning rather than performing the role of "smart and articulate student," was operating at a preconscious level.

### Teaching as White Water Rafting

One of my favorite metaphors is teaching as white water rafting. In both, periods of apparent calm are interspersed with sudden frenetic turbulence. Tranquility co-exists with excitement, reflection with action. If we are fortunate enough to negotiate crises

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successfully we feel a sense of self-confident exhilaration. If we capsize our self-confidence is shaken as we are awash in self-doubt. These are the days we vow to quit at the end of the semester. All teachers regularly capsize and all teachers worth their salt regularly ask themselves whether they have made the right career choice. Experiencing ego-deflating episodes of disappointment and demoralization is quite normal. Indeed, being aware that we regularly face inherently irresolvable dilemmas in our teaching, and that we hurt from these, is an important indicator that we are staying awake and remaining critically alert.

Teachers who say that no irresolvable dilemmas exist in their lives are, in my view, either exhibiting denial on a massive scale or getting through the school day on automatic pilot. Some teaching dilemmas are so intractable for the simple reason that they have no solution. The most we can hope for is to craft provisional responses that seem to make sense for the context in which we find ourselves and that lessen rather than exacerbate the tensions we inevitably feel.

I know I will never strike the right balance between being credible and authentic because no such perfect balance exists. I know I will never connect with everyone's preferred learning style 100 percent of the time because the diversity of my students' personalities, experiences, racial and cultural traditions, and perceptual filters (as well as my own personality, racial identity, learning style, cultural formation, and professional training) make that impossible. And I know too that I will never judge correctly exactly when I should intervene to help a struggling student and when I should leave her to find her own way through her learning challenge.

Whenever I'm on an interviewing committee deciding who will be appointed to a new teaching position, one of my questions to candidates is always to ask them which of the teaching dilemmas or problems they face they have never been able to solve. If a teacher tells me they have no such dilemmas or problems then mentally I move a long way toward striking them off my list of

“possibles.” I don’t want to teach with someone who either refuses to acknowledge that such dilemmas exist or, knowing of their existence, chooses to ignore them.

It seems to me that classrooms can be thought of as arenas of confusion where teachers are struggling gladiators of ambiguity. Just when we think we have anticipated every eventuality, something unexpected happens that elicits new responses and causes us to question our assumptions of good practice. Yet admitting to feeling unsure, realizing that our actions sometimes contradict our words, or acknowledging that we are not in control of every event is anathema to many of us. In our heads a good teacher is like a skilled archer with a quiver full of powerful arrows. Whenever a problem arises we feel we should be able to reach into the quiver, choose the appropriate arrow, fit it to our bowstring, and fire it straight at the heart of the problem, thereby resolving it. Appearing confused, hesitant, or baffled may appear to us a sign of weakness. And admitting that we feel tired, unmotivated, or bored seems a betrayal of the humanitarian, charismatic zest we are supposed to exhibit.

When all these feelings arise, as they are bound to with alarming regularity, two responses are typically called forth. The first is to be weighed down with guilt at our apparent failure to embody the idealized characteristics of a properly humane, omniscient, perfectly balanced teacher. This response illustrates Britzman’s (2003) myth that “everything depends on the teacher.” This myth holds that if the class has gone well it’s because you have been particularly charismatic that day, adeptly diagnosing students’ learning styles and designing the day’s activities to respond to these. Conversely, if the class has bombed or gone awry you assume it must be down to your incompetence.

The second response to feeling clueless is quickly to retreat to a position in which you deny that anything untoward has happened, saying, in effect, that your performance has been exemplary but that your students, colleagues, or superiors are too narrow-minded or unsophisticated to see this fact clearly.

When things inevitably fall apart it seems to me that the most reasonable response is somewhere between these two extremes of self-flagellating guilt and self-delusional denial. In traversing terrains of ambiguity, chaos and contradiction are inevitable. The old military acronym SNAFU (“Situation Normal, All Fouled Up,” to put it politely) nicely approximates the practice of teaching. Recognizing this, however, usually comes only after a series of profoundly unsettling experiences.

For those of us trained to believe that college classrooms are rational sites of intellectual analysis, the shock of crossing the border between reason and chaos is intensely disorienting. It’s an experiential sauna bath, a plunge from the reassuring, enervating warmth of believing that classrooms are ordered arenas into the ice-cold reality of wrestling with constant dilemmas and contradictions.

But just because our classroom practices might seem to be contradictory (for example, prompting discussion by telling students they don’t need to speak), this doesn’t mean we should throw our hands in the air and believe that good teaching is a matter of mysterious chance. I will argue in this book that the key to being a good college teacher is regularly collecting data from your students concerning how they are learning, week in week out, and then using that information to guide your decisions.

### Growing into the Truth of Teaching

Truth is a slippery little bugger. As soon as someone tells me they have the truth about something I get suspicious. Yet the truth is (are you now suitably suspicious?!) that each of us comes to certain understandings and insights regarding teaching that just seem so *right*, so analytically consistent, and so confirmed by our experiences that describing them as truthful seems entirely justified.

The truth I am talking about here is not universal truth, the grand narrative of standardized pedagogy that says that everyone should think, believe, or teach in a certain way. It is a more personal truth, one smelted and shaped in the fire of our practice so that it



fits the situations we deal with every day. In some ways it is close to Polyani's (1974) notion of implicit personal knowledge, the certainties that lurk in the dim corners of consciousness.

Over a period of time each of us develops this personal truth to the point where we depend on it and sometimes declare it. I've been teaching since 1970 and it's only in the last few years that I've felt confident enough to do some truth telling to myself about the frustrations and fears that are always there in my work. I feel I've grown into the truth of my own teaching.

By growing into the truth of teaching I mean developing a trust, a sense of intuitive confidence, in the accuracy and validity of our judgments and insights. Much of my career has been spent growing into truth. Here's some of the most important truths I've established for myself about teaching:

- I will always feel like an impostor and will never lose the sense of amazement I feel when people treat me as if I have something valuable to offer.
- I will never be able to initiate activities that keep all students engaged all the time.
- Attending to my credibility at the outset of a new course is crucial so I need to watch out for my tendency to engage in too much self-deprecation.
- The regular use of examples, anecdotes, and autobiographical illustrations in explaining difficult concepts is strongly appreciated by students.
- Making full disclosure of my expectations and agendas is necessary if I am to establish an authentic presence in a classroom.
- I always have power in the classroom and I can never be a fly on the wall withering away to the point that students don't notice I'm in the room.

- Modeling critical thinking is crucial to helping students learn it, but students will probably resist critical thinking whatever I do.
- Resistance to learning is a highly predictable presence in my classrooms and its presence does not mean I'm a failure.
- I have learned racist impulses and instincts and I will never lose these, though I can become more aware and struggle against them.
- I cannot motivate anyone to learn if at a very basic level they don't wish to. All I can do is try to remove whatever organizational, psychological, cultural, interpersonal, or pedagogic barriers are getting in the way of their learning, provide whatever modeling I can, build the best possible case for learning, and then cross my fingers and hope for the best.

These truths are experiential truths, confirmed repeatedly by my own analyses, colleagues' perceptions, and students' anonymous feedback. They have not been revealed to me in a series of Road to Damascus epiphanies, there have been no instantaneous conversions. Instead, there has been an incremental building of recognition and confidence, a growing readiness to accept that these things are true for me, Stephen Brookfield, even when they are contradicted by conventional wisdom, omitted from manuals of best practices, or denounced by authoritative experts.

What has been interesting to me is that as I have grown confident enough to speak these truths publicly I have had them confirmed by strangers. Just to take the example of the first of the truths mentioned above (my knowing that I'm an impostor), I have had countless teachers tell me that I put into words the exact feeling of impostorship that they felt. Apparently it was comforting to hear or

read a supposed “expert” talk about feeling like an impostor, because it named as a universal reality something they thought was wholly idiosyncratic, only felt by them.

### Being Experts on Our Own Teaching

One of the truths I want to argue for in this book is that sometimes *we* are the experts on our teaching. When we start to think about how to deal with the problems we face in class our instinct is to turn to classroom consultants, texts, or faculty development specialists to help us. The assumption seems to be that we will only stumble on useful insights or information for dealing with our problems by going outside of our own experience and consulting external sources.

Sometimes such resources are indeed invaluable. If I didn’t think that this book could be helpful there would be no reason to write it! But far too often many teachers view even a cursory reflection on their personal experience as essentially worthless. Their reasoning is that if they had experience that would help them to deal with the problem, then the problem wouldn’t exist anymore. I believe that the opposite is true, that the starting point for dealing with teachers’ problems should be teachers’ own experiences. The problem is that teachers don’t know how to unlock their experiences and reflect on them in a way that provides problem-solving insights.

In this regard we can learn a great deal from the ideas and practices of the adult educator, Myles Horton (Jacobs, 2003). Myles was the founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and he spent his life as an activist educator working with labor unions, the civil rights movement, and various grassroots environmental organizations. Although known chiefly for his social activism, he also worked out a theory of how to help people learn from their experience. “Helping people learn what they do” is his succinct description of how to get teachers to learn from their experiences.

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When I heard Myles speak this phrase to a group of my own students in New York I was taken immediately with how it captured what I saw happening in the best kind of teacher conversation groups. In these groups people come to realize the value of sharing their own experiences with each other, they help each other take a critical perspective on these, and they learn how to use this reflection to help them deal with whatever problems they face. As I work to get teachers to take their own experiences seriously, Myles' words are always at the front of my mind.

Of course, experience can sometimes be a terrible teacher. Simply having experiences does not imply that they are reflected on, understood, or analyzed critically. Individual experiences can be distorted, self-fulfilling, unexamined, and constraining. In fact, it is a mistake to think that we *have* experiences in the sense that our own being stands alone while the river of experience flows around us. Events happen to us but experiences—the meanings we grant to how we understand events—are constructed *by* us as we make sense of these events.

Although experience can teach us important lessons it is not inherently enriching. Experience can teach us habits of bigotry, stereotyping, and disregard for significant but inconvenient information. For example, my “experience” of life as an adolescent and young adult taught me that Black people are violent, not very smart, rhythmic, and athletic. I had to learn to see this experience differently by opening up to other perspectives on my learned racism.

Experience can also be narrowing and constraining, causing us to evolve and transmit ideologies that skew irrevocably how we interpret the world. A group's pooling of individual experiences can be a myopic exchange of prejudices. Even when cross-disciplinary groups work on the same problem (for example, when teachers of mathematics, psychology, athletics, literature, theater, and engineering join together to look at how they can respond to the diversity of ability levels, racial identities, ethnic backgrounds, and learning styles in their classes) there can still be



a form of groupthink. This is particularly so if group members are drawn from the same class, cultural group, and geographical area.

Despite these caveats concerning the uncritical celebration of personal experience, I think we need to err on the side of taking personal experience more seriously. Asking yourself what motivated you to learn in a particular class, what it was that an instructor did that made you trust her, or why you were unconcerned about making mistakes in a particular course but paranoid about it in another can yield very fruitful lines of analysis for how you can create the conditions under which your own students will learn. If you don't already do so, then you should probably begin to trust your inner voice a little more and accept the possibility that your instincts, intuitions, and insights might possess as much validity as those of experts in the field. You need to recognize the fact that in the contexts in which you work, *you* are often the expert.



