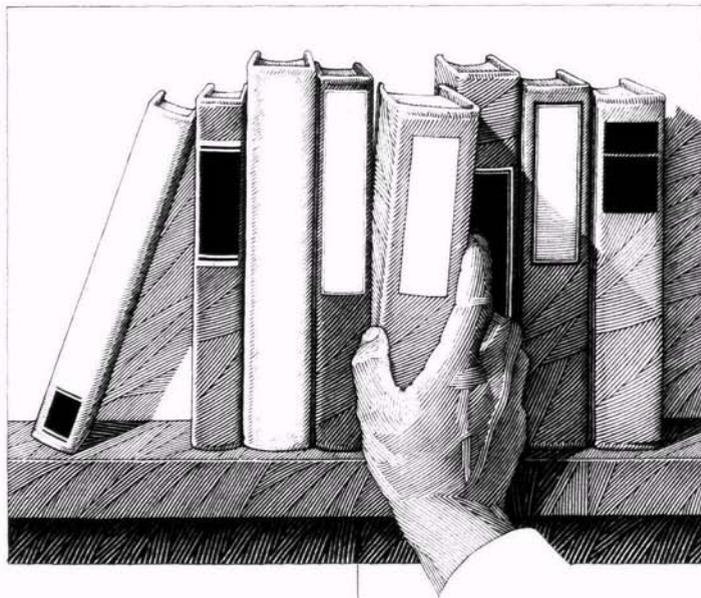


Achieving Reflectivity Through Literature

There's a richness in literature that can help teachers gain insights and perspective about their life's work.

Recently, as a result of new requirements from Oregon State's system of higher education, Portland State University changed its four-year undergraduate teacher education program to an intensive five-year graduate plan. The program includes a heavy emphasis on the knowledge base for effective teaching; and, to prepare graduates for the complex sociology faced by the professional teacher, students spend nearly half the program in specially chosen "cluster" public schools.

The problem is that students can graduate with a strong technical background but a limited overall perspective. But how does a program ensure a broad perspective on the nature of teaching? After focusing on the pedagogical and behavioral skills of teachers for three intensive terms of the fifth year, teacher candidates at Portland State take a summer course in reflective practice. The goal of this course is to move students from a technical understanding of teaching to comprehending the big picture of teaching with all its social and moral implications.



Using Literature to Reflect

Strongly influenced by Robert Coles' ideas in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (1989), we organized our course around the idea of *teacher as character*. By having our students read and view fictional and real teachers' stories about their lives, beliefs, frustrations, and accomplishments in and outside of school, we hoped to help them cultivate richer insights into what it means to be a teacher. We felt these stories would

help them see relationships between their own experiences and those of the teachers they read about. In turn, we expected these connections to inform and influence the direction of our class discussions as well as influence future personal directions.

We also planned for our students to share their own stories to help them develop an awareness of the power of listening to their students' stories. As William Carlos Williams told his medical students, "Their story, yours,

mine—it's what we all carry with us on the trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (Coles 1989, p. 30).

The reading and viewing list for the course consisted of fiction and nonfiction: Coles' *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (1989), Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), Rothenberg's *Children with Emerald Eyes* (1987), and Laurence's *A Jest of God* (1989). They also read essays and short stories such as Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers", Wolfe's "The Plumed Knight", Updike's "More Stately Mansions" and "Slippage", and Baxter's "Gryphon." In addition, they viewed the videotapes, *Dead Poet's Society* and *Stand and Deliver*.

Discussion and Dialogue

What happened in our classrooms? Students spent much of their time in small-group activities designed to encourage discussion. They often moved outside the classroom to their favorite campus nesting places to continue the dialogue. Later, in whole-class discussions, students brought their ideas and issues before the class.

Students kept dialogue journals to document their reactions and thoughts about their viewings, readings, discussion in class, or their teaching experiences. The journals also provided the instructors with detailed records of students' reflections on their course experiences so the instructor could provide students with personalized feedback. Finally, their journals served as an evaluation tool for the course.

Students helped design a rubric articulating qualities they felt should be assessed in their journals. They adapted many of these qualities from Elbow's (1981) criteria for evaluating writing such as: grappling with ideas in order to understand the central issues, synthesizing ideas and situations with their own experiences, challenging and taking risks by voicing their own opinions, and rethinking and revisiting initial ideas and opinions.

The "Aha" of Learning

We found in our students' journals a rich qualitative source of their percep-

tions about the course and about the reflective process. A sampling of journal items establishes a sense of these reflections:

• "What a luxury to be able to learn by reading 'real' books! Ninety-nine percent of the education textbooks have as much relevance to real life as a language text has to getting kids excited about learning a foreign tongue . . . We learn best from the "Aha" and the 'Aha!' is an emotional thing."

• "I've been reading *Children with Emerald Eyes*. I'm struck by the tremendous love of the author for the children with whom she worked. At first I was feeling guilty, because I still feel no desire to go work with similar children. It finally dawned on me that she wasn't telling me to do that, she was telling me to use the same love, keen perceptiveness, patience, and uncompromising honesty with whatever children I am called to teach . . . Why have none of our teachers and none of our textbooks told us to love the children?"

"Why have none of our teachers and none of our textbooks told us to love the children?"

• "Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers" keeps coming back to me. He is saying to me that as responsible, professional, ethical, thinking individuals—teachers—we must face the prejudices, biases, dead-on and must decide how to correct them. It is not as teachers we must do this but as students of human behavior. Learning how to try to correct it is so difficult."

• "I'm feeling ambivalent towards Rose's book, *Lives on the Boundary*. On the one hand, I admire his dedication and insight into the educational

system and what it does to kids. I also feel put off by his whining search for acceptance Actually I'm probably more frustrated with this book, because I see myself doing some of the whining. I was labeled a failure after my student teaching experience. I couldn't handle inner-city kids, according to my support teacher. Ever since then, I have been trying to convince myself and others that I can."

Students spoke of the course as having a "grounding effect"; it was a sort of filter through which they could run their previous field experiences. One student said the course helped him "clear the blurs" by encouraging him to gain perspective about his recent teaching experiences.

Most important, students raised questions and saw connections that we hadn't anticipated. One student asked, "Why do all the teacher characters have some close personal connection with their teaching environment—Keating, a prep school graduate in a prep school teaching environment; Chris Zajac, a working class product in a similar teaching environment; Rose, who rises from the impoverished south side of Los Angeles and later works with similar students—can't teachers cross boundaries?"

Some students, too, spoke of being "overwhelmed" rather than "empowered" by this course. They said there was too much reading, with too little time for discussion. Others challenged our focus on the stories of other teachers, which, they said, allowed insufficient time for the students to share their own stories. Some questioned the use of the dialogue journals as an assessment instrument. Students felt that basing their evaluation on the journal contradicted the spirit and nature of a course on reflectivity.

To "Weigh and Consider"

From our own reflections and those of our students a number of recommendations emerge:

• The number of readings should be limited to allow for the fullest range of "unrushed reflection."

• Other input, such as the students' journals from other courses, case studies, and discussion of particular "classroom vignettes" should be included

and intertwined with the readings to personalize the experience.

- If the dialogue journal is to be used for evaluation of student performance, the notion of "journal" should be fully explored with students. Criteria for its assessment should also be carefully developed with students, and other forms of evaluation of student performance should be examined.

- More time should be spent on the process of reflection. Some students felt that the course "emphasized and underlined" the concept rather than informed them about the process. Students suggested more discussion on the "techniques of reflection," their own and those they had observed, discussing the "when of reflection," and ways to develop reflective practices.

- The concept of reflection should be infused and reinforced throughout teacher education so that students have the preparation and material to

receive full benefit from a course at the conclusion of the program.

We feel this course has successfully planted the seeds for thoughtful educational practice. Our students pursued Francis Bacon's injunction to read "not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider." We hope they continue to nurture and cultivate these seeds to maturity throughout their professional careers. □

References

- Baldwin, J. (1988). "A Talk to Teachers." In *Multicultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*, edited by R. Simonson and S. Walker. St. Paul, Minn.: Greywolf Press, pp. 3-12.
- Baxter, C. (1986). "Gryphon." In *Best American Short Stories*, edited by R. Carver. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Coles, R. (1989). *The Call of Stories: Teach-*

ing and the Moral Imagination. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kidder, T. (1989). *Among Schoolchildren*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Laurence, M. (1989). *A Jest of God*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Rose, M. (1989). *Lives on the Boundary*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Rothenberg, M. (1987). *Children with Emerald Eyes*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Updike, J. (1987). "More Stately Mansions." In *Trust Me*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Updike, J. (1987). "Slippage." In *Trust Me*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Wolfe, T. (1987). "The Plumed Knight." *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe*. New York: Charles Scribner.

M. Carrol Tama and **Kenneth Peterson** are Associate Professors of Curriculum and Instruction, Portland State University, School of Education, P.O. Box 751, Portland, OR 97207-0751.

What's the difference between

Night & Day

Next time you observe a lesson and are faced with preparing an Instructional Conference, use ***The Instructional Coach's Companion***.

TICC—an exciting, new computer program by Fran Mayeski and Linda Goldsmith—will lead you quickly and easily through the conference preparation.

As you prepare, **TICC**

- provides definitions and examples of **forty-eight elements of effective instruction** (from active participation to whole brain teaching),
- gives options for diagnostic questions and transitional phrases and, when the preparation is done,



TICC prints out a complete "road map," incorporating all your choices and entries, for you to use when you conduct the Instructional Conference.

TICC is available for IBM/compatible and Macintosh computers for \$189.00.

For more information or a demonstration diskette, contact **Successful Software, Inc., 2232 Crosswind Drive, Kalamazoo, MI 49008 (616) 381-1691.**

P. S. What is the difference between night and day? Try **TICC** and see how much easier your preparations are and how **TICC** increases the effectiveness of your Instructional Conferences. Then you'll know.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.