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Abstract

At a time when the context of teaching in higher education is difficult for any number of factors: reduced funding, changing demographics of students, demands to teach in flexible times and spaces, there are also higher levels of quality control, transparency and accountability over teaching are exerted by institutions. This paper re-frames these demands and difficulties to reclaim the disciplinary expertise of the academic as teacher and following Palmer (1998) sees teaching as an entanglement of ‘beings’: the teachers, the learners, and the subject and explores what it means to BE a teacher within these relationships. We argue for a relational pedagogy in which embodied teaching is guided by listening for and to the subject. Wishing to be consistent in the paper with its theme, we adopt a subject-centred approach. And since our core subject in this paper is teaching, we necessarily include reflections on teaching experiences.

Keywords: subject-centred learning, relational pedagogy, phenomenology

Introduction

The challenges and transformations in the past 20 years of the university as an institution have been well documented and discussed (Barnett 1992, 2000, 2011). In particular, the financial pressures faced by universities, the competition for funding, the forces of globalisation (Shumar 2004); the changing demographics of academically underprepared students (Wingate 2006; Devlin and O'Shea 2012); the rearrangement of teaching into ‘flexible times’ in which there seems to be no time at all (Clegg, 2010); the use of spaces that are not physical (Savin-Baden 2010) and the emphasis on producing the employable, work-ready graduate (Cooper, Orrell and Bowden 2010). Plus, the difficulties of large amounts of teaching load being carried by casual staff marginally linked to the institution and to students. Finally, the extended surveillance on academics as teachers in terms of quality control, transparency and accountability have all lead to an experience of teaching in difficult times in higher education (Lupton 2012).

Inspired by Palmer (1998) this paper plots a journey in which we explore and reflect upon our personal experiences of tertiary teaching and address ourselves to the question of: what does it mean to BE a teacher? Like Palmer (1998) we view teaching as an entanglement of ‘beings’: the teachers, the learners, and the subject. The key aspect that we wish to highlight in this paper is the notion of the subject as a being. The difference we are drawing between subject centred learning and learning of a subject is the distinction that: ‘The subject-
centred classroom is characterised by the fact that the third thing has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do’ (Palmer 1998, 117). We interpret Palmer’s use of the word ‘thing’ through Latour (2004, 223) as, ‘A thing is, in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an issue very much in there, at any rate, a gathering… the same word thing designates matters of fact and matters of concern.’ So, Palmer’s ‘third thing’ that students and teachers gather around is in and of itself a gathering. Subjects studied, from environmental science to philosophy, cannot be divided into realist hard facts versus subjective interpretations of experience but are always matters of concern, are always imbued with and intertwined as facts-values. The ‘third thing’ is the world speaking to us. We may hear that voice through the sounding boards of environmental science or philosophy or psychology or politics or engineering: and so hear or respond to different words but the world does speak, which means that by attending to the quality of our listening (Hua 2012) we may find a way to re-frame teaching in difficult times. Re-framing teaching relationships in higher education as a gathering around a subject opens up an endlessly rich and engaging community of learning for teacher and student alike and reminds us that the fundamental reason for teaching (both of teachers and students) is to engage with the world through the subject studied.

Using frame theory and phenomenology we shift the boundaries of what it means to be a teacher and exemplify this through personal reflection. But teaching does not occur in isolation from the greater social and political forces surrounding universities and society more generally. A second theme revolves around teaching at universities in difficult times, and how we see that a subject-based approach may be put into practice in current socio-political circumstances by actively building community. Thus, the paper moves between personal reflections and a reflexive approach which assumes that ‘…the beliefs of researchers affect the world that they research’ (Fox, Martin and Green 2007, 182).

Re-framing the difficulties

Frame theory assumes that the conceptions and system of conceptions that we use change what we observe and notice. Frames are more than a tool for thinking they are dynamic systems that change both what we think and how we interact with the world and each other. To reframe our conceptual system is to change that dynamic (Jerneck and Olsson 2011).

Part of what a frame does is to determine what is considered to be part of the context and what is left out. In our reframing of the difficulties of teaching in higher education we shift the frame to include the relationship between and with: students, teachers and the subject, not as an add-on but as central to teaching. This is to conceptualise pedagogy as relational and to enter into a relationship is to be open to change and attend to the relationship. As McGilchrist (2009, 28) points out when discussing the workings of the human brain:

The kind of attention we bring to bear on the world changes the nature of the world we attend to, the very nature of the world in which those ‘functions’ would be carried out, and in which those 'things' would exist. Attention changes what kind of a thing comes into being for us: in that way it changes the world.

For example, rather than framing the teaching difficulties that a widening and increasing participation in higher education brings through a ‘student deficit’ model in which students are asked ‘to adapt themselves to the institution and its rules, rather than on the institution and its main players to adapt in response to the fresh perspectives’ (Bowl 2001, 157); it is to attend to the changing relationship between subject, student and teacher. In any
relationship it is the whole person that is involved, not a segment and so this reframing of teaching brings the whole person into being a teacher.

This re-framing also highlights the phenomenological method, which draws together insights into, from and through experience via critical reflection and generates detailed, careful descriptions of everyday ‘things’ to see them in fresh ways (Goulding 2002, 23). Phenomenology takes the approach of examining subjective and personal human experience with an emphasis on an individual’s views, feelings, and emotions (Harvey 2009; Lopez and Willis 2004). This is a method that assumes all knowing is interpretation, that interpretation is improved through a circle of open peer inquiry and discussion, that methods of inquiry must take great care over close, attentive observations and that those observations must not be limited by preconceptions as to what should or should not be included. Rigorous scholarship using this method means it is necessary to include even those aspects of teaching such as bodily emotions and intuition which are usually considered to have no place in the classroom.

As the teaching context in higher education expands (geographically, sociologically, politically) so the quality of attention to teaching needs to expand not contract and include more of the person in the teacher. This is not to become the over burdened ‘martyr’ carrying greater work-loads but to expand the sense of self in relationship with and to others including the subject. It is to redefine the framing of what it means to be a teacher.

Teachers matter. It has been said before and it will be said again; not the teaching but the teacher matters (Fenstermacher and Richardson 2004). Who has not heard the reflective question at some point in an academic development session of: ‘Think of a teacher who influenced your learning style/ trajectory/ journey?’ And listened to a flurry of affectionate and powerful memories of a person who shaped that person’s thinking? It is not the ‘what’ that we remember but the ‘who’! We must begin therefore by reframing teaching by reframing ourselves. And to do that is to begin with autobiography (Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy 2004).

**How did we come to be teachers?**

**Julia**

I did not set out to be a teacher and after 20 odd years teaching at university I still have no qualifications as a teacher. Rather, like most of my colleagues I have a PhD in my subject area (philosophy); have completed many short professional development courses run through the university and had lots and lots of practice on the bodies and minds of 1,000’s of undergraduate students. I was also lucky to experience inspirational and transformative teaching as an undergraduate from Dr Patsy Hallen, a now retired academic at Murdoch University, whose gentle yet strong insistence on authentic engagement with texts and ideas opened up the life of the mind for me as a young student. A door once opened that can never be closed again and thus I fell in love with thinking about thinking and with the joys and thrills of the subject of philosophy. And so I took the traditional route of casual tutoring, completing a PhD on the philosophical ramifications of quantum theory as considered through David Bohm’s metaphysics of wholeness at the end of which, with children to support, I found a secure job in the offshoot world of academic language and learning, becoming a senior lecturer in learning skills.

At first, I resisted the naming of my work as ‘teaching’; I was an academic and taught alongside my research and other duties. I facilitated learning, I created conditions for excellent discussions amongst students, I inducted students into the discourse of academia but I did not name myself a teacher. I might name myself as a tutor or lecturer but not as a teacher, it was only after a long time of wandering around the university that I have come into being, as a teacher. Coming back to my discipline and supervising research students in
philosophy and wondering again, ‘What is the pedagogy for beholding interconnectedness as a primary reality and not a derived one?’ (Palmer and Zajonc, 2010, 77).

Angus

Having grown up spending a large amount of my time outdoors, with family holidays frequently spent busy camping in the wilds of Australia, studying Environmental Science at university seemed like a natural fit. I was an extremely mediocre student, however, barely scraping through with pass marks for most of the technical units. Things changed in my final year when I was exposed to policy, law and decision-making, including what is now my area of speciality: environmental impact assessment (EIA). I discovered a great passion for this more applied aspect of environmental science.

After completing a basic BSc degree I was employed briefly and casually to undertake some EIA research, which ultimately resulted in my first publication in the field. By this time I was hooked and signed up for Honours research in EIA following a gap year of travel overseas. During my Honours year, I also started teaching for the first time as a casual tutor in an environmental policy and law unit. I continued with the tutoring after graduating and whilst working as a full-time EIA consultant. It did not take me long to realise that I did not enjoy the commercial side of EIA much at all, but really enjoyed the university teaching I had been doing and was hungry for more. Consequently, I enrolled in a PhD in EIA, knowing that this qualification was essential for an academic career.

I have always enjoyed the teaching experience but literally 'fell' into this role with no training or preparation whatsoever, relying entirely upon my wits and self-motivation to do as best as I could at it. My formal reflections on teaching began when I taught units in environmental education (EE) - here for the first time I was exposed to academic literature and thinking about the (environmental) learning experience and a body of knowledge that was seeking to make EE as effective as possible. Thus I embarked on the journey of self reflection, awareness and evaluation; always seeking to improve my own teaching. It is fair to say that teaching is equally as beguiling a subject to me as is my long-term love of EIA.

Re-framing relationships in teaching

Claiming an identity as a teacher in higher education can be difficult, as we note in our stories. Savin-Baden (2008, 145) remarks, ‘… the notion of ‘being’ a teacher in higher education continues to be a problematic and contested space.’ Part of this difficulty is the pressure to learn pedagogical theory and practise when expertise lies in a disciplinary area, this throws all academics (apart from those in the discipline of education) back into being a learner ‘…and for some academics the notion of being a learner while being a lecturer is deeply problematic both emotionally and pedagogically’ (Savin-Baden, 2008, 145). Re-framing this difficulty away from expertise in pedagogical theory and onto teachers as whole people who are passionate about their subject of expertise, takes away some of that pressure. It is to widen the frame to include both those dispositions which are usually recognized as part of the characteristics of good teachers such as: ‘…enthusiastic, dedicated, communicated well, were available to help and did so promptly and explained the course requirements clearly’ (Devlin and O'Shea, 2012, 369) and to include relational qualities. To begin with what it means to be a teacher, is to allow words from the affective realm into teaching accounts, such as those that emerged in our autobiographies: ‘beguiling’, ‘hungry’, ‘love’, ‘gentle’.

Whilst we would agree with Lupton (2012, 6-7) that, ‘The foregrounding of the teacher might seem at odds with the student-centred approach which has dominated the higher education teaching literature over the last 20 years … it could be argued that acknowledging
the mind-body-spirit of the teacher as a crucial dimension in teaching and learning is integral to a student-centred approach.’ We would add that it is the entanglement of both teacher and student in relationship with the subject, the ‘great’ thing, that is being studied which is at the centre of the classroom. As Palmer (1998, 116) describes it:

\[\text{Perhaps the classroom should be neither teacher-centred nor student-centred but subject-centred. Modelled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher- and student-centred education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student, but subject at the center of our attention.}\]

We would also add that building this ‘community of truth’ is through relationship with other teachers. Whilst we may begin with autobiography we must then move to a sharing of those stories as a way to build community. Academics have often faced difficult times and it is possible to trawl through the institutional history of the western university and point to any number of these times, for example, student riots in Paris did not just happen in 1968 but also in 1229 when academics at the University of Paris went on strike for two years over the deaths of students and to force the declaration of academic freedom (Courtenay, Miethke and Priest 2000). However, rather than the collective identity that historically academics have drawn on in times of threats; currently, one of the profound difficulties in teaching in higher education is that the range of academic responses is constrained by an ‘enhanced individualism’ (Shumar 2004). This is an individualism ‘…which involves a loss of autonomy, a lack of self-determination and a culture of audit and excessive accountability” (Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy 2004, 29). The struggle against the ‘enterprise university’ begins when we remember that academics and students are the university. A university only exists as a relationship between students and faculty. Indeed, Palmer and Zajonc (2010, 25) suggest that community as a concept exists as, ‘an ontological reality, an epistemological necessity, a pedagogical asset and an ethical corrective.’ This means that academics and students need to ‘take back’ the institution, to reclaim the *communitas* of the university as their own, to stand against the environment of increasing surveillance and control of teaching in higher education and do so together, not alone.

Barnett (2011, 14) calls on academics to strive for the best possible idea of a university under present conditions to create an ‘ecological university’ which brings together ‘… the apparent tension here between authenticity and responsibility, between the inner and the outer callings of the university… that takes seriously both the world’s interconnectedness and the university’s interconnectedness with the world.’ And a good place to begin is by reconstituting the interconnections within the university so that academics move from an individualised account of their teaching to a collective and shared space with a language to talk about teaching that is authentic to them, a language imbued by the disciplinary subject.

Whilst there are, and have been, good reasons for improving teaching quality in higher education, this can be achieved through institutions increasing trust, supporting risk-taking behaviour and acknowledging the courage that it takes to teach (Palmer 1998). This is not to denigrate the importance of understanding and at times applying teaching strategies, but it is to recognize the limitations of such approaches. For example, John Biggs (1999) wrote an extremely useful and richly textured book aimed to ‘… help university teachers reflect on and improve the quality of their teaching, despite the conditions of class size and diversity that seem to make good teaching more difficult than ever’ (x1). Thirteen years later, most academics have incorporated Biggs’s teaching strategies of aligned assessment, authentic classroom activities and scaffolding of curriculum into their practice, yet still struggle with the question of how best to teach in the context of a higher education system now under even greater pressures from constant demands by a multitude of ‘stake-holders’. Just as the
conceptualization of students' approach to learning as shallow/deep stratégic (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983) does not encompass the whole of the learning experience; so approaches to teaching as transfer of knowledge or transformation of students does not encompass the full experience of teaching. It leaves out the transformation of the teacher. Palmer (1998, 10) shows that, ‘good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher’.

Reflections on the integrity of the teaching relationship

Julia

Recently I was invited to run a day long professional development seminar at another university for tutors on ways to engage their students in critical thinking. As my seminar was on the second day I decided that I needed to attend the first day to get a sense of the context and culture of the faculty rather than just walk in, do my thing and leave. I did this because teaching for me is about relationship and it is very difficult to form a relationship so quickly. At least having the day before with the participants talking and drinking tea together, gave us a small chance of succeeding in creating a learning moment the next day. I spent quite a lot of time planning the rise and fall of the day: recognizing that there would be the after lunch lull, building in the easy moments at the beginning, scaffolding the interactions within the room so that the participants would have moments of engagement, moments of quiet reflection, moments of taking in (possibly) new ways of thinking about the tasks; moments of modeling and moments to practice new approaches. The day flowed as I had anticipated until after lunch I threw out the planned session and changed to a session with much more space in it because something had happened: thinking had entered the room. Sometimes when I teach I notice a shift within the attention of the room, not of individuals but a collective shift, and I term this ‘thinking entering the room’. I experience this shift as a presence arriving that changes the quality of what we are all doing at that moment- whether it be talking, listening, reading or writing. This is the experience of thinking as a collective act, which intensifies, sharpens and deepens the capacity of each of us to think.

On this day when I saw thinking arrive I let go of the plan, let go of the control and opened the space for participants to synthesis and integrate the material already covered into a lesson plan for their students, and to present these lesson plans to the seminar group. They covered the white boards in that room with brilliant, creative, innovative teaching ideas far beyond anything I had suggested and did this all in one hour. At the end of the session as we were reviewing together what had been created in that room, I found myself moved to tears (which I just managed to hold back) by the generosity of these people. And I remembered what it was about those inspirational moments with Patsy Hallen as an undergraduate and a postgraduate that had changed me: it was love.

Angus

Recently I conducted a World Cafe with my students on the rich topic of (environmental) decision-making and trade-offs. I had never facilitated a World Cafe before, but had previously thoroughly enjoyed several community-based events at which the technique was used; it was such an amazing energising feeling when passionate discussions occurred spontaneously throughout the room. I wanted to achieve something of the same with my students. It turned out that I was in for a roller-coaster of emotions as the World Cafe with my students unfolded and few of my expectations eventuated!

I explained the basic structure for the World Cafe involving small group discussions upon three challenging questions concerning decision-making issues with group changes to
occur for each question. I set up the 'cafe' tables with plenty of blank paper and pens to enable furious scribbling, jotting or doodling to take place by anyone and everyone in a group during their discussion (i.e. this had been the experience in community-based World Cafes I had previously attended). I also provided sticky notes to enable each group to capture key ideas from their discussions that would be pasted onto the classroom walls under each discussion question, for whole-of-class deliberation at the very end.

I assigned the membership of the first set of small groups (thereafter the students self-selected groups when it came time to 'move on') so as to break up the regular peer-groups that the students formed each week during class. The students all moved to their new groups and I invited them to commence discussions.

The room remained silent! It was everything I could do to stop myself from commanding them to speak. It was agony, and so I left the room for five minutes or so. When I returned each group was engaged in very subdued discussion - there was none of the hubbub I had so vividly enjoyed in the community based World Cafes. Also there was no scribbling on the paper provided; instead each student was busy writing notes in their own private notebooks. I deliberately did not sit-in or listen-in on the conversations of the groups, as I normally would during small group discussions, as I did not want to impose in any way upon their own thinking and learning and group dynamics. My only communication with them was to invite each group to write up at least one sticky-note and to paste this on the classroom wall, prior to them forming new discussion groups and moving onto the next question. It seemed like hard work to get them to write up just one sticky-note per group per question - again this was in great contrast to the previous World Cafe experiences where comments proliferated.

While the students were involved in their discussions, I jotted down my observations of the event, noting that it didn't seem to working all that well because it was so different from my previous experiences and hence expectations. When I felt that the discussions had probably come to a useful end (intuited from the energy levels in the room) I commenced a whole-of-class discussion.

I was astounded (and relieved!) when several students voluntarily spoke up and said it was one of the best discussions that they had ever had in a classroom and that they really appreciated meeting and talking to other students that they normally would not engage with. They observed that this exposed them to different ideas, and they noted it was far superior to discussions in previous weeks of the semester. They then asked me to share the contents of the sticky-notes with them. Up until this point, I had not looked at their content; I had just been disappointed with the small number received.

Reading aloud the sticky-notes I was amazed at the sophisticated, nuanced and extremely well thought-through responses to the discussion questions. I could not have asked for better subject-related content and it exceeded all of my expectations. Perhaps my excitement in reading out the student responses and sharing my own reaction to them inspired the students. Because all of sudden they had leapt to their feet and were using their mobile phones to photograph all the comments. And then one of them said: "We could post these on the online Discussions Forum for the external students to share!" I was thrilled needless to say.

What had been, for me, a teaching experiment, for which I had held strong pre-conceived notions of how it "should" proceed had unfolded in a completely different way, and ultimately surpassed my expectations regarding the learning content and experience. I learnt that teaching must be something that the community of learners owns and shapes for themselves. While I was responsible for the initial skeletal structure and learning content to some extent (i.e. a World Cafe would not work for questions with 'black and white' answers - they must revolve around topics that invite in-depth discussion and multiple 'shades of grey'),


I had to relinquish control and let the subject speak for itself and to capture the student's full attention. It took personal courage on my behalf and I had to endure a couple of hours of self-doubt, fear and loathing, but the experience ultimately transcended all expectations.

Reflexivity: reflecting on reflections

As revealed in our previous reflections, neither of us set out to become teachers, but rather somewhat 'fell' into the role. Labelling oneself as a university teacher may superficially evoke the 'duty statement' description of academic teaching responsibilities. A focus on the tasks of teaching is often undertaken in light of the current difficult times being experienced at Australian universities and elsewhere in terms of increasing class sizes, seemingly poorer entry level education standards, stretched resources etc. But the nuances of tertiary teaching are so much richer than this functional level of consideration. Through a reflective practice developed over many years we have come to understand the deeper philosophical meanings of 'being as a teacher'.

The unifying experience for both of us has been to learn to listen to and trust our own inner voices. Our students and our subjects communicate with us at a subliminal level that we have learnt to be receptive to and to seek out gently. Thus when thinking enters the room, or students become beguiled and engaged in the subject for themselves, we have learned how to let go of 'control' of the teaching and to enter into the learning experience along with our students.

For us there can be no other way to be effective teachers. The difficult times faced in universities will not be solved by technique-based solutions; notwithstanding the importance of the ongoing conversation between academics that surrounds training and capacity developing events as well as the published literature. Through personal transformation and self-awareness, and through the journey each of us has inadvertently experienced in our own ways, we know that any apparent obstacles to tertiary teaching can be overcome, together. Whilst we work in different areas of the university we have connected to each other (and to others) through our reframing of teaching as being.

We listen to our being in order to teach. When we are listeners as teachers then there are ways to work with qualities of listening. As teachers, we listen to our students to hear what they think, what they understand and the meanings they construct (Dewey 1933). We also listen for the moments of understanding of students and the usual form of this listening at university is through assignments and exams. However, another form of listening is when we listen with our students to what the subject is saying to us. And then:

When the great thing speaks for itself, teachers and students are more likely to come into a genuine learning community, a community that does not collapse into the egos of students or teachers but knows itself accountable to the subject at its core. (Palmer 1998, 118).

We are advocating that as teachers, one of the most effective things we can do is simply bring our attention onto the subject at hand, and enable our students to join us in this mutual inquiry. In this manner teacher and student collectively share in the learning process in a charged atmosphere during which thinking can enter the room. We are also attuned to the power differential that must exist between a teacher and their students, but through our careful listening and as the quote from Palmer above indicates, taking a subject-centred approach is a gentle and effective way to manage power differences. We are able to discern the need to provide guidance or a firm hand, for example, when marking assessments in order to uphold the minimum academic expectations laid out in our unit materials, while at the same time aiming to provide opportunity for our students to enter freely and deeply into their own relationship with our shared subject.
One of the ways that we have noticed the quality of attention extending in our teaching is when we include bodily and emotional awareness. Listening for the teaching moments with hearts and bodies; paying careful attention to the tingles of skin, the jolts of nerves, the catches in throat, the visceral feelings in the belly (when things are going badly) and the irrepressible urge to smile (when things are going well) has been a reliable guide for us in our years of teaching. When we follow a question with students, when we sit with a question in silence; when we ask of each other what don’t we know, then inner attention to bodily tuning is most intense. When we feel the atmosphere of the room thicken we know a need for gentle, slow movements; yet sometimes we step clumsily into a moment and the learning scatters and the students freeze. But in all this it is our trust in ourselves and in our small community of like-minded teachers that gives us the courage to know what it is to be a good teacher, it is programmed into our very being. So it is as though we keep 'relearning' for ourselves at a conscious level what it means to be a good teacher. But that relearning process only has space/opportunity to emerge when we ourselves are tuned into the emotional and physical sensations arising from the teaching experience; in short, behaving like a lover.

We are not claiming particular expertise as teachers, but rather expressing a relational pedagogy. After years of pursuing 'method' or 'techniques' for effective teaching, it is somewhat ironic to realise that the magic lies within us, our students and our subject all along. As Palmer (1998, 2) notes: ‘we teach who we are’ or put even more simply still: teaching is being. And at the intimate relationship level of teacher, subject and student, in the centre of teaching and learning lives love.

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