Knowing and Teaching

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In May Sarton's *The Small Room* (1961), Lucy, a new hire fresh out of graduate school, confronts her awesome responsibility of teaching undergraduates. In doing so, she wonderfully articulates her experience of a critical distinction between knowing and teaching—"*knowing something and teaching it are as different as dreaming and waking!*" She discovered what we have experienced—because we know our field does not necessarily mean that we can teach. In teaching, knowing our fields is necessary but not sufficient.

Teaching is a way of being present to others. Because "teacher" is a relational term, it implies "student." Yet when we college faculty talk about teaching, what is often most figural for us is the knowledge we teach, be it of history or nursing or chemistry or political science. We name *what* we teach, not *who* we teach, and we look to our discipline to name who we are—historian, nurse, chemist, political scientist. Our disciplines provide us an identity. When we talk about teaching, our conversation typically turns to *what* we teach, *what* we know, *what* we do or do not "cover." We easily slip into talking about these areas of our expertise and what we do with our expertise—how we present what we have learned to our students.

It is understandable that we find delight and stimulation in such expertise. After all it is within the framework of our discipline that we come to understand and make meaningful what we know and experience. It is within our disciplines that we are situated and lead active intellectual lives. We are products of the academy which stresses knowing. There learning is most frequently measured by a kind of testing that quantifies how much we know and awards it a value. Generally as students of our discipline, we enjoyed our academic experiences. We have ways of addressing and configuring the complexities of *what* we teach—the content. What has been less available to us are ways we can confront the complexities of learning and teaching, complexities of *how* we teach. Just as our disciplines act as frameworks that organize what we know, there are frameworks that can assist us to think about teaching.

Examples of such frameworks are (1) cognitive developmental theories, (2) learning style inventories and (3) metaphor. The first two enrich our understanding of our students as they learn over time and of ourselves as teachers in relation to them. The *third*, metaphor of self as teacher, bring teacher and student together in relational ways that articulate and describe particular ways of being present to the other. All three frameworks create possibilities for the reflective teacher to confront the complexity of teaching. Each is a way of seeing that suggests alternatives that expand how we think about what we do and how we might address the particularities of our students' learning in relation to the demands of our disciplines. Each framework informs us as teachers and offers options that integrate teaching and learning.

> "She had imagined she knew the material on Thoreau and Emerson by heart, that preparation for the first lectures would be easy, but she soon discovered that knowing something and teaching it are as different as dreaming and waking."
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> *May Sarton,*
> The Small Room.

The cognitive developmental frameworks come to us from psychology. They are the work of teaching psychologists who were curious about how their students learned. They then structured research to understand their students. William Perry's *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years (1968)* is a classic and the first in the series of three studies to which I will refer. Perry shows us that there is indeed a progression in the ways students' thinking develops during their college experience. Aware of this, we are able to make better judgments about how and what we teach in order to promote that development. An understanding of what Perry discovered from his college students will "tune our ear" to attend more carefully and knowledgeably to the words of our students, preparing us to hear what we may not expect or even be prepared to hear. Perry's study is not a laboratory study but rather a study of real students engaged in actual learning experiences. In his students' voices we hear our own students as they move from a tolerance for "just the facts, please" to "I have a right to my opinion" and on to the ability to construct arguments using evidence. His framework suggests ways we as educators can both challenge and support our students as they develop in the contexts of our colleges and universities.

While *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1986) builds on insights gained from Perry's work, their unique contribution is that they researched the way women learn. Their work is not gender specific. Rather it tells us something about all the students we teach. The last chapter of this study takes us back to the classroom, accenting its appropriateness for informing educators. The framework the authors derive from their research shifts the emphasis from knowledge about the teacher to knowledge about the student. Awareness of our student's development challenges us to understand differently how our students, men and women, think for themselves, and to have some ideas as to what our students observe when they see us, their teachers, thinking in our classrooms.

A more recent work on students' intellectual development is *Knowing and Reasoning in College* by Marcia Baxter-Magolda (1992). While this study builds on the works of Perry and Belenky and her colleagues, it also extends to include men and women. Our own experience as classroom teachers resonates in this study when we hear the students' words and their narratives. They call

to mind those we hear daily in our own classrooms and overhear in the halls and on the grounds of our own campuses. Baxter-Magolda sees understanding our students' intellectual development as being at the heart of effective teaching. The four ways of knowing represented by the students in this study can act as a framework to assist us in our conscious efforts to promote the intellectual development of our students in the courses we teach.

The three studies mentioned offer us ways of understanding our students and thinking about how we can actively promote learning in our classrooms. Such studies inform the ways we think about how we choose to be present to our students. We teach everyday. As any practitioner brings to his/her practice a knowledge of the field, they also bring ways of engaging those with whom they work, with whom they are in relationship. When we think about *how* we teach and *who* we teach, we engage in the highest form of understanding, according to Aristotle. To actively contribute to our students developing abilities to know and to reason in the context of the discipline we wish them to know and understand, is to engage in effective teaching. Clues in and insights from these studies can assist us in understanding how our students experience and understand grades, tests, authority, issues of ambiguity and relationship, all of which have a direct bearing on how our students mature as students and knowers in the disciplines they seek to learn and we wish to teach them. Such attention to *how our students learn* invites us to think differently about *how we teach.*

Our students' preferred ways of learning become apparent to them and to us through a second kind of framework, that provided by various learning style theories. Using frameworks provided by various learning styles is another way for us to think about teaching and engage its complexities. David Kolb's theory of experiential learning and his Learning Style Inventory (LSI) are helpful ways of involving our students in learning about learning. An understanding of *how* they learn empowers students to be independent and versatile. They have options when they are in learning situations they do not prefer. What learning styles do for us is make us truly aware of the diversity of learners we are likely to have in any one class. A framework that helps us think about various ways of perceiving and processing sets us free to reflect on what we can do in our classrooms to promote learning. To admit to diversity and cling to "tried and true" ways of being present to our learners is to avid the implications of what we know to be true. An awareness of a framework such as Kolb's, gives us choices and possibilities to vary our teaching and an impetus to reach and teach the diversity of students populating our classrooms and campuses. The alternatives available to us, appropriately used, can enhance the ways we present knowledge and encourage learning. A decision to lecture becomes a meaningful pedagogical choice, just as does a decision to structure a learning activity where students work in groups in a hands-on activity. Remembering that teaching is a relational interaction, Kolb's discussion of learning styles helps us think first of our students and our desire that they learn what it is we teach. As a framework it helps us to re-view *how* we teach, not only *what* we teach.

The third framework or way of seeing ourselves as teachers is that of metaphor. Metaphor allows us to describe and articulate for ourselves and others a particular way we see ourselves in relation to our students. Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By,* remind us "that the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (p.3). Metaphor is a matter of language. It has no meaning until we give it language. In teaching, metaphor might not seem immediately apparent. But if we listen to our language, we give ourselves away. Teaching is frequently described as a battle, using the language of war or emergency triage. Teaching is expressed by some who experience it as feeding and learning as a digestive process. It may be a journey to some while for others it is a task and the teacher is the task master. We talk constantly about the need and the pressure to "cover" our material—an interesting choice of words since presumably we do not wish to tell others we are hiding knowledge from the students. We talk about knowledge as if it were a material resource—we store it, pass it on, we bring it up, it's up for grabs, we grasp it, we grade it, we use it, we seek it, we waste it, we pool it, we package it, we market it, and on and on.

In every metaphor of self as teacher there is an implied metaphor of the student. This sets up a relationship we may not have previously articulated, may not even have known. Teacher as "sage on the stage" is quite different than teacher as "guide on the side." And in each case, the student changes. In the first, the student is audience; in the second, the student may be a traveler, an apprentice, a tourist and so on. Either way, there is a clear relationship identified that marks the roles of the teacher and the student. If we pursued these, we would find that both our actions and language tend to give evidence of implied metaphors. When we understand *who we are as teacher* we more readily understand *how we are as teacher.* Metaphor serves as a way of thinking about ourselves as teacher that can make us aware of how we teach what we know.

Each of the three kinds of frameworks discussed provides us with possible ways of thinking about teaching, ways of seeing that enable us to address and engage this complex activity we do each day. Knowing our field is critical in our profession, but as we can see it is not sufficient. In our teaching we are present to others—our students—on a daily basis. "Teaching calls us to live in the world of actuality, and of possibility and vision." (Noddings and Witherell, p.7). The actuality of teaching requires us to be "in the moment." It is here we become aware of the others the students are. Understanding their needs and capabilities, and with our knowledge of our discipline, we create opportunities for them to learn. Our energies are spent less in transmitting what we know that in creating opportunities for these students to learn. We come to respect teaching for the complex activity that it is and the particular ways it challenges us to know differently—to understand what we know in a way that we enable others to learn. •

References

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