Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Tales told out of school: Women's reflections on their undergraduate experience

Blythe Clinchy, *Wellesley College*

Some years ago I reported encountering what is known in the psychological research game as a "pointing study," which struck me as a metaphor expressing what we do to children and adults in our teaching (Clinchy, 1987). In this procedure, a child is presented two objects, one hiding a plastic trinket. If the child points to the correct object, he gets to keep the trinket; if not, he goes away empty-handed. The child is not asked to speak, only to point. Now, you'd think that if you were trying to understand why children choose an object, you'd ask them. But asking apparently is too messy for research. You can understand why. For one thing, asking leads to words and words are troublesome; they require a lot of transformation before you can crunch them into the computer. And another thing: If you ask a child questions, you treat him as a source of knowledge. You assume that he knows something that is worth listening to. Your "subject" turns into an informant. If you don't watch out, he might turn into a colleague, and you, the experimenter, might become less of an authority.

In the particular research study I wrote about, the researcher had actually taken special precautions against any such eventuality. Interposed between the child and the experimenter was a semi-opaque screen so that the child and experimenter couldn't see each other. Someone asked the researcher what the screen was for. After a

moment's hesitation, he finally remembered that the table-screen apparatus had been left over from some previous experiment, he needed a table and the screen wouldn't come off. Anyway, he said, the screen turned out to be useful, because - and I quote -"it keeps the kid from talking to me too much. You know, if the screen wasn't there, he'd want to talk to me. He'd say irrelevant stuff like, 'Who are you?'"

It occurred to me at that point that this image of a researcher at one end of the table, the child at the other, and the screen interposed between them was similar to one which kept cropping up in the stories women had told me about their educational experiences in the various research studies my colleagues and I conduct. Let me try to say why.

I have come to believe that the traditional liberal arts college, like the traditional experiment, is designed in ways that make it very difficult for even the most thoughtful and creative teachers to make connections with their students and to help the students make connections with the material they are studying. It puts a screen between us and them so that we never hear the real questions, the real thoughts they want to express. As Carol Gilligan once reported one of her interviewees saying, "Do you want to know what I think? Or what I really think?"

Connected Knowing Our research - and the research of others - leads us to believe that many students - especially, but not exclusively women students -have a proclivity for an approach to knowledge which we call <u>connected knowing</u>. When they encounter a new idea, they try to enter into it, to attach them- selves to it, to establish a kind of intimacy with it. If, for instance, they are studying an essay by a philosopher, they try to get behind the philosopher's eyes, and think along with him, following his argument step by step. They want to learn about the philosopher's life, about him as a person, so that, in Peter Elbow's phrase, they can "share the experience" that led him to his ideas; this, they think, will help them to understand his thinking. At least at first, they don't want to criticize the position, to "tear it apart;" first they want to understand it from the philosopher's perspective before making a decision about it from their own.

These women soon learn that this way of knowing is considered out of place in the academy. Their teachers give them few opportunities to practice connected knowing and little tutelage in developing it. What is desired and what is taught is what we call separate knowing: a way of knowing that is objective, impersonal, detached, and critical. Separate knowing is the only way of knowing-or at least the dominant form of knowing-that most of us teachers were taught, especially in graduate school. The system as a whole is geared toward separate knowing, forcing most of us, to be fundamentally separate in our teaching as well as in our thinking.

Connected Teaching Many students yearn for a more connected form of teaching. They want to connect with the material, its origins and the teacher as a person. Some teachers resent their women students' penchant for, as they put it, "personalizing everything." From the perspective of separate knowing, the relationship between teacher and student should have nothing to do with learning, but, from the perspective of connected knowing, it clearly does. For many women - and perhaps for men as well - development takes place in the context of personal relationships, and the quality of the relationship affects the quality of the learning.

Researchers have repeatedly found that for women, the most powerful learning experiences in college occur outside the classroom and in the context of informal encounters with faculty and advisors. For example, Light (1990) reports that when interviewed about advising, Harvard men reported wanting an objective advisor who will provide the relevant information, which they will use to make their own decisions. The women want their advisors to be objective, too, but objectivity has a different meaning for them. When asked "what does it mean to be objective?", young women respond "to put yourself in the other person's position, to forget what you think and take their perspective." And why be objective? "So you can help a friend make a decision that's right for her, in her terms. It's this soft of connected objectivity that women want in their advisors, and I believe, in their teachers as well.

Teachers, of course, need to know "the facts" about the material, but if our task as teachers is at least partly to arrange a marriage between the student and the content, then it behooves us to know something

about the student, too, especially about the relationship she presently has to the material. And the system as it stands conspires to keep us at a distance from the student and the student at a distance from the subject matter.

Some degree of distance between teacher and student is appropriate. And, in most cases, students do not want to share the intimate details of their personal lives with their teachers, nor do their teachers wish to hear them. But the intimate knowledge I think a teacher needs is not of this soft. It's things like students' conceptions of themselves as learners; their notions as to why they speak up in class and why they don't; where they think the syllabus comes from; what are the purposes of the various disciplines; whether there is only one correct interpretation of a poem and if so how you find out what it is and if not are some interpretations better than others and if so how can you tell; and what are their naive concepts of aggression or correlation or history or heat or whatever it is you're trying to teach. In shod, what are the students' attitudes and assumptions and conceptions and intuitions and even feelings about this enterprise upon which we are jointly embarked?

In a recent article Dorothy Buerk, a teacher at Ithaca College who is trying to help alienated students "connect" with mathematics, and a former student, Jackie Szablewski, (1990) tell the story of Jackie's experience in Dorothy's Writing Seminar on Mathematics. Dorothy asked her students to use metaphors to represent their experience with mathematics. In her first journal entry, Jackie used a metaphor we have seen in many other students: the student, she writes, "is in the role of the tourist who merely looks out at the sights that surround him as they travel past in a blurred rush."

Within each course, we keep them moving at a brisk pace so as to ensure coverage of all the important topics listed in the syllabus; no dawdling allowed. Across courses, students are expected to apportion their time evenly enough to do well in everything, regardless of the degree of attachment they may feel for a particular course. This system pretty much assures that no student will become immersed in any one topic or any one course.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and

Tarule, 1986), we tell about a student who almost slipped through this system, catching herself just in time. She said, "I remember last semester getting really almost terrified when I was studying for finals, because all of a sudden I got so wrapped up in the material. I hadn't put it down for a while. And I just realized, you know, that it was really exciting to do all this stuff. But if you did that all semester long, you'd go crazy." You can't afford to get behind. The tour bus is leaving for the next landmark.

How sad if our students experience their education like a whirlwind tour of Europe. How much better if we could all get off the bus and spend some time getting to know the locals. How much more effective we might be if we allowed the students to become "connected" to the material, to find the relationship between themselves and the content. It would require connected knowing, the suspension of judgment and the use of deliberate procedures for eliciting and attending to students' narratives of experiences related to the material we are studying. It requires that when we ask a student, "Why do you think that?" we make it clear that we mean not "How can you justify that point?" but "What in your experience has led you to that idea?"

Like the researcher at the beginning of this piece, we have inherited an obsolete piece of equipment. But for us, the experiment is not over. There is time to dismantle the equipment, to deconstruct the system we have inherited and reconstruct it in a way that is liberating to students and teachers alike.

References

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