

Excerpt from Interwoven Conversations
Chapter 7: 175–180
You're Always Right and You're Always Wrong



With some writing underway I turn to a second matter that arose yesterday. In her reflection/letter which she handed me late in the afternoon Shelagh wrote the following:

In your article "Sharing Journals: Conversational Mirrors for Seeing Ourselves as Learners, Writers, and Teachers" (Newman, 1988) you wrote about Pam and how she let you know that you undermined her confidence re: her story. Well this afternoon when I received your note about my writing, I felt the same way. Your note said "the writing felt detached", that you didn't "feel me in the narrative." I was devastated for a moment. As an inexperienced writer, willing to take risks after feeling some trust, I felt my writing was in vain. I have invested a lot of myself in what I've written so far. As Pam felt, I was given no recognition for my efforts. I discussed how I was feeling with Maggie. She and I talked about your note and my reaction to it. I don't object to comments and constructive criticism; what I am upset about is how you said it perhaps. I guess I wanted some recognition of the effort I'd expended....

This note from Shelagh regarding your response to her writing made me think of one of my fifth graders. Brendan is bright but he's been very reticent about sharing his writing. So as he stood in front of me with his piece about his trip to New York in hand I understood what he was risking by making this move to seek me out. However, as he began reading I realized I had a tough decision to make—his narration read like a travel brochure. How was I going to save his feelings and yet let him know that I couldn't connect with his story? When he got to the end I took a deep breath and said, "I get a picture of your drive into New York, but where are you? I want to know how you feel about arriving in the city." He looked discouraged, but not exactly surprised. "I think perhaps you had better give this some thought," I said. "Do you want me to know what New York is like by describing the buildings and sights? Or do you want to say something about how you feel about the experience of visiting the city?" Just as you did with Shelagh, I can see I pushed, no I shoved, Brendan toward thinking about what he was writing. As uncomfortable as my response made him, however, I believe he deserved to be challenged.

Linda Cook

A tricky moment. Shelagh has taken a very big risk here by letting me know just how my response to her writing has affected her. I have to write her back but I'm not sure exactly what to say. She had handed me her writing and asked me to read and respond to it just before lunch. I wrote what I thought was an Elbow-like response to her couple of pages of narrative because I had wanted her to see how her words were affecting me as a reader. The problem is I handed my written response back to her without having had a conversation about it.

While her writing had glimmers of an emerging voice, I hadn't really sensed her presence in it until, perhaps, the last paragraph. The anguish I know she was experiencing in the situation she's trying to capture didn't reach me. I said that in the note. For a couple of years now I've been trying to nudge Shelagh to hold a mirror to herself, to help her become a more reflective teacher. A lot of her difficulty in the classroom stems from her need for rigid structure and control. Here she's writing about being swamped by an overwhelming marking load but not looking at how she herself has created the problem. I thought she would be able to handle my written reaction. Looks like I was wrong, however. She is obviously more insecure about her writing and, perhaps more important, about her teaching than I

sensed she was.

I think about the situation and I write her:

Let me explain why I chose to respond as I did. I could see the situation you were describing but the feelings you were attempting to convey didn't reach me. I could have sympathized with your plight by commenting on similar experiences I have had, but I didn't think that would help you consider how your words were affecting me as a reader. Nor did I think that kind of a response would help you examine the contradictions which had brought you to that impasse. So I decided to be honest about what I experienced as I was reading what you've written so far.

I know first hand it's not easy when readers say this or that doesn't work. When my friend Marlene told me the original opening of that article you mentioned was awful and should be thrown away, I, too, had a sinking feeling, but I knew she was right and so I went back and worked on it some more. Good writing demands honesty. That means learning to tell one another the truth about what's working and what isn't. That's hard on both the writer and the responder but definitely worthwhile.

I want you to know I appreciate the risk you took by writing to me. I'm glad you told me how you felt. What you've let me see is that my nudge was more like a shove. I apologize for that. We should have talked about the writing and what effect it was having on me before I handed you my written reactions. I'll try to remember that next time.

I think about adding one more question: Can you identify some of the demonstrations I was trying to create by responding to your story as I did? I decide not to. That question would reestablish me as teacher and right now I need to be more of a colleague.

Shelagh's letter is an important incident. It forces me to reflect on Elbow's contention 'You're always right and you're always wrong.' Elbow is referring to our reactions as readers and writers but his notion applies equally forcefully to teaching.

No matter what I do in the classroom, what decision I make, I'm always right and I'm always wrong. That is, everything I offer will be right for some students and wrong for others. I wrote about an instance of 'you're always right and you're always wrong' not long ago (Newman, 1990).

I had just finished a writing conference with Greg. I'd listened to him read his piece. I'd encouraged him to talk about the difficulties he felt he was still having deciding where his writing should go. He felt the piece was unfinished and detached but he wasn't sure what to do about it. As I listened to him I recalled something he'd done with his own students which he'd described during one of our class discussions. I wondered aloud whether he mightn't actually use that experience as an opening.

"That's a possibility," he said, so I sent him off to write. Not long afterward, however, I heard him telling his group "Judith said I should...."

What did I learn from Greg's comment? I was confronted with evidence of how difficult it is to step outside an authoritarian role, and it raised for me some of the problems of holding writing conferences with students. I had no clearly worked out notion of how Greg's writing should go. I was simply trying to help him bring more of himself into the piece. I'd offered him back his own story so he could see how he'd already shared with us some incidents which illustrated what I sensed was the point of his writing. But my tentative connection had the force of a directive—not "Judith thought I might," but "Judith said I should." I'd inadvertently taken charge of Greg's writing. Only then did I realize I might have asked him whether he could think of something he'd done in his own classroom that illustrated what he was writing about and then asked him where he might use it effectively.

And yet, offering a suggestion isn't wrong either. My conversation with Debbie, which followed immediately after the conference with Greg, helped me see that. I could tell from Debbie's face and voice she didn't feel comfortable with what she'd written. She sounded tentative and looked perplexed when I asked if she could sum up what she'd done so far:

"Tell me more about the situation," I prompted. As she talked I asked questions, I kept watching for signs of animation and authority which would let me know she was on to something. She finally began telling about her own recent experiences with writing -- the furrow between her eyebrows disappeared, her face relaxed.

"Here's where she's comfortable," I thought to myself, "this is where she should be able to write. How do I help her see that?"

"Why are you hesitant to write about yourself?" I asked. She gave a couple of reasons: she didn't think her own experiences were interesting enough; besides, she thought I was expecting her to try fiction.

"Why don't you try writing the incident as a personal narrative?" I suggested. At that her face changed. I could see the tension dissipate as she left to resume writing.

This conversation made me aware that one of my roles during a writing conference, particularly when the writing is just starting out, is to help the writer make contact with what she's trying to convey. In addition, these two conversations juxtaposed allowed me to see there is no one way to assist student and teacher writers. While Debbie was able to accept a suggestion and make it her own, in Greg's case my connection was made too directly. His response to my input showed me I needed to keep out of the decision-making at least until he is more willing to trust his own ability. Offering him the suggestion wasn't a bad thing to have done, though; it let me learn more about how to support Greg's learning and writing (pp. 19-20).

The inescapable conflict—the inevitable dilemma of teaching: no matter what I try, what activity or strategy I offer, what comment I make, it will be helpful for some and yet may inter-fere for others. In other words, I'm always right and I'm always wrong.

It's been very helpful for me in sorting out what I believe to think about pedagogical decisions in terms of 'you're always right and you're always wrong' and 'it depends.' It's relieved me of the burden of trying to figure out the one right way to do things. It's also freed me to change my mind and to think much more about the context in which I'm operating. Many teachers really don't like to hear that sort of answer when they ask me, an acknowledge 'expert,' some version of "Am I doing this right?" I think we've helped to perpetuate the notion that teaching is simple and straightforward by the kind of usual answers we give and through the various curriculum guides and instructional materials we produce. Teachers have come to expect there's a right way of doing things and get very frustrated by this whole language philosophy which seems so difficult to pin down. The ones who are comfortable with ambiguity have stopped trying to pin things down and have shifted to a reflective stance through which they'll never stop learning about teaching. What do I do to help the others?

Susan Church

Frank Smith (1981) discusses the problem of students' interpretations of teachers' intentions in his important **Language Arts** article "Demonstrations, Engagement and Sensitivity." He argues students are learning all the time but that what they could be learning may not be what we think we're teaching. My conversation with Greg and Debbie made it very clear to me just how differently my responses can be interpreted.

This notion of demonstrations, engagement, and sensitivity is very complex. It links with Vygotsky's notion of **zone of proximal development** (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky contends we learn from seeing how others do things and by trying them out with whatever assistance is available and thereby become able to do many things autonomously. That's why the collaborative context is crucial if we want learning to occur. We are learning from each other all the time. Making that learning conscious is a crucial aspect of creating a learning-focused environment.

Demonstrations and engagement are difficult concepts. As Maggie commented in one journal last winter:

I think that I am just now beginning to see the significance of the concept Smith is presenting. It seems that our colloquial understanding of a 'demonstration' is limited to showing how someone does something...a gymnastics demonstration, a demonstration of Indian basket weaving or of quilting. What Smith seems to bring to the meaning of this word is the presence and stance of the potential learner...When I checked a dictionary for a definition of 'demonstration', I found 'the act of making clear, esp. by practical exposition.' The operative words here seem to be **making clear**. Only Smith sees 'the clarity' as **having to occur in the learner through engagement**.

Then there's the question of how this idea of **demonstration** differs from **modelling**. ...When we see others doing things and we imagine ourselves doing these things with pleasure or effect, they become demonstrations for us. It's an active transactional process, not passive. [A learner] doesn't simply copy the demonstration but selectively chooses what she wants to synthesize.... Modelling doesn't account for interpretation on the part of the learner.

As I see it, learners create demonstrations for themselves from the potential inherent in the instructional setting. As teachers we have no way of controlling what learners will take from any situation. Different people will engage with the same potential demonstrations differently. That means in order to learn what's working for whom, what's interfering for whom, we have to be engaging with our students' demonstrations. There is, or should be, engagement in both directions. From a transactional, uncommon sense, perspective we teachers must be learners, too.

It's time, I think, to raise these important issues in the workshop. However, I'm not yet sure how to go about it. I'm waiting for the teachers to present me with an opening.

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Later, I think about "You're always right and you're always wrong." Today's instance is a mild one. I may have inadvertently trampled Shelagh's feelings but we'll be able to reestablish a working relationship. However, that isn't always the case. Sometimes my being wrong has had far more devastating effects.

I remember an incident which occurred during a three-day inservice workshop with twenty teachers who had been meeting monthly as a group for close to a year and a half. Because we were working under tight time constraints I had chosen to use a somewhat confrontational initiating activity: I asked each teacher to list all the writing, reading, listening, and talking he or she had done in the past week and the purpose of each instance. We followed that with a similar list for our students. As people shared their own and the students' literacy and language experiences, I recorded collective lists on an overhead projector. Then, in small groups, we compared the two lists.

In four of five groups, discussion focused on differences. The teachers saw that despite their efforts to make learning more participatory, much of the reading, writing, and talking their students did was still being done for the teacher as an examiner. In one group, however, conversation veered toward similarities.

Our sharing in the large group began with similarities: both students and teachers made notes, we read notices, we wrote lists. To help the teachers see beyond surface

commonality I asked them to consider the purposes served by these various examples of language activity. In the large group people addressed the issue of teacher as examiner and how it played out in their classrooms. One teacher, however, was uncomfortable with those differences and what they implied about her teaching. Copying notes from the board was the same as recording highlights from a lecture, she insisted.

An interesting moment. I acknowledged there were certainly similarities between our language use as adults and students' language use in school. In fact, our goal was to eliminate as many differences as we could. But I knew as a teacher there were still important contradictions in my own classroom and it was looking at differences that helped me change.

With that I directed the group conversation to an articulation of the differences the teachers could perceive. A little while later when I joined her small group I quickly became aware of that teacher's hostility. Her back was definitely turned in my direction. The others and I were chatting, their elbows on the table, bodies leaning forward. Attempts to bring the fourth into our conversation were unsuccessful. I finally asked her directly what was wrong.

You've mentioned watching for the expression on people's faces, their body language, the tone of their voices several times. This is all an important aspect of assessment. Interesting, though, that when people talk about assessment, 'faces lighting up' or 'elbows on the table' are never on the list!

Diane Stephens

"You made me feel like I was stupid. You aren't caring. You don't want to help. You're not a teacher, you don't know how to connect with people's feelings," she exploded.

"What did I do?" I asked her.

"You rejected our contribution to the discussion, you refused to consider what we had to say."

"Do the rest of you feel the same way?" I asked them.

"I need to know because I can't go any further until we've

sorted out what's happened here."

As I looked at each of the other three I read embarrassment but not lack of engagement.

"No, I didn't react that way," offered one.

"Nor I," said a second shyly.

"And you?" I asked the third.

"I think there are similarities but I could see why you wanted us to consider differences," he replied.

"So you didn't all react vehemently to my pushing you to think about differences."

At that, the fourth abruptly arose and stomped from the room.

You're always right and you're always wrong. While my invitation to examine contradictions made many of those teachers uncomfortable, they were willing to go along with me to see how the session would play itself out. But for one of them, my confrontation inadvertently turned out to be much too direct. I'd chosen a frontal assault because the background I'd been given about this group of teachers, the fact that they'd been meeting to discuss ideas about change regularly for more than a year, led me to assume they would be able to face inconsistencies in their teaching. And that was true for nineteen of the teachers. But for one, my nudge was too overpowering. Her defenses slammed into play, cutting us off from one another. Although she returned to the workshop the following day, we remained antagonists.

I've thought about that workshop a lot. As a consultant I've chosen the role of questioner. I feel it is imperative to help people confront contradictions in belief and practice. Consequently the inservice workshops I offer put people in a position of some vulnerability. I can't always predict who will engage and who will defend.

And I am vulnerable, too. I lay my beliefs on the line each time I meet a group of teachers. I, too, have to face the contradictions of my inadvertent demonstrations. I know no matter what I try, it will be useful some people but interfere for others.

As teachers we are constantly having to deal with the unexpected, to accept surprise. As Don Murray (1989) argues

what is certain is change. We must expect unexpectedness. If we are to teach our students responsibility, we must prepare them to make use of change. (p. x)

I recently read the following in **The Royal Bank Newsletter** (1989):

If a doctor, lawyer or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn't want to be there and were causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some conception of a classroom teacher's job.

Teaching is a daunting job. The best we can ever do is just try.