

PERSPECTIVES

Teaching at 78: Facing a Fear

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Recently a former university colleague remarked in an email to me, "It's amazing and wonderful that you continue teaching at age 78." "Yes, it is," I replied, "but it comes with an ever-advancing fear." I told him that I was quite unsettled a few years ago when I read in *The Economist* (2019) an obituary for the famed French film-maker and photographer Agnès Varda who had died at 90. The writer said that she had never lost her sense of wonder. "All those memories and realisations that made up her life would fade away unless she kept voyaging through new landscapes, meeting new people, looking and listening and constantly rebuilding the world out of sheer curiosity." This assertion struck me sharply as it expressed a feeling that I had had for some time but which had not come forth with such clarity and impact. It made me wonder if all of my own memories and realizations from the classroom experiences over half a century that make up my professional and personal identity will fade away and be over when my days at the chalkface inevitably end. I recognized that it is this fear that in part keeps me from retiring from classroom teaching.

After compulsory retirement from my university professorship at age 65, I continued to teach at that institution and at other local universities as a part-timer. Those days too were terminated because of my age at 72, but still I was able to continue teaching as a part-timer at the high school affiliated (*fuzoku*) with the university at which I had been professor. Actually, I had started teaching students at the high school in 2001 while still at the university. Fortunately the high school officials look beyond the number

that happens to be my age and value the unique brand of English language instruction that I bring to the students there. So, it is indeed amazing and wonderful that I am still teaching. I do it very well and enjoy it as much as I ever have. But it comes with that fear.

Realizations

The word "realization" has two meanings. One is understanding, the other is fulfillment. In both senses I fear that not only the memories but also the "realizations" acquired over my long career may dissolve once I leave the classroom.

Narrative reflection is an essential means for teachers to explore and to make sense of our teaching practice. The stories we relate about our teaching lives can lead us to realizations of what we do and who we are. They draw us to construct and affirm the meaning of our work and our professional and personal identity.

I have found that the insightful expression of those in other professions, crafts, and occupations of all sorts on the work they do can be a catalyst for this ongoing, career-long process. It enables us to step outside the classroom box which may confine our thinking. It can be helpful in directing our thoughts about our own work and illuminating further and more deeply what we do as teachers and who we are. Following is an example.

Anthony Sher was a fine actor born in South Africa who performed on the English stage. The writer of his obituary, again for *The Economist* (2021), tells that early in his career he learned an important lesson from theater director Alan Dossor, who once asked

him, "What do you want to say as an actor?" Sher was confused by the question and Dossor added, "You won't become a really good actor till you put yourself on the line, till the job's vital... it's got to mean something to you before it's going to mean anything to the audience. Otherwise just go be a plumber."

That certainly applies as well to teachers instructing their students. We cannot be really good at it if we merely convey to our classes, as Thornbury (2002) put it, "It doesn't really matter what you think, so long as you use the third conditional." The instruction has got to mean much more than that to us and to them.

As much for teachers as for anyone, the path to meaning is responsibility, as clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson (2018) tells us. In our work as teachers, meaning lies within the particular time, place and socio-cultural circumstances of our practice. In Uganda, for the early years of my career, I understood my responsibility to the newly independent nation to contribute to its widely expanded secondary education system and to help students achieve their goal of moving on from subsistence farming life. When I taught ESL in adult education in Los Angeles, I understood my responsibility to immigrants to facilitate their successful assimilation into American society and to contribute to their capacity to have a better life for themselves and provide for their children. For nearly 40 years in Japan, in a very different context, I take my responsibility not only to guide their academic achievement but also to "build on and affirm the cultural, linguistic, intellectual and personal identities that students bring to our classrooms" (Cummins, 2003, p. 5), and to promote their growth and development as mature young adults with the capacity to relate well with others and to think critically for themselves.

I believe that I have done well over the years to fulfill those responsibilities. But without the classroom environment, without

new classes of students and the particular collective and individual features they bring, and without then having to continually work to maintain and reconstruct these realizations, surely they will diminish in my mind.

Another realization, again in both senses of the word, that is removed as time passes in retirement is that of the existential human relations that are the essence of the culture of the English language learning classroom. The intimate relations between teacher and students and among students themselves are often more genuine and significant than those many people experience outside the classroom. It is in fact a real world where close and personal interactions, relationships, commitments, responsibilities, and purposes are engaged. It is a place where students learn the critical value of respect, authority, discipline, morality, responsibility, integrity, and character. It is a place where there are rules, accountability, consequences, challenges, expectations, disappointments, and achievements.

Yet these realizations turn on themselves by their essentially ephemeral nature. Those understandings and fulfillments build up over time and feed off the ongoing input of new experiences. But in the end, after we leave the chalkface, they are gone as well and only memories may remain.

Conclusion

I was taken aback last year when a student told me that I was a legend. Perhaps that gives some reassurance that I have at least accomplished some good things as a teacher. I have had an amazing and wonderful run through seven decades in the classroom and will keep at it year by year as long as school officials allow me to stay at the high school.

I conclude this narrative reflection with the words of another artist, Tony Bennett, the legendary American singer and performer

who died earlier this year (2023) at age 96. One of his favorite songs was "When Joanna Loved Me" (Bennett, 1964). In fact, he gave that name to one of his daughters. His lyrics for the song follow and I must say that those feelings resonate with me in relation to my love of teaching. While the realizations that have made up that life at the chalkface are likely to fade, as Agnès Varda feared for her life, when I leave the last piece of chalk at the board, perhaps some memories will remain "for a while", as in the song for Joanna. And if you think this is the schmaltzy reverie of an aging teacher, please tell me first that you love teaching as much as I do and then hold off on that thought until you too are 78 and still cherishing the love you get from teaching students in a classroom while retirement looms nearby.

*Today is just another day, tomorrow is a guess
But yesterday, oh, what I'd give for yesterday
To relive one yesterday and its happiness*

*When Joanna loved me
Every town was Paris
Every day was Sunday
Every month was May
When Joanna loved me
Every sound was music
Music made of laughter
Laughter that was bright and gay*

*But when Joanna left me
May became December
But, even in December, I remember
Her touch, her smile, and for a little while*

*She loves me
And once again it's Paris
Paris on a Sunday
And the month is May*

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About the Author

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