

Editor's Column

Volume 4 – Talking About Teaching

Essays about Teaching as Stories about Teaching

In the introduction to his essay in this volume, “Novice but Great,” Benjamin Gibbs notes that there is “no singular steadfast rule of effective teaching” and that therefore the “axioms, mantras, and . . . lists” often found in articles about teaching “typically end up stored in the brain next to dieting secrets and tips for financial success.” Gibbs’s observations are enough to make an editor of a volume called *Talking About Teaching* give up in despair. If effective teaching can’t be captured in lists of dos and don’ts (“always start class with a joke;” “never ask a question whose answer you don’t already know”) or mantras (“it’s not about you—it’s about the students;” “it’s less about you and your students and more about your discipline”), and if essays on teaching end up sounding, in Gibbs’s phrase, “a little fluffy,” then what’s the point of such a volume? Gibbs himself doesn’t take up this question directly, but rather, like the other nine contributors to the volume, offers an essay that implicitly answers it through its own method of argumentation. And that method relies on the power of storytelling—or, more precisely, on the interaction of two components of effective narrative, the mimetic and the thematic.

To illustrate what I mean, I turn first to the common rhetorical practice of the founder of the Academy of Teaching, President E. Gordon Gee. In his remarks to the Board of Trustees on July 2007, on the occasion of his resuming the presidency, Dr. Gee stated: “This is the university of the American dream. I can remember still one time when I conducted commencement [and] I just happened to ask . . . ‘Would all those who are first generation students stand up?’ Over half of those students graduating [rose to their feet]. This is the American dream” (<http://president.osu.edu/docs/transcript.pdf>). The passage begins and ends with the thematic point, and its middle provides a mini-narrative of real experience that vividly demonstrates the validity of that point.

In other words, the mimetic component consists of the representation of concrete experience—in these essays representations of such things

as a teacher-student interaction, a class session, a whole course, or even a whole career—and the thematic consists of the broader conclusions that apply beyond and supply the relevance of the particular example. The mimetic component helps establish the writer’s authority because it grounds the essay in real experience. The mimetic component also implicitly acknowledges that effective teaching does not depend on establishing and following abstract rules but rather on recognizing and being able to respond to the complexities of experience. The thematic component addresses the “so what?” question because it extends one or more dimensions of the experience to a generalization or set of generalizations relevant to other teachers, students, and pedagogical situations.

Each of the ten essays in this volume works out a different interaction between the mimetic and thematic, and, collectively, they cover a range of pedagogical situations and issues. Kevin Boyle, in an essay written for the Autumn 2009 convocation, seamlessly blends the mimetic and the thematic, as he exhorts first-year students to seize the opportunity to open themselves to “the power of ideas.” “Take a class in a subject you know nothing about. Read a book you’d never thought of reading before. Write an essay or do a problem set not because the professor requires it but because putting something on paper forces you to refine your thinking. Go to a lecture just because it sounds interesting. Go to a movie or a play or a concert that will challenge you, even if none of your friends is going. In short, allow yourself to embrace the world of ideas, to experience the amazing sense that discovery brings, to think in ways you’ve never thought before.”

Alexis Collier, in her essay on assessing learning outcomes, begins with two variations on the mimetic: an account of her experience in not being able to give a student a satisfactory explanation of her grade, and a story about her typical way of communicating expectations to students. Collier then builds on this mimetic base as she draws out her larger thematic points about systematic methods—and pedagogical benefits—of assessing learning outcomes. And she nicely rounds off the essay by returning to the beginning and finishing the story about her experience with her student. Sarah Sanderson, in her essay on teaching Spanish to Ohio State students, begins, like Collier, with a specific incident. But rather than choosing an incident that itself presents a specific pedagogical challenge, Sanderson picks one that dramatically poses the challenge of her teaching situation: how does she stay motivated to teach her subject?

The rest of the essay answers that question in ways that can help the rest of us as we reflect on our motivations, even as it occasionally returns to Sanderson's experiences with specific students.

In his essay about teaching the scientific process, Randy Nelson moves back and forth between his experience with "Lesson 2" of his courses on behavioral biology and his generalizations about what students need to know about the construction of scientific knowledge, especially its provisional status. In addition, Nelson deepens the force of the essay's thematic points by placing toward the end a mini-narrative of how and why he changed advisors during his graduate training. Brian Edmiston, in his essay on creating spaces for "learning wisdom," also uses different layers of mimesis to support his thematic points about the effectiveness of "dramatic inquiry." As he explains how this pedagogy works and what it can achieve, Edmiston not only refers to specific moments in his experience but also skillfully draws on the mimetic power William Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Neeli Bendapudi, in her essay on "Co-producing Class Participation," may initially appear to have left out the mimetic because she gives most of the essay over to a discussion of methods for enhancing the quantity and quality of student participation in class. But a closer look reveals that Bendapudi's commentary on each method is deeply rooted in the concrete experience of the classroom. It's no accident that Bendapudi talks about "best practices" rather than rules. Gibbs's essay on novice teachers is similar to Bendapudi's in its relation of the mimetic and the thematic. Rather than explicitly offering short narratives, Gibbs identifies qualities and practices underlying effective teaching by those new to being in front of the classroom. But not surprisingly, his discussion of those qualities and practices clearly relies on the authority of experience.

Valerie Lee, in her essay on the importance of attending to the effects of classroom demographics on its "climate"—and on the importance of attending to changes in both demographics and climate—anchors her thematic points in some startling experiences across her long career as an African American professor of American literature. For example, she notes that early in her career "Students who filled my classroom at the prestigious private liberal arts college were always surprised that their writing instructor was someone who looked more like their household maid than the teachers from their prep schools." Just as

important is Lee’s account of her attitudes toward the challenge of this situation and others related to it, an account that combines the mimetic and the thematic: “I pity teachers who always have taught students who believed in their expertise and respected their authority. Such teachers lose the challenge of teaching those who never will see them as a part of their world. If ever there is a professional development moment, it is when someone incredulously asks, ‘Are you the teacher?’” Ron Solomon’s essay on the paradox of teaching mathematics—if you don’t understand the basic concepts you can’t explain them to somebody else, but once you do understand them it’s hard to put yourself in the position of someone who doesn’t understand them—is full of stories. He tells us about his own experience as a listener of Mozart and recounts some wonderful chapters in the history of mathematics. But he weaves all the stories together in support of his broader insights into the challenges and rewards of teaching mathematics.

Finally, Elizabeth Renker demonstrates a different way of interrelating the mimetic and the thematic because her thematic points go beyond matters of practical pedagogy to questions of how we should construct the curriculum in the age of Wikipedia and other signs of our changing assumptions about the construction and dissemination of knowledge. Renker begins with the thematic points, drawing on both her research into the long process by which American literature became a standard part of the curriculum of English Departments and on an assessment of how attitudes about knowledge are changing, and she proposes the provocative thesis that we are on the verge of a new approach to the university curriculum. Rather than faculty dictating the curriculum to students, students will be setting it for themselves. Renker then turns to the mimetic to illustrate these points—and to show that “the end of the curriculum” is not necessarily the end of the world as faculty know it. Renker tells the story about her experience teaching the history of English poetry alongside contemporary alternative music. In this course, the students select a great deal of the music, which Renker then has to learn—just as the students need to learn the poetry that she selects for them. Together they explore the ways in which learning each subject enhances their understanding of the other.

Taken together, then, these ten essays address subjects ranging from motivation to assessment, from diversity to the curriculum, from the power of ideas to the paradoxes of teaching mathematics. They are eminently practical, offering both suggestions for “what to do on

Monday morning” and ideas for reconceiving what one does on Monday morning. Yet no one of them claims, either explicitly or implicitly, to offer the “single, steadfast rule of good teaching.” Instead, they collectively demonstrate, in the language of Edmiston’s and Renker’s essays, that we can find wisdom in the thoughts of the group. And that demonstration more than justifies an editor’s work.

James Phelan
Professor of English
College of Humanities
Editor, *Talking About Teaching*
Ohio State Academy of Teaching