

# Becoming a Good Teacher: Struggles from the Swampland

**E**ven after ten years of teaching middle school, even after two years of teaching at the university level, even after studying teaching and learning enough to earn a doctorate in it, there are still times that I sit and reflect after class, feeling hollowed out and anxious by these burning questions: Am I a good teacher? Are my students learning?

It is both humbling and frustrating that the questions that haunted me as a first-year seventh-grade ELA teacher continue to stalk my confidence as a classroom veteran. Becoming a teacher-researcher helped me welcome my questions, because through addressing them, I became less anxious and more responsive to my students' learning needs and desires. I became a better teacher.

## The Good Teacher/ Teacher-Researcher

This article is about how I learned to teach by understanding that I could learn from my students (Egawa, 2009) and respond to their learning needs and desires. This kind of understanding requires, as Wilhelm (2010) suggests, "both the etic [my own] and the emic [the students'] perspectives" along with "reflectivity and reflexivity" (p. 38). Wilhelm's more general description of understanding helped frame the kind of knowing that, as a teacher-researcher, I hoped to generate for myself and my students.

I began systematic inquiry into my classroom practice by asking, "What are some of the literary

understandings constructed by students in this class?" I taped classroom discussions, interviewed students, studied their reader-response journals, and wrote reflective/analytical memos. This inquiry was messy, recursive, and occasionally daunting. Teacher research has been likened to a "swampland" where methods of inquiry require "experience, trial and error, intuition, or muddling through" (Schön, 1995, p. 28). Teacher research invites practitioners to take on these messy, daunting challenges and generate knowledge about their own teaching and student learning (Bintz & Shelton, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This challenge places students in the center of knowledge production. So what did I learn about literary understandings from my students? How did I use this knowledge to improve my pedagogy?

This inquiry into my own teaching took place in Project Equal Middle School (PEMS), home to an ethnically and academically diverse group of young adolescents in a borough of New York City. I specifically studied one lower-achieving seventh-grade language arts class of 30 students whom I instructed for 43 minutes a day. My students helped me understand that good teaching is a process of listening, orchestrating, and negotiating, but when I first examined student talk and writing, I did not feel like an attentive orchestrator. Instead, I was flummoxed and appalled by the literary understandings that were emerging.

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## Classroom Cause and Effect

### Students' Odious Constructions of Literary Understanding

When I examined classroom conversations and students' writing, I continued to face this strange phenomenon: What students found exciting, engaging, and pleasurable in reading was learning,

practicing, and talking about discrete reading skills and strategies. When I asked students to explain, they told me straight out that they wanted to do well on their April City-

wide Reading Test. This desire to do well on a standardized reading test profoundly influenced their ideas of literary pleasure. I was worried. My conception of literary pleasure focused on deep engagement with literature. Our different understandings inevitably led to conflict in the classroom.

### The Good Teacher Listens

During one class, Edie (student names are self-selected pseudonyms) chides me for suggesting that the ELA standards would benefit from student input. She suggests that my emphasis on engagement with literature ("feelings") is not as important as the standards:

Maybe they [the people who create standards] are worried about our future . . . [they know] what we're going to need to know when we grow up. So that's what you need to teach us first and get that out of the way and then you can teach us how you feel, you know, 'cause that's not really gonna help you when you're 21 and you're in college whatever, and trying to earn a degree. That's not gonna help you—how you feel about a book (laughs).

Edie shocks me. She has an especially insightful reader response journal and, through investigating her own responses to literature, finds that she is "bored" because the Goosebumps series she's reading seems "like a formula." This insight helps her search for more complex books.

But Edie does not connect her deeper literary understandings with something that's "gonna help you." Instead, she focuses on standards and skills needed for the Citywide Reading Test. Edie is not alone in her emphasis; during parent-teacher conferences, parents ask about my plans for timed tests, PSAT prep, and practice test packets.

Students' and parents' talk about literacy as skills and strategies to be acquired for the purpose of doing well on tests also makes sense because of the high stakes attached to the Citywide Reading Test. Scores on this seventh-grade test determine access to one of the new highly regarded small high schools in and around the New York City area. Doing well means better high school opportunities, and the way to "doing well" in the eyes of my students and their parents means building reading skills.

### The Good Teacher Orchestrates

If how students define literary pleasure means building skills that lead to better performance on tests and, therefore, increased opportunities for high school choice, then I need to orchestrate their ideas with what I know to be valuable in the ELA classroom. I ask students to look closely at their reading strategies in order to achieve a more metacognitive stance towards their own reading. Many students, such as Mary, take up this challenge with pleasure. She writes how she "puts" herself "in the characters' spot, making myself encounter those events that they encountered, so I can feel their feelings, the mood and their tone of speaking. These strategies may seem corny and funny, but they actually help me!"

In a letter back to Mary, I comment "Wow, this is very analytical of you, and strategic! Does this take away or add to your reading pleasure?" She replies, "I think it adds to my reading pleasure. It makes you realize that there's cause and effect everywhere, and it's like a game to see which events or actions a character did that led to another's doing."

Mary's journal response reflects the kind of enthusiasm students exhibit when they blend

metacognitive stances with reading skills. Deeper understandings of reading skills matter to them and reflective thinking matters to me. I often find this kind of orchestration uncomfortable but necessary. In the next section, I show how I tried to negotiate skill building with the intent of getting students to construct and generate knowledge.

### The Good Teacher Negotiates

The following classroom conversation illustrates my attempt to negotiate students' desire for reading skill development with my desire for students to see themselves as knowledge producers. The lesson centers on the skill "cause and effect." Because an entire section of the Citywide Reading Exam is devoted to this skill, students consider it particularly important. I ask them to construct a definition (MB refers to me, Mary Beth):

15: **GALLA:** It's something that happens because of the cause.

16: **MB:** Very good. Sandy?

17: **SANDY:** When something happens because of something else. For example, it's cold and because of that you wore a sweater.

18: **MB:** Good! Good! Terry?

19: **TERRY:** Leading to or causing another.

20: **MB:** Great! Jay?

21: **JAY:** I know what that is! I had thought it was something else.

22: **MB:** Yes! I know. You were thinking it was this! [Points to an equal symbol]

23: **JAY:** Oh, cause and effect is like, it's like the cause causes something to occur.

24: **MB:** Exactly. Maxine, put it all into a definition for us.

Although one student speaks at a time, there is a lot of murmuring in groups about the properties of cause and effect. I hoped that Maxine, who often had trouble following concepts, would be able to give a definition. What follows is an example of an entire class working together to help her:

25: **MAXINE:** Well, well, all I know is if there's a killer and he has blood on his shirt, uh . . . the clothes are effect.

26: **MB:** Well . . . can you think of a different one? Listen. Because if you talk about a murder, you say [in weird accent that makes kids laugh] because Jimmy Joe was so mad at Sally Sue and because he has . . . a, --

27: **KRISPY:** --shotgun.

28: **MB:** --shotgun in his pickup--

29: **VOICE** --[he shot her! He got arrested!]

30: **MB:** You could do a text box like this [writes], but you can't say that because Sally Sue was murdered, the effect is that they have to find the murderer . . .

The conversation now is like a party game where kids get to say "what happens next" and Maxine's contribution is taken up. I am bothered by the fact that my voice is the voice of authority, but with this particular class, at this particular moment, I cannot deny that students are deeply engaged:

32: **MB:** Jody? And then Rocky. I'm sorry! [At this point students were falling out of their seats trying to be heard]

33: **JODY:** It's like something that you or something that happened, it's like, um, Sandy said, it's like, if it's cold outside, you have to wear a sweater.

34: **MB:** That's right!

35: **JODY:** Cause if someone drops a pencil, you're going to pick it up.

36: **MB:** Right. Cause: I dropped it AND need it; Effect: I'm going to pick it up. Um, Rocky.

37: **ROCKY:** [inaudible]

38: **MB:** OK. It's cold outside so I wore a sweater. [Writes it]

39: **MB:** Write this at the top where it has those lines and under there, under this, "it's cold outside so I wore a sweater." Sandy, what's the cause and what's the effect?

40: **SANDY:** Um, that it's cold, and the effect is that I wore a sweater.

41: **MB:** Excellent. Now, what did you call this, Rocky?

42: **ROCKY:** Action

43: **MB:** That leads to...

44: **ROCKY:** Reaction.

45: **MB:** Now, the reaction is the effect. So, [pause] the cause is, it's cold out, the effect is that I wear a sweater. It's not that easy. Sometimes it's not that easy. You can't say, "My mother had a baby, that's the cause, and the effect is that I'm late for school." It's--

46: **VOICES** [argue]

I think many educators and test makers would have accepted Rocky's assertion (line 38) that a logical effect of cold air would be "wearing a sweater." I want, however, a more refined effect, something more direct. Many students argue with my rejection of Rocky's example. It is a fine moment. I try to listen to many of the arguments, but there are too many occurring at once.

50: **KRISPY:** I want to give another definition.

51: **MB:** Go ahead.

52: **KRISPY:** It's a relationship between two or more things when one thing directly leads to or causes another.

I write it down and address the class to recognize their contributions:

53: **MB:** Krispy . . . was listening to everyone here. Listening to Galla and Sandy and Jody and Maxine. He was listening, so he came up with this definition, which is probably the best I've ever seen in any textbook. Krispy came up with this definition by listening to Rocky and Maxine and all of you who participated in coming up with definitions and examples. He had the ability to take what you said, encapsulate it, and put it into a super definition.

As the class constructs more examples, another language arts teacher walks by and asks the class if she could copy our definitions and examples for her own class. I see the pleased and happy looks on my students' faces and feel that something unique has happened. I often experience moments of incredible energy and delight with my classes, usually during conversations about social importance or profound understandings. This conversation is just one of many with this class that creates energy and delight from constructing definitions and examples for skill development. My students are knowledge producers, but it is the epistemological stance that proves powerful and radical for all of us.

## The Good Teacher Wonders

There was a problem with the Citywide Reading Test that year and students did not find out their scores until late summer. Scores were scaled differently from the prior year, making direct comparisons to the previous year's results impossible, but I did see that 15 out of my 30 students scored in the top 16% of the city. One student scored in the top 2%, and no students scored in the bottom 16%. My students would have looked

### CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

#### Becoming a Good Teacher: Struggles from the Swampland

The author shares how she assesses students' interests and strengths. The ReadWriteThink.org Strategy Guide "Assessing Student Interests and Strengths" shares a number of specific methods that can be used to gain a fuller picture of the interests of students as well as what students understand, know, and can demonstrate by doing.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/assessing-student-interests-strengths-30100.html>

—Lisa Fink  
[www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org)

at these scores and said I was a good teacher. But I wonder, will I be remembered as the teacher who helped them achieve great scores on their Citywide Exam, or will I be remembered as the teacher who pushed them to deep understandings of their own and others' literary understandings? Or did they learn, as I did, that both matter?

## References

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If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or if you'd like to see NCTE take a stand on a position you support, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention.

For further details on submitting a resolution, to see resolutions already passed by Council members, or to learn about proposing position statements or guidelines other than resolutions, visit the NCTE website ([http://www.ncte.org/positions/call\\_for\\_resolutions](http://www.ncte.org/positions/call_for_resolutions)) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; [lbianchini@ncte.org](mailto:lbianchini@ncte.org)). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2011**.

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