

Making Peace With Ambiguity: The Symbiotic Interaction  
Between Prospective Teachers' Subject Matter Knowledge  
And Intellectual Development

Ten years ago, Lee Shulman (1986) laid out Domains of Knowledge that he theorized prospective teachers need to master as they learn to teach. Today, reform movements have targeted subject matter knowledge as a domain of special importance. Programs of teacher education have responded by raising grade point standards for admission, increasing the number of discipline-specific courses prospective teachers need to take and in some places requiring students of teaching to complete their bachelors degrees before proceeding with certification course work. Tests of basic knowledge as well as teaching knowledge are required for certification in many states. Subject matter standards emanating from collaborative work between academics and school persons (See National Standards For Language Arts, 1996; Math Standards, Science Standards) reflect a national sense that what we want school children to know and learn and what we want their teachers to know and be able to teach are intimately connected.

Teacher educators have supported these reforms. We have joined disciplinary colleagues and participated in the development of the national standards in the subject matter areas. However, we are teachers of teachers. We may care deeply about and be committed to reforms that push for greater subject matter expertise for new teachers. But helping prospective teachers develop that subject matter is not typically what we do professionally. Consequently, we have passed however tacitly the question of how and when undergraduate prospective teachers develop subject matter expertise to those who teach and are scholars in those disciplines, Programmatically, we

“count” a bachelors degree as a kind of hallmark or standard. It simplifies our work to assume that a completed undergraduate major in mathematics or literature signals genuine, full and sufficient subject matter knowledge for teaching. It leaves us free launch into other domains of teacher knowledge. Increasingly, however, teacher educators ask whether we can indeed make such assumptions. A group of subject matter majors with equally high, respectable grade point averages arrives in teacher education programs with remarkably unequal subject matter knowledge.

English majors are a case in point. What they learn about English, reading literature in particular, is unpredictable on two levels. First, English is a particularly ambiguous discipline at undergraduate levels. Its history includes wide variety in point of view, tolerance for differences of opinion and a capacity to see itself as a cohesive discipline despite its lack of an unambiguous answer to Peter Elbow’s question, “What Is English?” (1990). English departments self-consciously attempt to reflect the intellectual range within the discipline. Within the faculty, very different ways of thinking about the purposes for reading, the legitimate actions readers might take as they interact with a text or even the interpretative power or importance of a reader abound. Archetypal, Marxist and Feminist Criticism, Deconstructionism, New Criticism, Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Readers’ Response Criticism are only a few of the well-established and fundamentally different traditions that co exist within the discipline and so appear embedded in the syllabi of departmental professors.

At the undergraduate level, these different perspectives are unlikely to be explicitly named; they do, of course, richly color the work English professors do with under grads, the sorts of assignments they demand and the criteria by which they assess those assignments. Consequently, prospective

English teachers who successfully pursue an English major learn that reading well varies according to the standards any particular professor references. It is unclear whether they apprehend this variety as a reflection of a disciplinary tolerance for multiple critical points of view. More likely, they “learn” that what is required for good reading is highly unstable, relative or a function of professorial whim (See Graff, 1992).

A second source of variety in undergraduate preparation in the discipline stems from a more mundane source. Like many other discipline-based undergraduate majors, English departments require a core set of courses of all English majors and typically balance that requirement with an array of options for personally tailoring the degree. Electives in writing, poetry, women’s studies, Jewish studies, the novel, etc. work well for inviting English majors to pursue personal interests. The elective options within the major mean that it is unwise to assume that any two English majors at any given university share an experience of the discipline or leave their area of major study with a similar body of knowledge upon which they will draw as they enter a College of Education.

#### Disciplinary Ambiguity

#### And Understanding Literature For Teaching

Literary theorists may thrive in the ensuing intellectual debates, disciplinary disagreements and critical competitions for interpretive power. It is less clear how undergraduates pursuing a degree in English and planning to teach literature in America’s secondary schools respond to the disciplinary diversity. What does this diversity of perspective look like to prospective literature teachers? How do they reach decisions about why they will teach a text, what they will ask young readers to do with that text and how they will know whether their students have learned?

## APlan For Research

In 1995, The National Center for Research on Teacher Learning concluded a five-year study of how undergraduate literature majors developed subject matter knowledge. Twelve undergraduates who had just begun a sequence of courses toward a literature major and who planned to enter a program of teacher education upon completion of their studies were selected from a pool of volunteers who were enrolled in either the first or second literature course in the sequence their department required. We balanced our participant pool for gender and included the one African American student and the one Latino student who volunteered.

Over a period of four and in some cases five semesters, we watched and listened as they embarked upon and completed a course of study required by their department for an English major. Data come from a 120 question baseline interview, several informal end-of-semester interviews and an exit interview which revisited much of the baseline material. All interviews were audio taped, video taped and fully transcribed. The baseline and exit interviews focused on what participants believed good readers do, know and understand rather than on participants' knowledge of specific texts or abilities to perform reading tasks. Participants theorized about what makes a text "literature," how they might select texts for adolescent readers, and were asked to critique literary theory--readers' response, deconstructionism, new criticism, etc. (See McDiarmid, 1994). They told us about their histories as readers, speculated about what seemed to count as exemplary work in their on-going course work and shared their attributions for the grades they received. We were interested in documenting the kinds of subject matter knowledge these majors would develop prior to course work in teacher education; therefore, our study focused on participants' emerging

understanding of literature as a subject matter, not on how these twelve learned to teach literature.

Analysis was holistic. A team of researchers read each participant's data as a text. Each researcher within the team assumed primary responsibility for developing a "case" around one of the following topics: personal history effects, intellectual development effects, general views of self as a reader, responses to issues of diversity and personally valued "theory" of reading. Researchers met as a team to review each participant's data set and hear the "case" each team member had prepared. Consensus of analysis was reached by repeated hypothesis creation and testing by rereading of the data.

### An Unanticipated Connection

In retrospect and given the variety of legitimate, viable scholarship within the discipline, we should have been less surprised by the kinds of issues study participants were worrying. We expected them to hold conflicting views about whether meanings reside in texts, in readers or exist at all. We knew they might use interviews to uncover their own tacitly held biases about the place and value of the traditional literary canon. We anticipated that they might reference very different codes (See Scholes, 1985) when talking about what readers do when reading for pleasure as opposed to what they might do when reading "like a literature major." We knew they would be aware of differences across professors and that these differences might be fruitful to discuss.

We did not particularly expect to hear these English majors treat virtually every element or task in the interview protocols as if they were part of one super-ordinate, recurring, thematic question: How can we explain multiple Right Answers. But of course; the more we listened, the more we wondered how we could have failed to anticipate just this. The disciplinary

dilemmas literature majors face inherently as students of literature parallel the struggles William Perry (1981) leads us to expect all young adults can encounter as they develop from Right Answer seekers through a period of relativistic thinking and into mature intellectual beings able to make committed choices built on criterion for developing best answers where right answers do not exist. Our study data indicate the learning to be successful as an English major and then attempting to translate that expertise into a pedagogical position reifies a fundamental dilemma in young adult development.

#### Taylor: A Case

We adopted Perry's nine position framework for identifying how adults position themselves in regard to Authority and Right Answers as the theoretical framework we referenced as we attempted to understand how intellectual development affected and bounded each participant's theories about reading and learning. We found powerful connections between participants' intellectual development as signaled by their abilities to cope with what they saw as multiple "right" answers/interpretations of literary text and their abilities and sophistication as readers.

Rather than skim the surface of twelve participants' intellectual activities, I have selected one--Taylor--to review in detail. I have selected her because she made her dilemma explicit for us. She struggled openly with her own inability to develop expertise she saw as essential for an authority to hold--as essential for a teacher of literature to be able to demonstrate. Her perception of a teacher as an expert, an authority figure, her flat confession of own inability to do those things she believed expert readers do and her determination to become a teacher despite her perceived inability to do the

things she saw as essential for an English teacher to do make a compelling, frustrating and ultimately informative story.

A bit of foreshadowing is in order. The significance of Taylor's story lies in its ending: Taylor resolved her dilemma by redefining what authorities do and by embracing multiplicity as an end in itself. The stance she adopted toward literature, teaching and school children was born of an intellectual activity Perry would call temporizing or retreat. Its form of expression, however, sounded a lot like the constructivist views of teaching and learning most teacher educators would value, support and see no reason to question. She made peace with disciplinary ambiguity; she also hid her own lack of intellectual development behind a rhetorical facade few teacher educators might recognize as hollow. Hence the need to share her story.

#### Between The Discipline And The Deep Blue Sea

Taylor joined our study as a traditional undergraduate in her sophomore year majoring in English. She came to our university the second of three children from a home where both parents were professional educators. Taylor's mother taught high school public speaking and supervised the journalism extra-curricular activities; her father was the assistant superintendent of her district. Reading had figured prominently in her home experiences. Taylor's parents allowed her a later bedtime if she elected to read rather than watch TV; they gave books as presents; Taylor's father read professional materials as a leisure time activity.

Despite the value Taylor's parents apparently placed on reading, Taylor reported that she had read often but not widely. She reported reading "Sweet Valley High" books as a teenager. A sports-based novel called Varsity was her favorite book, one she said she had read several times--even recently. She requested a Dr. Seuss book, The Places You Can Go, as a graduation gift and

named him along with Stephen King as favorite authors. “I still have a romance book every once in a while--Danielle Steele. But they’re just enjoyment books to get away from the literature and the hard core books.”

These are certainly legitimate, engaging and delightful reading materials. But they require a only minimal reader skills in order to be read, understood fully and enjoyed. Taylor’s exclusive choice of personal reading material that placed relatively low demands on her skills and helped her “get away from the literature” becomes an important piece of her story when we listen to her self-assessments of her reading skills.

### Beginning With Self as a Reader

In our very first conversation together and then regularly throughout subsequent conversations, Taylor proclaimed her inadequacies as an interpreter of literary texts. And, she explicitly connected her perceived inadequacies to her projected ideas about her role as a teacher.

I’m kind of struggling with the literature [course]. I like the reading. I have a hard time interpreting reading. I read more for enjoyment. And I know I’m going to need to be able to understand it and interpret it in order to teach it. I’ve had two professors who are wonderful in terms of interpreting, and that’s what I want to learn to do.

Later in the same interview session, Taylor described a course she was taking where the professor “draws things out of the reading. He knows the works, and he knows the style and what the people are thinking. He’ll say, ‘Look at it like this,’ and all of a sudden, things start clicking.” Taylor concluded, “That’s what I need. I need someone to get me going and just lead me in the direction, and I can interpret things. . . . I see a theme, but I don’t see a point.”



Such analytical presence of mind was rare in our group of literature majors. Taylor's ability to apprehend the mental work of her professor, to see him use pieces of disciplinary knowledge to craft an interpretation and to name accurately his actions was impressive. We asked every participant to explain to us how they would know that someone "knows literature." Most nominated number of texts read and ability to recall them as the criteria. By contrast, Taylor's response focused on the actions she expected from expert readers.

A lot of [knowing literature] is the reading into things. [My professor] not only shows you the point of view of the people, but he gives you the issues and the background. We really go into a lot of who the author was and where he was born, where he migrated to, the issues surrounding his life. . . . So it's not just being able to understand the material that they write.

Because he knows a lot of background. I'm sure he did research that he acquired [from others] or that he went out and did. But in either case, he remembered it, and that really impresses me. I would say he knows literature.

Taylor was watching a particular critical theory at work when she watched her professor. Unaware that the reading actions she watched represented only one perspective, she treated this professor's model as an authoritative one, something she should emulate. His activities as a reader represented to Taylor a Right Process she hoped to learn.

I can read the book and go to classes and they'll interpret it for me and I can see where they're coming from in that instance, in that specific book. But I'm afraid I'm not learning how to go about interpreting all books and the steps and the processes and

how to read to look for the interpretations, and that's what I'm hoping to get out the most.

Whether we agree with Taylor's critical perspective is not the issue here. What is important is to understand the task she has set for herself--to become someone who knows literature in those ways that will qualify her to teach it to others. Her language here suggests that she understood the world of literary knowledge as a place where Right Answers exist. She seemed to believe interpretations--meanings--are indeed *in* the texts and able to be found by a reader if that reader does a particular set of activities. Readers should do the actions she saw her professor do and come away with an interpretation. Teachers, then, should show others how to do this kind of mental work.

I agree with requiring close reading. Not just surface reading. Seeing the symbolism, seeing the metaphors. . . . You pick up on the technique. . . . That's what I've been saying; the reader learns to interpret. You pick up on the technique. There's some form of basic outline that a critic follows when he's critiquing something. You emphasize the good and the bad. Then you make comparisons to the [author's] life and to the background and to the time [period]. . . . They go off on different directions, but that's a very basic outline I'm sure that they kind of follow. And by following that, we see the things [the critics] are emphasizing.

Taylor's belief in a Right Process--a technique--was firm. As a researcher and English educator, I am intensely grateful to her for the explicit way she talked about her conviction. She leaves little to intuit. Taylor expected that someone who knows literature would follow the Right Process,

arrive at an interpretation and be able to teach this Right Process to others. This was her plan for herself as a teacher.

Taylor was only a sophomore, just beginning her literature courses. I assumed she would encounter other critical perspectives as time passed and that she might change her mind--more than once--about the kinds of activities that lead to viable interpretations. Coming so early in our association and in her career as an English major, I took these comments as indicative of her potential to learn how to achieve this goal she had set for herself, learning to interpret literature by herself. I assumed she would talk about her skills as an interpreter quite differently by the time our conversations would be completed. My assumptions proved false.

Across the first round of interviews we used as a baseline and then across three sets of end-of-semester interviews and concluding with a final round of exit interviews, Taylor failed to reach a point where she believed that she functioned as an independent maker of meaning around a text. She eventually abandoned the goal altogether.

I cannot put this down as an issue of poor self-esteem or self-effacement. In general, Taylor talked about herself quite positively. She called herself "aggressive" and "a real leader." She recounted with pride events from a freshman education class where she had noticed her unique ability to look at educational issues across "a full range of school" to include administrative positions. She saw this ability as positive and useful. She worked on campus as a residence hall advisor and often shared stories of her decisive actions in that role. And in our final conversation together, she explained, again with pleasure, that she had "grown regarding multi-cultural issues." Taylor typically spoke about herself with pride and gave every indication of high self-esteem. Only on the subject of her ability to interpret

literature was she less than positive. The fact that she believed the ability in question was critical to her success as a teacher, that she explicitly noticed its centrality to the task of teaching and that it represented her only instance of serious self-doubt leads me to represent her inability to interpret literature as an important and very likely an accurate assessment.

How could someone as bright as Taylor, as analytical, as focused on a perceived problem and as motivated as she to correct an inadequacy fail to develop across five semesters of literature course work? It's a question worth pursuing! However, our data did not take us in that direction. We were able instead to document the rationale Taylor eventually used to allow herself to pursue a career teaching literature without measuring up to her own criteria for knowing literature.

#### Ending With Self As A Teacher

Five semesters later, Taylor had stopped talking about processes for generating interpretations; she had stopped talking about her fear that she might not be prepared to teach. She had taken an adolescent literature course in the English department. Again, she was impressed with her professor. This professor treated the course as a context for modeling strategies classroom teachers could use to invite readers to develop personal meanings. If Taylor knew that this professor was operating from an entirely different critical perspective than the first professor she so admired, she did not tell me. Taylor simply stopped raising questions of author's meanings, She began talking about the importance of personally valid interpretations. And she noted that these will certainly vary. By the final interviews, Taylor had decided that a large part of acting like a good reader did not involve generating independently one potentially valid meaning/interpretation but instead involved noticing and appreciating multiple ones. "I'm not

searching for one meaning. I'm searching for possible meanings." She explained that readers would gain pleasure from the recognition that "There is another interpretation. That there are others."

This shift in focus may signal nothing more important than Taylor's intuitive ability to find the central, distinguishing feature of a favored professor's stance on the question of interpretation. Still, it is instructive to notice that Taylor began to place greater value on the ability to see the interpretations of others than on developing her own, publicly approvable / defensible interpretations.

You talk in class; you hear three more meanings. And then your understanding is how you kind of choose to handle all of these meanings and how you put them together, take parts, delete some. So, that's your understanding. And you gain a greater pleasure if you are open as a reader. You just listen to them all. Accept or don't accept. And you just bring it all together into an understanding. It's very individual.

#### Understanding Means Seeing Multiple Right Answers

I pressed Taylor to talk about the relationships between readers' meanings and author's potentially intended meanings. I asked her whether meanings are real, illusions, or something else and whether they are tied to understanding literature. Taylor clarified:

I think the author has a meaning, O. K.? He's doing this for a reason. . . I think often, they write it right out for you. But I'm not saying you have to have it or that you will find it for sure. . . . What you get out of it is what you get out of it, and it's not an illusion for you. . . , When a reader reads, whether they realize it or not, they are reading and interpreting two meanings.

They are interpreting what they think the author means and then there's a more personal meaning. They are reading it and they are like, "How does this affect me?"

The more we talked, the more frustrated Taylor became. We concluded this portion of our conversation as follows:

I throw out all these words, but it's like I don't know what I mean by them. . . . A reader tries to interpret the author's meaning. And then it's like he brings that text and what he thinks the author means--all of that--to his time period. . . . It can be personal. "This is my personal understanding of what this text is." I don't necessarily think that, after you've heard everything and recognized everything, that you need to say, "O.K. This is understanding for me." I think you just gain understanding by the open-mindedness part of it, of just recognizing all the different [interpretations]. That's what I think understanding is.

Taylor's idea of what a Right Process might be had drifted away from an insistence on a particular process that she felt sure would lead to one Right interpretation. By the time I last saw her, she had decided that people know literature when they can listen in open-minded fashion to the personal interpretations of others. They might reach a personal understanding themselves. If so, fine. But they might not. Understanding the meanings made by others, "recognizing all the different interpretations," would be enough. Seeing multiple Right Answers had become a kind of Right Answer within and of itself for her.

This drift undoubtedly also shifted her attention away from anxiety about her inadequacies as an independent interpreter. Rather than

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maintaining the belief that a good reader be someone who can generate valid, independent interpretations and insisting that she could not become a good reader until she learned this skill, Taylor's new definition of a good reader with its focus on accepting multiple interpretations required her to evaluate instead her ability to see as valid the interpretations of others. This was something Taylor announced that she was able to do well! I do not think it is unrealistic to argue that Taylor's decision to focus on readers' abilities to see the points of view of others made it easier for her to feel good about herself as a reader in the present and to pursue her career as a teacher in the future.

Neither would I argue, however, that her decision was calculated or intentionally self-serving. There is every reason to believe that Taylor simply wanted to figure out how to manage the discrepancies between her own thinking about a text and the thinking she saw in others--like her adolescent literature professor. Given the absence of clear frames from either professor, of understanding that the two professors represented two different schools of thought on the question, and given her eagerness to teach, Taylor very likely embraced an attitude that allowed her to put the question to rest and get on with learning to teach. Believing that all interpretations are equally correct, valuable or worthy, valuing multiplicity for its own sake, appears to allow some prospective English teachers to set aside questions of how to develop a good interpretation. At the same time, it lets them set aside questions of how to teach others to do this puzzling and illusive act. And it frees them to look instead at how to get kids involved with literature minus the need to evaluate, scrutinize, coach or direct the quality of that involvement.

#### Teaching Means Soliciting Multiple Responses

These new ideas translated into a new vision for what Taylor saw herself doing as a teacher. Earlier, Taylor had imagined that she as The

Teacher would help her students arrive at interpretations approximating her own, and she worried about whether she would ever be able to have interpretations of her own. “Teaching” would mean presenting this teacher interpretation. Now Taylor imagined scrupulously avoiding a teacher’s interpretation. “Teaching” became something to avoid on principle. She envisioned instead a classroom where a teacher managed students’ projects and encouraged multiple formats for responses to literature.

I don’t believe that literature is taught. . . . “Teaching” is where someone has information to relay. It’s like, “This is weather in clouds. Rain comes from clouds.” That’s teaching it; you’re telling them. But I don’t think you can do that [with literature]. You can’t tell them the meaning because I don’t believe there is only one meaning or that teachers’ meaning are the right meaning. . . . I want to play the role of what society labels a teacher, but I see my responsibilities in the classroom different than what a lot of people think.

I pursued Taylor’s new vision of teaching by asking her to imagine a tenth grade classroom where she might want students to read “The Raven.” I asked Taylor what her role would be.

What would I do? I really believe in this. Let the kids get out of it what they get out of it. Don’t let them slack off and say, “I don’t get it.” I could see myself having a reading of this in class. Have students brainstorm meanings or discuss questions or what they don’t understand. . . . [I’d ask]. “What meaning did you get out of this? Bring me in something that represents that meaning and kind of create a booklet. Poems or song lyrics. It can be pictures or cut-outs or whatever.” . . . Then, they can



stand up in front of class and say, "Well, this is very depressing. So I went to the library and I made the first page of my booklet obituaries because I hear death in this poem." I'd have them create something tangible that represents their meaning physically and require a presentation to really emphasize that what everyone got out of this is different.

Taylor said, "I really believe this." I wanted to test that. So, I pretended to be a student attempting her assignment. I purposefully offered her my imaginary booklet based on as blatantly an erroneous reading of the poem as I could quickly concoct. I said:

Suppose I bring you in a picture of an automobile accident because in "The Raven," this guy was in an auto accident and his wife died and now he's in a wheelchair with a canary a friend brought over. His wife is a ghost. He is real depressed, on drugs because he is in pain and he thinks the canary is a raven.

Taylor responded to my booklet's length, not to its content. "I would realize that my assignment--I was anticipating maybe a booklet of poems or maybe some song lyrics, not just one picture with a two second explanation." She seemed either undisturbed by or unaware of the mismatch between my ideas about the poem and its literal-level content. So, I expanded my imaginary booklet to include a few newspaper clippings about auto accidents resulting from drunk driving, a personal story of my uncle who lost a child due to a drunk driver and a request that we start a SADD group in our school.

Taylor liked my expanded project. "I like how you interpreted or created a story. I like how you brought in personal reflections. But I still need your reflection on the poem. Why is he writing it? Is he trying to tell people something?" I explained that Poe was trying to warn people about the evils of

drunk driving. Taylor accepted that but wanted “more.” She attempted to improve my attention to the poem without negating anything I had said about my understanding of it. She concluded by noting, “You’re not too far off. It’s just that I need a connector” between the ideas I had presented and the poem.

Evidently Taylor truly did believe that any and all student ideas about a text should be treated as valid. She was never satisfied with my pretend attempts to link my interpretation to the poem, but neither did she challenge my reading or imagine informing it in any way. This exchange ended with Taylor’s outline of the kinds of activities she imagined would fall to her as a teacher.

My job would be to kind of be the prober in a class discussion. I would just kind of be the one asking questions for the class to talk about--real general questions. Or I’ll play devil’s advocate to what they do say and have them think about it or provide evidence for it and just get the class discussion going. My job is to probe the rationales [students have] for believing what they do about a poem. . . . When the discussion starts, those that don’t have an idea what’s going on listen. Then they pick up on what everyone is talking about. I just let ideas come out.

Taylor had traded one Right Process for another. It is not inappropriate to note that the Right Process she abandoned was one she failed to learn to use. The new Right Process gave Taylor-as-Teacher a decidedly different role. It did not require her to act like a reader herself at all. Rather, it provided a principled position from which to eliminate her own ideas about texts from the classroom and called for her to demonstrate tolerance for students’ ideas without evaluating, coaching or improving the bases for those ideas.

Ready now to become a teacher, Taylor talked about her role with great energy. She was eager to get into a classroom. In fact, she was so eager that she elected to enter a special certification program that would use her summer for teacher education course work and put her into a year-long internship one full academic year early.

Taylor had nothing to teach. She had learned nothing about how to personally connect to literature. She told me, “If we didn’t have literature in high school, it wouldn’t hurt [students]; it just would not benefit them.” Taylor was explicit about her belief that literature in high school is actually unnecessary but nice to have.

They just get a taste of [literature] in high school. . . . they’re preparing [students] for college. . . .We teach literature for them to have another avenue for knowledge. They’ll have learned math; they’ll have learned science; and I guess literature is just another thing for me. It’s just as important to have a background. They don’t have to be really strong in it, but just the knowledge that it’s out there and if they choose to pick it up later, they’ll have a basis.

Such a statement is consistent with arguments for teaching literature so that young readers have a chance to locate texts they may want to read beyond school; however, few teachers would so openly signal a belief that there is actually nothing to learn in literature classrooms. Taylor had not learned to confidently interpret text or become articulate enough about that process to teach it either directly or indirectly. She had not developed a personal passion for the ideas in books or personal reasons for reading. But she had discovered that she was very good at agreeing with the interpretations of others. She had learned to value multiplicity for its own

sake and to see her ability to understand multiple points of view as worth modeling for others. And she was eager begin that modeling by setting up projects for school students that would allow them to get graded for holding many ideas about what they read.

Her plans included no mechanisms for getting students to do the reading. Taylor relied on neither text selection nor personal energy to motivate readers--she saw motivation as completely unproblematic. Taylor had no plans for mediating difficult text for particular readers. She had no plans for justifying grades or integrating writing. She had no disciplinary knowledge pressuring her or questions about what to teach. And Taylor was completely unconcerned with what readers might learn either about characters or issues in the texts or Literature writ large or English. She hoped they would learn tolerance for the opinions of others; but she was unconcerned with how to help any one student discover a personal opinion.

Taylor's rationale failed to become more full. She noted that certain material must be taught before readers could be expected to understand particular texts--author's life, period details. But Taylor never argued that there is anything to learn in a literature classroom. There were no books she treasured and wanted to pass along, no texts, authors or genres she thought that all human beings should read, recognize or experience, no skills all students should develop, no general, common goals that reading might serve. Her vision of teaching was content-free, untroubled by a need for assessment, unfettered by ideas about how adolescents learn. The classroom she imagined was a smorgasbord, a text-tasting, a sample-and-buy-it-if-you-like-it event. "I don't want to teach [students]. I want to expose them and let them make their inferences."

## Making Our Own Peace

Undergraduates' intellectual development, their ability to forge a position in regard to multiplicity as it sits in tension with a perceived need for a Right Answer had direct, central, potent effects on their understanding of what readers of literature might do with a text, why they might do these things and how readers can discriminate between right and wrong interpretations of texts. These effects appeared to have bounded and in many cases limited what prospective English teachers like Taylor were able to learn about literature as a discipline. As long as Taylor continued to believe that there does exist one Right Way and that teachers embody and model this right Way, she was unable to locate a more discipline-informed view. English as a discipline includes a variety of legitimate critical perspectives each of which define expertise differently. Taylor's search for One Right Way limited her ability to perceive the richness inherent to the discipline.

Her real failure lay in her inability to develop a view of expertise that both honored the variety within the discipline and represented intellectual work she herself felt competent to do. This failure skewed and thwarted her ability to construct an instructional role for herself as a future teacher of literature. Instead, she maintained her notions about Authority and Right Answers by developing a decidedly non-instructional role for herself as teacher. The interaction between Taylor's struggle to resolve questions of authority Vs ambiguity, to manage the dilemma of the Right Answer Vs Multiplicity and her ability to learn the subject matter of a literature major make her case instructive for teacher educators.

Taylor's story has implications on four fronts. First, it raises some hypotheses about the consequences to prospective teachers when the problem of multiple truths gets swept prematurely out of sight by the "all things are

valuable because multiplicity itself is valuable” conjecture. Second, it suggests that such a conjecture may be especially likely when a prospective teacher encounters a readers’ response methodology minus an opportunity to think through the premises behind that methodology. A third set of hypotheses rise out of Taylor’s thin personal expertise as a reader. Her case suggests that underdeveloped readers may be at special risk of leaping to a theory of reading that protects them from confronting their inadequacies as readers and allows them to proceed with career plans that would otherwise require reconfiguring. And finally, her case suggests that it is quite possible to have ideas about teaching minus any ideas at all about either learning or the necessity of learning a subject matter.

This last line of thinking strikes me as especially chilling. Teacher education programs assume that prospective teachers have a body of knowledge they want to teach. We do not typically imagine that our work includes routinely helping prospective teachers imagine that they ought actually teach something. We realize they may come to us prepared to teach inaccuracies or thinly understood subject matter. But that we might be working with subject matter majors who see no subject matter at all that is worth knowing--this is beyond what we’ve imagined as our task.

We also assume that while prospective teachers may be under-informed about how children learn, they agree with us that such a topic is important if not vital. We expect to help prospective teachers reframe their ideas about how students learn. But we are not typically prepared to routinely prove to prospective teachers that learning matters.

If Taylor represents more than one isolated case, then those of us who teach teachers need to radically rethink our roles and our goals. Prospective English teachers like her would not necessarily announce themselves in a

teacher education setting. Their eagerness to learn how to host class conversations would sound like a commitment to solid, student-centered teaching--something we would be disposed to support. Their enthusiasm for teaching as a career and delight in the ideas students bring to class discussions might easily mask the fact that they actually do not believe they have anything to teach or that the quality and content of students' learning matters. In fact, prospective teachers' preference for student interaction could easily look a lot like a beginner's efforts at constructivist teaching. Our assumption that they are attempting to enact readers' response pedagogues born of personal skill as a reader, love of literature or a desire to foster life-long reading skills in students could be over generous. For some prospective literature teachers, apparent commitment to readers' response pedagogues may be nothing more than a means for avoiding a confrontation with personal inability as a reader.

A prospective literature teacher's stance toward disciplinary knowledge may be a reflection of a tension between basic problems of intellectual development and reluctance--even inability--to move into an intellectual Position that would allow Self to function as an independent maker of meaning around text. A prospective teacher like Taylor could agree to teach Romeo and Juliet, engage students in a personal project loosely tied to the story line, grade those projects holistically or as portfolio contributions and everyone watching might be delighted with her efforts while dismissing the rough spots as tied to the difficulties any beginner would experience the first time through Shakespeare with adolescent readers. A Taylor could easily pass through a teacher education program and none of us be the wiser or make a conscious, professionally-based move to help.

We currently have no mechanisms that would reliably signal to us that the trouble a beginning literature teacher is having in a classroom stems from her personal inability as a reader, from her profound belief that there is nothing to teach or learn or from her inattention to building a theory of learning. In fact, our emphasis on developing expertise with the techniques and methodologies of teaching--especially with those involving social constructions of knowledge--might lead us to reinforce the very inadequacies we could help a beginner rethink or overcome.

If intellectual Positions and theories of reading reinforce rather than challenge one another, then teacher educators who work from colleges of education as well as from departments of English need to invite prospective literature teachers into assignments and experiences that make it safe to grapple with questions of multiplicity/relativism Vs authoritative Right Answers and make these literature-specific. Questions like, "How can literature teachers honestly evaluate some student interpretations as "better" or more defensible than others?" and, "How can my interpretation as a reader be Right if the author also had an intended meaning in mind?" as well as, "What would I do as a literature teacher if I don't want to tell students the Right interpretation?" deserve explicit and repeated syllabus space.

Teacher educators who invite prospective literature teachers to pose and think through these kinds of hard questions can become instrumental toward helping literature majors come to an articulate knowledge of their own actions as readers and begin to explore pedagogical practices that might help student readers develop similar skills.



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