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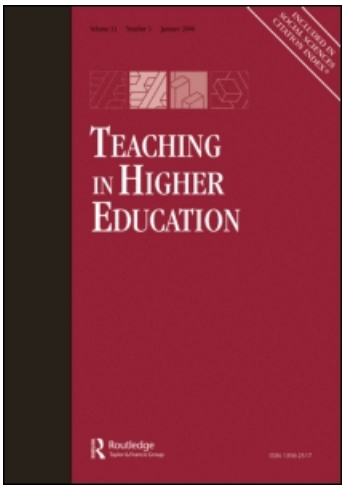

Teaching in Higher Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713447786

Identifying transcendence in educating for public service: reflections on qualifying to teach as a pedagogic example

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Online Publication Date: 01 December 2008

To cite this Article Frusciante, Angela(2008)'Identifying transcendence in educating for public service: reflections on qualifying to teach as a pedagogic example',Teaching in Higher Education,13:6,679 — 689
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13562510802452400
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510802452400

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Teaching in Higher Education
Vol. 13, No. 6, December 2008, 679–689

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Identifying transcendence in educating for public service: reflections on qualifying to teach as a pedagogic example

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In this critically reflective piece, I describe the design of a foundations of education course and my first year teaching experience. I discuss thematic statements of issues that emerged as I came to construct the meaning of my experience and evolving ideas about teaching for public service professions. These included that:

- Questioning is not 'normal' for everyone;
- The experience of classroom safety may be different for student participants than for teacher participants;
- Reflection is a situated responsibility; and
- Assessment and authority interact within the context of learning in a formal classroom.

Discussing these issues helped me in framing teaching for public service as itself a transcendent public act, one that crosses boundaries of time and space and that requires embodied, rather than idealistic, understandings of qualifying to teach.

Keywords: reflective pedagogy; learning community; assessment

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> I had been preparing for a long time but still did not feel quite prepared ... As an educator, I am not alone in the endeavor, so there will always be a bit of uncertainty. Perhaps the rigid structure of education has been because people are afraid of the unknown ... (reflection, first night of class).

It was through a graduate assistant opportunity to teach a senior-level undergraduate Foundations of Education course that I embarked on a mission into university education. I took from the experience, lessons and questions about ideas of legitimacy and quality in teaching for public service professions, and about the unique and essential space that the courses focused on social contexts of professional practice provide in developing public service. Because of the experience and my reflection, I now hold a sensitized perspective on issues of assessment and authority in the classroom and the challenges of reflective requirements as situated within institutional structures and credentialing processes.

In this piece, I describe my design of the course and discuss the insights I have constructed in analysis of my experience. I do so hoping that the questions I raise will ring true for others greeting the challenges of teaching. I also write in the interest of supporting engaged approaches to pedagogy that I believe are essential to the development of public service within contexts of diversity.

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ISSN 1356-2517 print/ISSN 1470-1294 online
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DOI: 10.1080/13562510802452400
http://www.informaworld.com

School communities, like other public arenas, are increasingly characterized by diversity, with ideas of quality and higher education preparation in constant interaction with this diversity. The analysis necessary to understand higher education praxis for supporting the development of citizens prepared for collaboration in the distribution of resources to diverse groups that takes multiple forms. Analysis of higher education teaching sometimes addresses ideas of social equity and diversity by drawing attention to culture, background, race and the social and life experiences of faculty, in addition to the content material of the classroom (Rice 2004). Where university praxis involves opportunities for classrooms as participatory organizations, analysis focuses on the nuances of the shift from collaboration *for* others to collaboration *with* others, as learning communities develop and governance and control become distributed (Gibbs et al. 2004). Writings sometimes focus on the collaborative classroom where participants take on unfamiliar roles in learning environments that are at the same time highly structured yet chaotic (Cunningham et al. 2005). Analysis of higher education teaching within a postmodern time thus calls forth a consciousness, embedded with concerns of social equity and rich in awareness of participatory practice, a consciousness whose writing must illuminate challenges and tensions of reflexivity not in isolation, but as embedded within the classroom processes, institutions, and broader socio-economic contexts. Reflection thus comes to be understood as being conducted by a self with gendered, classed and racialized locations (Clegg 2004).

As I explored content, I drew from my academic heritage and the smattering of ideas that I had encountered. I was cognizant of education as a social institution with established patterns of practice operating in relation to broader structures of social stratification (Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Lortie 1977; Mulkey 1993). I had been introduced to educational change efforts that draw upon differing values influencing ideas of what education should be and do, and through whose engagement education should take place (Barth 1990; Baum 1997; Davies 1981; Dryfoos 1994). I had encountered various philosophies related to pedagogy (Dewey 1938; Freire 1993) and issues of educational meaning and change (Calabrese 1990; Fullan 1991; Sarason 1971).

I was particularly intrigued by the conversations about issues of control and power within classrooms and school structures (McNeil 1986; Pauly 1991; Shor 1992) and processed these ideas in relation to my emerging notions of development of democracy and community (Arnstein 1969; Heller 1989; Moore 1993; Price 1990; Putnam 1993; Selznick 1992; Stein 1965). This unique, although haphazard, combination of information and the associated awareness of social challenges, made me eager to embrace the teaching experience. Because of my own early educational experiences, I had come to understand schooling as a public mission – not only a *place* for content learning but a *space* to explore issues of teaching, authority, and participation for community and democracy.

Approach

I call my thoughts here reflections because my questioning of the experience was not predetermined. Teaching was a practical, albeit reflective, activity for me. Although I engaged in weekly notes for the first semester and summary notes in the second semester, much of what I share here comes from vignettes that have taken hold in my mind with their significance not quite clear until today – well after the experience was completed. I also consider these reflections because I make no claims to the accuracy of these materials beyond my own memories and notes. I made no requests of participants to confirm my memories, nor did I claim or intend to dig deeply into participant experiences, address

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ethical issues related to utilizing names or descriptions, or confront the challenges of confidentiality and quotation. My notes, at the time, were solely for practical reflection and I have only now sought to construct a deeper meaning out of my experience.

Analyzing my notes and my memories has made me more aware of the importance of writing about pedagogy as it becomes situated in a public arena that is complex and diverse. Within the context of educational preparation programs, diversity becomes visible as citizens prepare to take on pedagogic roles in various positions in school communities. Particularly within a postmodern era, where there is a heightened awareness of community and interactions of power and knowledge within public service, analyzing teaching practice in higher education is crucial. As I analyzed my first university teaching experience, its meaning evolved through the design of the course, the curricular paths of the course, and my notes in which I documented course occurrences, my thoughts, and those participant comments that I recorded as poignant at the time. In analysis, I awakened to reflexivity, as my awareness became embodied through public action.

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Course design

> A funny thing happened tonight ... when I was going around to the groups, I actually looked over my shoulder to see if a teacher was looking at me ... (reflection, second night of class)

To prepare for designing this course, I turned to the university catalogue in which the description of the course told of developing critical and reflective thinking about social and philosophical issues. The course was a semester-long introductory course. My goals entering the course were layered. At minimum, I wanted to ensure that students left the class having some exposure to thinking critically – beyond their current understanding of their subject areas, classroom techniques, and readings of educational philosophy – about contemporary educational issues. I wanted students to be reflective. I also wanted to encourage participants to: consider values in their practice; engage various disciplinary perspectives; collaborate in learning about social contexts; consider multiple perspectives; develop basic research skills for exploring their social environment in relation to their teaching practice; and take an active part in building the course content and assessment framework.

In reflection, I realized how daunting was the task I set out, although as a 'new' teacher, I had no expectation of *not* achieving these goals. I was quite conscious and slightly intimidated by the uniqueness of teaching teachers and the complexity in knowing that my pedagogy would have some influence whether it was consciously noticed, subconsciously resisted, or perhaps someday modeled.

In my first syllabus, I emphasized that I was drawing upon Ira Shor's ideas of empowering education (Shor 1992). I told of my position as a doctoral student within the institution. I told of my practical experience and my focus and I explained my approach as teachers and students being co-explorers. I provided this statement not because I wanted participants to think that I adopted any one educational concept, or that my thinking on education could be summed up in a page, but rather because I wanted them to understand why I would be asking for questioning and participation. I also wanted to model transparency. I believed that it was important to share some of my own philosophy if I was to be asking others to share theirs.

Curricular paths

> I contributed some questions and help with grouping. One person would not let me get in 'What is the nature of learning?' She said that this was too abstract and not able to be answered. (To this, another student expressed irritation over the difference in intellectual levels in the class). The class decided that asking 'How do we learn?' was more useful. I had to let it go and laughed that they probably wouldn't let me get in 'What is the nature of being?' I was pleased that they were taking more control of their learning ... (reflection, second month of class ...)

There were multiple curricular paths that I addressed throughout the class. These included *disciplinary questioning* including exploration of history of education, architectural readings about school design, connections between economic differentiation and test scores, and sociological and political understandings of schooling in relation to democracy. I also encouraged students to *think philosophically*. I encouraged *pedagogy development* where participants drew from their philosophical questioning and utilized their reflections to prepare their own educational philosophy papers. To develop *qualitative research skills*, I included research skill development. This involved activities in interviewing, observation, categorization and analysis. I also incorporated into the activities various learning configurations and *decision-making processes* at the same time that readings addressed issues such as team-building, identification of ethical dilemmas and communication skills. I concluded the syllabus with a strategic *assessment* matrix that outlined my goals for the course, how I thought these would be achieved, and the evidence I would use to consider if the class was successfully moving through the curricular paths.

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Meaning-making

Now, analyzing my documented experiences, and critically reflecting on my experience, I recognize that:

- questioning is not 'normal' for everyone;
- the experience of classroom safety may be different for student participants than for teacher participants;
- reflection is a situated responsibility; and
- assessment and authority interact within the context of learning in a formal classroom.

Identifying these issues helped me in framing teaching for public service itself as a transcendent public act, one that crosses boundaries of time and space and one that requires embodied, rather than idealistic, understandings of qualification.

Questioning is not 'normal' for everyone

Many adult students have not been encouraged to question their training. Although it is well-documented that teachers teach how they were taught, that schools serve social reproduction purposes, and that control in educational settings often interferes with learning, I was surprised at how difficult it was for students to question the structures they had been part of for many years. I encouraged questioning through multiple types of participation. In each semester, participants commented on how foreign the level of participation was for them.

Even though questioning structure from a safe distance (e.g. past schooling experience) was met with uneasiness, questioning our current classroom was even more uncomfortable. Once I was caught by surprise. I had asked participants to brainstorm and list educational topics and vote on the five issues that they wanted to have groups address. I chose five to give an even distribution of individuals in groups and thus an assumed equity in workload. When I revealed the issues for the project, a woman was visibly upset because, within the structure that I had designed, 'special education' topics did not receive enough votes to merit class attention. She talked about how this wasn't fair and questioned why we could only have five topics. As she talked and others began to question, I found myself slowly stepping outside of the circle. I watched as she gathered support from the class for changing the assignment structure to include an additional group to focus on special education.

This action required the class to question the structure that I had set, to agree to a different distribution of, and perhaps increased amount of, work and to request a change in the assignment. Later that night, the participant came to me with her hand at her throat. She was almost in tears. She told me she never knew that she could 'advocate' for something. I was caught off guard in that I hadn't planned that result. I realized that students came to the classroom with different levels of ability in handling ambiguity and different relationships of trust to authority.

To be responsible to the class as a whole meant starting where the class was and providing the amount of structure initially required to develop skills of participation. Participants needed time to develop trust in me and also needed meta-structures to draw upon in trusting each other in participation. Collaboration in learning did not occur until late in the semester after participants had read about team work and approaches for giving and receiving feedback, had had exposure to diversity training, and had gone through a series of projects, each requiring greater analytic depth, individual commitment and group communication. Collaboration did not appear until at least a minimum level of safety, established through understanding of expectations, pervaded the classroom.

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The experience of classroom safety may be different for student participants than for teacher participants

One of the most disturbing experiences I had over the two semesters was when a participant, expressed that the classroom was not safe. In a suburban classroom, in peacetime (now understood as pre-September 11th), I was surprised that fear would enter into learning. My first reaction was to concur that all of the social structures that are present outside of the classroom also exist inside the classroom. I too was in interaction with social issues such as age, gender, and race as they manifested in the class. At the time, I accepted that my ability to create a safe learning experience depended on how well I was able to ensure that individual participation occurred independent of the social structures influencing who speaks. In retrospect, the issue of perceptions of safety was more complex and increasing individual voice in relation to me as a classroom authority was no panacea when it came to whose voices were actually heard by the class.

In an effort to develop voice, participants in a classroom environment balance the institutional structure with the group that supports learning. In traditional classrooms, where the primary relationship is between the student as an individual member of the group and the teacher as the institutional authority, a teacher can provide safety by hearing each individual voice – through individual writing assignments, tests, and reflection papers. However, as a decentralizing occurred in our classroom, due to the introduction of

increased participation and group activities, participants as individuals became uncomfortable. I now wonder if the introduction of questioning of educational structures, a strategy I used to assist in decentralization, created a temporary void that perhaps was filled by an intensity of social pressures as students competed for voice in different ways than they had been trained to do in traditional classrooms. Some welcomed the change. Some addressed their discomfort. Others disengaged, a sign I now understand as the transition from discomfort to fear.

The possibility of increased fear is disturbing. Although I accept that my classroom can never be isolated from a larger social context, I cannot responsibly place students in situations that they perceive to be unsafe. At the same time, the goal of encouraging students to be part of a learning community is too important for a goal to abandon. In these two semesters, I addressed the challenges intentionally and now also understand some unintentional approaches I used.

As I expected increased participation, I offered readings and activities in group skills to prepare students for that participation. I also tried to address issues as they were presented to me in individual reflections. I was comfortable in utilizing preparatory articles and teacher interventions to address participatory aspects of the class. The unintended approach that I was using was the shifting of my stance in order to draw upon institutional authority for maintaining control. Moving to the front of the room, shifting the focus from learning to grading, or changing the requirements of a project without consultation with the class, were some subtle approaches that I drew upon to assert my authority in the classroom. Ideally, I approached learning as a participant, but in the event that I became uncomfortable with dynamics in the classroom, I aligned myself with the institutional structure ensuring my position of authority.

Students had the same option for drawing upon the institution when they felt uncomfortable. However, if a *participant* were to draw upon this within the classroom, they would inherently be shifting themselves, into a *student* role, thus intensifying the perception of institutional inequity felt by participants, a step at odds with the work of a learning community. As a teacher in the classroom, I could thus assert authority simply by changing how I was interacting with the *concept* of the institution, a strategy which, if successfully engaged by a student participant would have served only to emphasize the position of individual students in a traditionally lower position in the institutional structure.

Adding to the classroom, the additional uncertainty of questioning structures and increased participation along with my shifts in concept may have added to an already inequitable structure. I also wonder now if, in an effort to maintain some sense of comfort or familiarity, participants more strongly held to traditional and inequitable social identities creating discomfort for those traditionally underrepresented. These activities fall generally under 'classroom management.' However, the addition of requirements for participant reflection, increased classroom complexity. One alternative to avoid discomfort might have been to lessen the ambiguity, using management skills to make teacher and student feel certain of expectations. However, we know that citizens working in schools in contemporary communities are faced with more ambiguity, not less. If not to lessen ambiguity, to train for reflective practice then becomes a responsibility not of classroom management but one situated within the structure of the class and participant relations.

Reflection is a situated responsibility

Within the context of learning, issues of safety and reflection are inseparable. In preparation for the course, I was *advised* in asking people not what they feel but what

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they think. This distinction was interesting to me because I didn't believe that human beings separated the cognitive and affective. Wouldn't asking for this separation create a dissonance in expectations? Particularly in socially situated human endeavors such as education, to encourage separation of humanness in the support of humanity seemed a contradiction that the concept of professionalism was not adequately prepared to handle.

I struggled with the issue of how to incorporate reflection within the course as I asked participants to reflect on their relationship to education and teaching. I hoped that the act of sharing made visible their beliefs and that they could therefore more consciously examine them. I understood success in the times when I accepted that, although I could 'hear' any issue in individual reflections, there were certain issues that I could not allow to become topics for whole class discussion because of my own relation to the issue and thus my inability to successfully mediate participant discussion.

I now realize that my development as a facilitator of learning was directly related to the speed with which I could reflect and my willingness to trust myself and to act on my reflection. Early in the courses, because my reflection speed was delayed, I possibly missed some of the teachable moments; this occurred especially when my own learning caught me unprepared. I suspect that as my reflection speed increased, I was better qualified to guide participants in their own learning.

To embrace teaching responsibly, I would have to come to accept the tensions I felt around encouraging participant reflection, particularly within the context of state institutions and credentialing processes. This tension manifested itself most strongly around the issue of assessment. How could I require and reward reflection without judging content of reflection? My notes reveal that I struggled with what was open for grading. At the time, I understood this tension as one of what and how to grade. As I deepened my ideas of success, I came to understand that the tension was inherent to the publicness of classroom teaching and learning.

There is a range to the publicness that occurs in relation to reflective practice in a classroom. Reflection that is between a student and teacher is different than reflection that occurs as dialogue between individuals in a small group, and also different than reflection that is part of feedback in a large group setting. The increasing extent of publicness intensified the pressures I felt because of my need to maintain legitimacy as a teacher within organizational and institutional contexts. This pressure was manifested in the classroom and in my own reflection around the issue of assessment that came to symbolize my authority in relation to participants and to learning.

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Assessment and authority interact in the context of learning within the classroom

Assessment is the most public manifestation of classroom learning. Whereas outsiders can never be fully present in the class, assessment is open for public scrutiny. If no outside presentations contribute to the public representation of the course learning, then assessment is the only immediate symbol of learning as a public product. The experiences of the Foundations class, raised important questions about learning relationships within institutional contexts of credentialing and competition.

Reading my notes, I realize that there were different relational structures in place within the context of the classroom as I designed it, and as a result, different interaction possibilities that I would come to value as part of the assessment. There was the one-on-one interaction, where I served as coach, as a compassionate listener, or as a Socratic partner. There was the structure of small groups where I prompted critique and questioning. In group projects, I was a tool provider, introducing groups to research

methods for exploring the world. During presentations, I was a facilitator of discussion. In large group discussion, I was a leader ensuring that voices were heard and when necessary that consensus was achieved in a way supportive of my goals for learning. Ultimately, within the framework of the larger institution, I was authorized to assess and reward students in relation to my determination of the quality of their effort and products.

Throughout the courses, I fluctuated between putting assessment up front, involving students in designing assessment rubrics, and hiding assessment away. I struggled with this responsibility and the more that ambiguity in the class increased, the more assessment as a symbol of my authority was placed in tension with learning. Although I sought collaboration as the ideal, I ultimately maintained my institutional authority – an authority that I understood in interaction with the responsibility to assess.

Because of the critical and participatory nature of the course, I chose to handle the discomfort associated with the questioning of my assessment decisions and because of the uniqueness of working with teachers, I also chose to be willing to answer questions related to my pedagogy and techniques. To the extent that the classroom is a public forum, the critique of my practice was neither private nor safe. However, to model skills of public service, I learned that I too had to engage in teaching as an explicitly public endeavor.

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Teaching teachers as a public action

> I suggested they get up and move themselves to the group they wanted so that we could see how the groups were forming. Once I did this, I realized I lost control because everyone is standing and is taller than I am. I almost couldn't even get into the circle ... I laughed and went over to the tallest guy, tugged on his shirt and he kindly asked the group to give me back control ... (reflection, second month of class ...)

The classroom is a public forum and can never be insulated from social contexts. The institutionalized classroom can support the perception of safety but within the context of credentialing, public investment and diversity, the classroom is always a space for public activity – active in the sense that praxis, encompasses awareness of structural constraints at the same time as a vision of the future. Courses that focus on social contexts of professional practice can serve to pull students outside of their professionalized boundaries by providing a space for questioning how professional practice is itself situated within broader contexts.

In a position of authority within the classes, it fell upon me as teacher to understand the social and professional groupings in the class and to direct participant attention to the exploration of key educational issues, while at the same time mediating the tendencies for social groupings to reproduce inequities. On occasion, the class coalesced around a competent individual who found herself performing those mediating tasks. This was the exception not the rule.

My engagement in the Foundations course was strengthened by my reflecting on the k-12 educational experiences that I brought to the classroom, and also how I had constructed meaning out of these. I didn't reveal my entire educational experience to students. I was, however, honest with the students in admitting to them that my background is not limited to classroom education nor is it solely focused on classroom practice. As a 'new' teacher, for me to do other than admit this would have been to spend the semester waiting to be 'found out' in my holistic definition of education.

In the context of the course, my admission meant that I was vulnerable, in that the test of my teaching became to show that my educational experiences, broadly construed as they

evolved over my life and in my training for community development, socio-political scholarship, and social action, could be of value within the context of formal learning and certification. However, my admission also opened the door to mutual learning as the participants began to teach me, sometimes explicitly telling me how to teach them. Social context courses thus provide a unique opportunity for participants to relate the classroom as organizational *part* to a larger social *whole.* In this way, the practice of learning emerges as an experience of classroom culture that respects praxis as the dialectic inspiration of organizational manifestations within broader learning communities.

Qualification as embodiment of the pedagogic self

> Inspiration – There's a realization that comes when you awaken and find that a paragraph was written in your mind as you slept. And, you have a sense, at one and the same time, that the words have emerged from very deep within, yet very far beyond. In this moment you come to know that deep within, and far beyond, are really quite the same place (reflection, upon waking).

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Indeed, learning to teach within the context of teaching others who are called to teach provides an unavoidable dialectic of the self and society as educational knowledge comes to be written through the pedagogic self. Teaching teachers in a participatory manner adds a recursive tension to learning since process and content are not always distinguishable, particularly with the introduction of reflection. Pedagogical questioning and reflection on a process or on the self can too easily become convoluted if not interrupted with specific learning tasks about social structures. Progressive educational ideals, without this critical reflection outward toward the conditions of reflection itself along with a focus inward on the 'technology of the self,' do not support reflection as part of individualization but rather as independence and compensation for disadvantage (Clegg 2004). This tension in the context of this specific course meant that my teaching would become embodied and holistic. Reflection in the Foundations class required a sensitivity on my part, a sensitivity that was other than rationality, a sensitivity to the manifestations of fear and anger – and a willingness to be with students as they constructed their own perceptions of success within the context of both the class and their new understandings of a larger social context.

However, even though I always maintained some distinction between myself as teacher participant and others as student participants, the learning that occurred between reflection and pedagogic action could not be separated, as both students and teacher became participants engaging in pedagogy while at the same time learning *about* pedagogy as public action. Teaching teachers as itself an effort of developing public action is an end and a means much as democracy is itself an end and means. Courses for exploring social contexts of professional practice are essential to providing the space for the exploration and development of a self that, although located within a social space and time, embraces the power of qualification through the embodiment of a freedom to create new meanings of authority in public action.

In the context of the strenuous magic of my first university course, I learned that, although institutional structures can provide a perception of safety through public authority, the power of qualification can never be taken or coerced, but comes from trusting oneself and others to experience together the unknown of freedom. Gibbs, Angelides, and Michaelides (2004, 185) note that the necessary praxis required to support self-organization into learning communities requires 'courage, for it is not undertaken in seclusion from the world, but within it, facing the reality created by our roles and myths'.

It requires existential trust in making judgments, releasing inauthentic identities, and accepting responsibility for free choice; this 'self-trust is based on a notion of respect. It is the development of a responsibility for oneself as part of humanity' (p. 187).

Self-trust is made difficult by institutionalized pressures, for as a broader society, we place restrictions upon learning for public professions, associating with the classroom understandings of who people are, how people learn, and approaches to authority as power over others, success as competition with others, and instrumental managerialism as the only acceptable professional good. Yet, these are not etched in stone; they are institutionalized social practices that are intertwined with our dominant historical past. The challenge of our educational work starts in our understanding of that past as the context of our professional development. However, the test of our commitment to ourselves in an effort toward authenticity and actualization, and our contribution to our public mission, is nothing less than courageous action that we take as visionaries, collectively present in our learning, and open to the possibility of redefining ideas and practices of authority in a democracy.

I appreciated the times that students showed their reflectiveness and learning so that I felt valued and recognized. Yet, I have come to the difficult acceptance that learning, particularly when it involves the readiness to question one's assumptions and the world around, is not always immediate, grandiose or demonstrable. It can be subtle and perhaps transcendent. An experience today can become learning years from now as it is redefined in the context of new experiences. In thinking about the Foundations course, memories from my pedagogic past helped me to realize that the 'teachable moments' that I feared that I had missed in the classroom, or could not find a way to make visible through assessment, were not lost forever. Through my teaching experience, I have begun to construct teaching as neither spatial nor temporal but as an action that, in its publicness, can transcend boundaries. To accept this, however, is also to accept that, although credentialing might occur in one space and time, qualifying to teach is an ongoing action that happens, not in preparation for teaching, but alongside the social practice of teaching.

With this awareness, I imagine that I will again be challenged to qualify with each course that I teach. I leave the reflection of my university teaching experience confident that learning occurred even though it may have manifested in some way that I did not recognize, that I may never witness, or for which I may never receive acknowledgment. I trust that learning from the experience may still be occurring for all participants including myself. I leave secure in the knowledge that neither formal classroom training, nor the legitimization of credentials, could ever make me into a teacher, but that having had a university experience that included opportunities to teach, I am better prepared to greet the ongoing responsibilities of qualifying to guide knowledge construction for public action.

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