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What Have You Learned From All of That Teaching?

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Abstract: *Research suggests that a dominant human trait is the capacity to forget information, ideas, and insights. A professional antidote to forgetting is the practice of keeping a learning journal to take ownership of one's instructional insights in fulfilling the moral purpose of education: the spread of learning. Illustratively, this paper examines ten pedagogical insights gleaned from teaching in diverse academic environments across the past four decades.*

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning in a mosaic of elementary, middle school, secondary, and university classrooms during the past thirty-seven years teases a pedagogical question: What have you learned from the unscripted complexities of life in diverse instructional environments across the last four decades? Candidly, the complex nuances of teaching and learning in diverse academic environments are difficult to capture in a few paragraphs or pages. Perhaps the most promising place to start is to find resonance in one's lived-experience *insights*. In music study there is an expression that "rehearsals are not where you go to learn your part. It is where you go to learn everyone else's part" (Chang, 2025, p. 9). In practice, imaginative teachers and inspired learners engage relationally in the spread of learning in which each plays an integral part. The philosopher and Jewish theologian Martin Buber (1958) mirrored this dynamic in his insightful assertion that "it is relationship which educates" (p. 11).

2. The Purpose Of This Paper

The purpose of this paper is to inspire educators to take ownership of their own *insights* and generously share those insights with one's colleagues and students to enhance collective success in the spread of learning. The Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle framed the instructional challenge: "Nothing is more terrible than activity without insight."

3. A Litany Of Emergent Insights Across Four Decades

3.1. Insight: The Moral Purpose of Education

Philosophically, the words of Candide from Voltaire's classic 18th-century novella: "Il faut cultiver notre Jardin"----"We must cultivate our own garden" are illuminating. Metaphorically, effective teaching involves drawing insights from each academic season and synthesizing emerging insights into an authentic philosophy of education aligned with one's core values and the contextual challenges that one confronts (Pietersen, 2025.) Beyond the day-to-day realities of life in classrooms, it is imperative for educators to form a conceptualizing philosophy regarding the moral purpose of education. In commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Smithsonian, President Lyndon Johnson remarked, "The spread of learning must be the first work of a nation that seeks to be free" (Bunch, 2022, p. 14). Understanding the pedagogical insights of one's past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of decisions for the future create a deep current of self-awareness, meaning, and a commitment to the moral purpose of education: the spread of learning (Spears, 2004).

3.2. Insight: Finding One's Voice and Touch in Memorable Teaching

My inner-city secondary teaching taught me early on that the essence of influential teaching is to connect one's voice to an empathetic touch. In the anguishing context of two student suicides, I discovered that finding one's voice is not a matter of technique. It is a matter of time and soul searching.

Students learn and respond to what and who we are in our voice and in our empathetic touch (Farson, 1997). The techniques and tools taught in undergraduate teacher-education classes and faculty seminars are not substitutes for "who you are." Students do not follow your techniques; they follow your message and the embodiment of that message. The initial challenge in becoming an authentic educator is "*finding* one's voice in the first place" (Kouzes, 1996, p. 10). In classroom settings, what earns one respect from students and colleagues is "whether you are you and whether what you are embodies what they want to become." Across one's career, the enduring question is: "So just who *are* you, anyway?" (p. 11)

3.3. Insight: Teacher as Storyteller

The very heart of being an educator "is a desire to tell a story by making sensory, emotional connections" with students in an empathetic, realistic way (Schultz, 2011, p. 273). In the everydayness of life, "stories express how and why life changes" (McKee 2003, p. 5). In storytelling, emotion-eliciting input alters learners' brain functioning after only 12 milliseconds---far before students become consciously aware of it (Reisyan, 2016). Inspirational teachers tell and interpret stories that belong to someone else. Nelson Mandela, for example, is recognized as one of the most iconic figures of the past century for confronting the dehumanizing impact of South African apartheid laws. After 27 years in prison, Nelson was released and became South Africa's first Black President in 1994. His spiritual legacy is etched in the belief: "Retain faith that you can prevail in the end, while still exercising the discipline required to confront the brutal facts in your environment" (Bowman, 2017, p. 58).

Educators gather different stories based on "their own world views, lived experiences, and artistic values" (Chang, 2025, p. 9). To inspire students to expand their circle of moral concern for humanity, an educator might, for example, choose the empathetic parable of the Good Samaritan from sacred scripture to instill in learners a "deep understanding of another so intimate that the feelings, thoughts, and motives of one person are comprehended by another" (Senge et al., 1999, p. 431).

Whatever the story, a teacher serves as a trusted steward of telling stories with integrity, whether in science, history, literature, or art. In listening to stories, learners are meaning makers. Implicitly they ask: What makes this story unique in history? Why is it being told? For whom is it written? How does this story inform my learning? Is there a profound thought embedded in my interpretation of the story? (Chang, 2025). In a cautionary moment, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) observed that because our lives and our cultures are composed of a series of overlapping stories, if we hear only a single story about another person, culture, or country we risk a critical misunderstanding: stereotyping. Because of its incompleteness, a single story is almost never the definitive story of another individual or culture. [

3.4. Insight: What Can Be Taught? What Can Be Learned?

One of the recurring *insights* that emerged in multiple instructional settings was: "Skills that require lived experience can be learned only by the experienced." Because many skills such as creativity, innovation, empathy, and the ability to work in teams are often incredibly difficult to teach directly, exemplary educators work to create an immersive *context* in which those skills can learned. Diversity, for example, is not a directly teachable skill. Rather, it is simply the nature of the global talent pool. In contrast, inclusion is how this diverse pool of talent is engaged effectively in the development of society. Inclusion cannot be instilled by mission statements, value statements, well-meaning intentions, symbolic reform, lesson plans focused on teaching gender and race, or by "training programs that promise to surface and root out unconscious bias" (Helgesen 2021, p. 48). In both the classroom and the workplace, individuals either experience inclusion or don't in the attitudes, behaviors, and actions of their classmates and teachers (Johnson, 2020). Inclusion is a deeply human activity. At the institutional and classroom level, "only the daily practice of inclusive behaviors can build an inclusive culture" (Helgesen, p. 48). The instructional implication is that inclusive classrooms are webs of participation. Asking questions such as, "Who is present? Who is heard? Who is welcome?" invites an inclusive response: "Everyone."

3.5. Insight: Excellence in Teaching is a Form of Deviance

Media accounts celebrating the achievements of "The Teacher of the Year" invite an obvious question: "What do they do?" Excellence is a form of deviance. Excellence means "doing things that are *not* normal" (Quinn, 2004, p. 22). Teachers of the year do not imitate others. Instead, they strive to do things

that they do not know how to do by experimenting, learning, and creating. In practice, they are creating a new way to be a classroom teacher by reinventing who they are professionally.

"Teachers of the Year" are not normal teachers. Their so-called best practices emerge in a *context* created by an educator doing abnormal things (Quinn, 2004). Best practices, while a means to greatness, are not the source of greatness in instructional environments. Identifying and imitating others' innovative practices often fail because imitators do not fully understand the source of extraordinary performance: "It is who they are that matters" (p. 22).

3.6. Insight: Asking Questions to Learn from Everyone and Anyone is a Unique Skill

Only humans ask questions. As early as 375 B.C., Plato emphasized the importance of teaching children how to ask and answer questions. As humans, learners have a unique disposition to increase their knowledge---and they do that by asking questions. Everything we have learned through the ages came from a question that someone asked (Petersen, 2025.) Evocative questions are *generative,* meaning that they give rise to questions that did not exist previously. In contemporary classrooms, "the ability to master the science and art of asking questions is rarely exercised," with the memorization of right answers too often replacing thoughtful questioning (Bustin, 2015, p. 22). In the everydayness of teaching and learning, thought-provoking questions catalyze an array of responses which reveal who learners are experientially, where learners are going instructionally, and how educators and students connect relationally (Bowman, 2018).

Asking questions to learn from anyone and everyone is a *unique* skill set. Research suggests that asking is the one thing that consistently allows one to peer into the heads and hearts of other people to surface what they know, think, and feel (Petersen, 2024). Directing incisive questions at one's peers and teachers invites insight regarding an array of complex socio-technical and societal issues such as intermittent homelessness and climate change. There is a distinct difference in an instructional setting between asking, "What should we do? and the more inclusive, "What could we do?" Research suggests that "should" limits others' thinking to the most obvious or safest options. In contrast, the use of "could" opens one's thinking to a broader world of possibility (Novak, 2025).

3.7. Insight: The Rhythmic Underpinning in Collaborative Instructional Activities

As a first-year teacher, I was unexpectedly assigned the role of high school yearbook advisor. An initial audible gulp was subsequently supplanted by a reassuring sense that students are wonderfully talented, are internally motivated when they believe in what they are doing, are naturally creative when they wish to contribute (Wheatley, 2017). Mehta & Fine's (2019) analysis of what works and what does not in American high school education revealed that for many students the most memorable parts of the school experience were participating in all-consuming activities such as a drama production, debate, school newspaper, and school yearbook, all of which occur on the edges of the core curriculum. Decades after being appointed yearbook advisor, I recall resonantly the many hours of work with enthusiastic, committed students that ignited an overarching sense of intense focus, excitement, resiliency, stress and deeper learning. Remarkably, the small yearbook office became the place where mastery, identity, and creativity intersected. Students produced something academically consequential, saw instructional purpose in what they were doing, had choice in how they learned, received supportive feedback on their work, and felt that they were part of a school community that held them to a high standard (Mehata & Fine, 2019). Recent research underscores the enduring insight that to sustain engagement in innovative lessons and group projects, learners require more autonomy over tasks (what they do), time (when they do it), technique (how they do it), and team (whom they do it with) (Pink, 2009).

The smiles that greeted the published yearbook further highlighted the insight that both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities, teachers as instructional leaders create a climate that evokes a sense of common purpose, belonging, emotional engagement, and a shared vision in which students' best ideas and insights surface spontaneously in an environment of ever-deepening relationships. In a word, there is a rhythmic underpinning in collaborative activities in academic environments in which a vision is honored only through action.

3.8. Insight: What is Your Academic Legacy?

When one studies the sacred literature of the great religions of the world, those faith traditions mirror common underlying principles: "Our bodies (to live), our hearts (to love), our minds (to learn), and our

spirit (to leave a legacy)" (Covey, 1998, p. xv). In instructional settings, educators are both the creator and the vehicle for that which seeks to be born: an academic legacy. Generating an academic legacy is a choice, not an uninvited burden (Bowman, 2018). As professionals, educators must assume full responsibility for their impact on students' lives, including the advancement of human knowledge, the development of learning capabilities, the creation of meaning and significance in life, and contributions to the common good focused on a purpose that matters to the world (Favaro & Kleiner, 2013). In daily practice, "professionals exhibit a genuine humanistic concern for all of those that they serve in principled ways" (Bowman, p. 266). In that sense, one's legacy is less a product and more a process for reflecting deeply about what educators and students are doing together and how they are in *relationship with each other* as they coevolve common futures (Seidman, 2007).

3.9. Insight: Inspiring the Impulse to Learn

In T. H. White's (1958) *The Once and Future King*, Merlin the magician teaches the young prince who is to become King Arthur that nonstop learning is the key to leading a happy and fulfilling life. Merlin counsels the prince that "the best thing for being sad is to learn something. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing that never fails, the only thing that the mind cannot exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn" (p. 186).

White's poetic characterization of learning "as the only thing that never fails" forces a pedagogical question in contemporary classrooms: "Where is the *impulse* to learn?" Computer scientist Alan Kay argued that we are a nation of musically illiterate adults because people are taught scales before they have developed an impulse to music (Senge, 1998). The disquieting question that confronts teachers and students in contemporary classrooms is, "What is the impulse here?" What is the impulse in language arts classes that inspires learners to express the beauty, the meaning, and the power of life in their written and spoken words? What is the impulse in social studies classes that inspires open-mindedness in students in acknowledging the values, ideas, and disparate perspectives of others? What is the impulse for creating a problem-solving ethos in the science classroom in which students are "propelled by the intrinsic desire to solve problems and meet challenges creatively" (Anacona & Gregersen, 2018, p. 30). What is the impulse for enlarging students' circle of moral concern for others regarding justice, integrity, trust, honesty, humility, service to others, and truth? In the movie *Excalibur,* Merlin, mentor to King Arthur, is asked at a celebration what is the most important quality that a knight must possess. Merlin replied, "Truth. That's it. For when a person lies, they murder some part of the world." In the quest for truth, consciousness-raising instructional exercises invite students to reflect deeply on societal issues such as intermittent homelessness, immigration, climate change, and the status of minority groups in the nation. Insightfully, is not the instructional amplification of *impulses* what we call teaching and learning? (Bowman, 2018).

3.10. The Object and Reward of Learning

Educational philosopher John Dewey (1916) argued that "the object and reward of learning is the continued capacity for growth" (p. 117). The development of society is a foundational responsibility of our nation's academic institutions. The school is society's agent for preparing students to participate in and benefit fully in a democratic way of life. The primary responsibility of classroom teachers involves identifying and teaching the skills, proficiencies, and dispositions that enhance students' capacity to participate fully in a democratic way of life. (Willey, 1939)

4. DISCUSSION

Pedagogical insights tend to drift in the ebb and flow of daily life in classrooms across one's career. Hermann Ebbinghaus, a nineteenth-century psychologist, discovered that our dominant human trait is the capacity to forget information, ideas, and insights and their attending implications. He documented, for example, that the average individual forgets up to 90 percent of any information learned, after just 30 days. A productive professional antidote to forgetting is the practice of keeping a *learning journal* to record ideas and instructional insights, while periodically reviewing them reflectively to inform one's teaching and writing (Pietersen, 2024). Leonardo da Vinci, the 15th-century Florentine polymath, made groundbreaking discoveries in optics, engineering, anatomy, geology, fluid dynamics, weaponry, and painting. His ability to document insights and make connections across disciplines is highlighted in his

7,200 pages of well-preserved notes in which the spread of learning respects no boundaries (Isaacson, 2017). Leonardo lived out the insightful exhortation: "Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

5. Conclusion

As professionals, educators weave a thread of moral purpose into instructional activities by honoring students' aspirations, gifts, and evolving capabilities in a rich exchange of experiences and insights. In practice, that thread either breaks or does not (Bowman, 1998). The essence of professionalism was defined almost two thousand five hundred years ago in the Hippocratic Oath of the Greek physician: "*Primum non nocere*, not knowingly to do harm" (Drucker, 2004, p. 131). Professional educators do not inflict pain on their students. Rather, they create an ethical space in the classroom that invites mutual respect, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and radiates concern for the common good (De Pree, 1997).

In instructional settings, memorable educators are both the creator and the vehicle for that which seeks to be born: an academic legacy. In daily practice, one's academic legacy mirrors a continuous process for reflecting deeply about what educators and students are doing together and how they are in relationship with each other as they conceive common futures (Seidman, 2007). In that sense, professionalism is less a matter of what educators do, and more a matter of who they are as human beings.

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