

***A COLLABORATIVE AND WRITING PEDAGOGY:
AN ANTIDOTE TO DEMAGOGY?
(COMMENT ON STEWART & MCCLURE)***

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*The antidote to exhaustion is
wholeheartedness*
David Whyte (2011)

ABSTRACT. Stewart and McClure have inspiring views on how teachers can create more opportunity to take the role of power holder. But whether these views are indeed an answer to the constraints of standardization and high-stakes accountability and the conservative restoration of market reforms is not resolved or entirely convincing. However, that teachers will experience less isolation by engaging their students and the voices of theoretical mentors is promising and the more who hear about it, the more it might keep the status quo from maintaining its monological grip.

KEYWORDS: power holder, teachers, dialogic stance

The words of poet and speaker David Whyte might be expanded here with, “and the antidote to isolation is self-study”. Both these paradoxical statements may be interesting and valuable in connecting the problems Stewart and McClure bring forward in their paper and the dynamic responses they propose. The authors of this article are asking, not, how can we change the big-bad educational system (directly), but how can we decrease teachers’ sense of isolation and interrupt “the traditional hierarchy governing relationships between students and teachers...” (p. 93). In other words, how can we be more of who we are – people “who value creativity, dialogue, and democratic principles in our teaching”. Indeed, their response to the demagogical nature of the “Standards Era” is a pedagogical (and poetic) one.

Stewart and McClure’s paper invited me in particularly because of their impassioned call and argument for a dialogic stance and by their thoughts on using writing as a way of learning, not only about content and concepts, but about ourselves. In my response to their article I will explore and critique the line of reasoning in the article which starts with several ‘micro-level’ solutions to ‘macro-level’ problems. Then

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I will make the pedagogical leap I believe the authors intended, appreciating the subversive promise and usefulness of their approach and illustrate it with a reflection on what we might learn via a story about dead poets.

Critique and reflection

When I read the Hermans' quote on the "role of power holder" in Stewart and McClure's paper, I wondered if this was the relevant starting point for the article as the problems actually presented at the start of the piece focus on disillusioned teachers in a climate of high-stakes testing and "restoration of market-based reforms" (p. 91) – a problem at the 'macro' level. The issue of "equitable effort" and the current climate in education in North America as a whole seemed to be presented as the problem that leads to symptoms of teacher isolation and for which a shifting pedagogy at the classroom level is needed. The authors make us clearly aware at the start that, "the sociopolitical climate influencing educational policy is a driving factor of teacher frustration, isolation, and dropout," (p. 91) however the solutions that follow on the heels of these observations are sought in a dialogue with students where everyone will be "attending to issues of power in the classroom" (p. 91) – in other words, a solution at the 'micro' level. My critique is that the problems raised don't seem to match or convince the reader that a more collaborative pedagogy at the level of student and teacher is the answer to the larger problems at a national level. It doesn't, it seems, address the source of the misguided standardization efforts within a reality of "exceptional diversity, both in terms of social class as well as language and culture" (p. 92)

That said, the authors aim to change the climate of teaching and as we know from our study and practice of pedagogy, changes can and often do start at the micro level. This is why I felt the paper had a subversive flavour to it and begs the question: are Stewart and McClure trying to bridge the 'power gap' between 'teachers and students' which would then be reflected in the larger culture? And/or are they trying to create through dialogue a refuge – described with the carnival metaphor – within that rigid culture?

As I read on, I was more and more willing to ponder how a program of self-study and a "dialogic stance" (p. 97) could be a response to an educational system characterised by "scripted and prescriptive formula for teaching and learning..." (p. 92); one, as the authors point out – and many educators and researchers agree – is outdated and stubbornly perpetuated on a large scale. The conclusion that I drew, which is indirectly proposed in the paper and gets stronger as the paper progresses, is that creating an atmosphere in the classroom where teachers and students are more equal and "open to dialogue" and where instructors have the intention to use "critical and creative pedagogies" (p. 92) is a direct way of making the classroom a viable and liveable space and an indirect way of seeding change into the larger society. As I write

this, I remember scenes from the movie *Dead Poet's Society* (Haft, Thomas, Witt, & Weir, 1989).

A story

In *Dead Poet's Society* (Haft et al., 1989) Robin Williams plays the leading role as teacher Mr. Keating. In one of his first lessons he invites the students to read a passage from their textbook – a mathematical formula with which to interpret a poem – and then to rip it out, calling it “excrement” and asking them to consider that, “we’re not laying pipe! We’re talking about poetry.” The boys, all prep-school boys from the fifties, first hesitate and then follow orders with a giddy joy and excitement about what might follow this rebellious activity. Mr. Keating takes a personal interest in the boys’ lives and personalities; what they learn to master in themselves prepares them to question authority, the establishment, and what they really want for themselves. We might say they learn what Hermans calls attending “to the interactions and shifting positions that occur between internal and external dialogical relations.” (p. 100). This story illustrates clearly the subversive nature of dialogue which Stewart and McClure would recognize and be able to place in the framework of DST; and it is a dialogue that takes place both with dead poets (e.g. Whitman, Thoreau) and the living (i.e. Keating and his students and the eventually the boys with one another and external positions). What we see in the article and in the movie is that a dialogue with our “theoretical mentors” (those who have come before us) or our fellow pedagogues and other co-creators of knowledge does indeed produce, a “polyphonic reality” (p. 99) which can lead to profound shifts which, “frame education as the practice of freedom for all parties involved.” (p. 100).

Before I move on to also speak more about the poetic (i.e. writing) approaches and resources that would “make teaching and research imaginative, creative and emotional expressive,” (p. 100) I want to end this reflection with a word on the challenges teachers face as we/they use dialogue and pedagogy to counter the reigning demagogy. It requires living (and teaching) within the tension of how things are and how we imagine they could be and knowing that our work is not without risk. In *The Dead Poet's Society* – to use this story to illustrate once more – that risk shows up when one of the boys kills himself; he is not able to cope or resolve the tension between his newly imagined freedom and the demagogical pressures put upon him by parents and society. Whether it’s Freire, Shakespeare, society or our students we are having the dialogue with, we are constantly on new ground when we take a dialogic stance. What Whyte (Burrell, 2007) says about corporations, “The language we have in the corporate world is far too small for the territory of relationship and collaboration we’ve entered,” (p. 28) may well apply to education as well. We must be prepared for the naysayers; the pressures students will feel between succeeding at standard tests while being invited by us into real engagement; the time limitations teachers face; the colleagues who would

dismiss our work as ‘soft’ or ‘artsy’; the awareness that we are guiding students who will and need to take risks.

On writing for personal development

As I read the article, I underlined many passages and revisited various sections, but what had me adding exclamation marks to the margins is the section where McClure speaks of writing as part of self study and “why you believe that writing for personal reasons can be a valuable and cathartic experience in educational settings” and encourage students to “take the risk of making meaning through writing.” Writing for personal development is a vibrant and emerging field with a body of worthwhile resources and research (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2010; Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Lengelle & Meijers, 2009; Pennebaker, 2011; Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002) and it is also dialogical process in and of itself. The piece below is one I wrote for a book chapter (Lengelle, 2012) on why we might use writing to start a conversation with self and others (in the context of career learning).

In the last 16 years I have worked with students in both online and face-to-face environments using writing as a tool for personal and professional development. What I noticed, besides that there was a real thirst for the experience of writing and reflection, was that no matter what writing genres or prompts I used, life questions and issues emerged for students, just as they had in my own writing. These life questions and issues were asking for attention and my role as a teacher was not to provide answers but to create a safe space and provide structured exercises so that students could themselves unearth and articulate their own questions and eventually, to borrow the words from another poet, “live towards the answers” (Rilke).

What I see on a daily basis is that students aren’t just talking about themselves on the page, they are talking to and with their “selves” and those selves aren’t about to go away quietly. What I had tacitly known became clear through the experience of writing my “selves” and teaching others to write: the process itself, I discovered, is dialogical. Basically, there are two reasons for this: first, because we write for an audience. The moment you put pen to paper, there are two of you. Anne Frank wrote to “Kitty” – the name of her inanimate diary. She never knew she would be read by millions; she wrote for ‘herself’ but also for that imagined audience. If you’ve read her work, you’ll notice she is having a conversation with the world and herself and so it is with all writing we do, whether we reveal what we create to an actual reader or not. When we write, the presence of a reader is implied and at the very least we are always our own reader.

This brings us to the second reason why writing is dialogical: words we put on the page talk back to us. Sometimes we even write something “from which it is

impossible to retreat” as Whyte puts it. Or as I once said it, “...when your story stares back at you from the page and is either half-true or a dead-end, it’s too damn painful a thing to not re-write” (Lengelle, 2005). As the reader of your own work, you become the observer of your life and the text becomes a conversation partner to be reckoned with.

Writing is clearly a dialogical step towards understanding ourselves and others. Had I not been asked to write this reflection, I never would have engaged as fully with this article and with my own voice.

Conclusion

“Creating a classroom culture where multiple voices hold sway,” is what Stewart and McClure want to achieve as a response to the isolation teachers face, the power differences that give “some people more opportunity to take the role of power holder” (p. 1), and the rigidity of educational structures on a macro level. Their article gives us ideas and inspiration about how we might realize this goal, first through self-study, and then by fostering equal dialogue and using writing to shape and create meaning. That these steps are an answer to the constraints of “standardization and high-stakes accountability” and “the conservative restoration of market reforms” is not resolved or entirely convincing, but that teachers will experience less isolation by engaging their students and the voices of theoretical mentors is promising and the more who hear about it, the more it might keep the status quo from maintaining its monological grip.

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