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978-0-521-63954-5 - Language Teaching Awareness: A Guide to Exploring Beliefs and Practices

Jerry G. Gebhard and Robert Oprandy

Excerpt

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PART I: INTRODUCTION TO AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH TO TEACHING

In the Preface we highlight how we set ourselves apart from other approaches to teacher education. In Chapters 1 and 2, we discuss our *exploratory approach* to gaining language-teaching awareness. Framing the book, Chapter 1 spells out the assumptions underlying our approach. In Chapter 2, we present an overview of several processes through which teachers can explore their beliefs and practices. Chapter 2 also illustrates how two teachers-in-training carried out explorations in distinct ways that combined several of these awareness-raising processes. Tasks accompanying the content of both chapters allow readers to gain experiential awareness of what we mean by exploring teaching.

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If the teacher agrees to submerge himself into the system, if he consents to being defined by others' views of what he is supposed to be, he gives up his freedom to see, to understand, and to signify for himself. If he is immersed and impermeable, he can hardly stir others to define themselves as individual. If, on the other hand, he is willing . . . to create a new perspective on what he has habitually considered real, his teaching may become the project of a person vitally open to his students and the world. . . . He will be continuously engaged in interpreting a reality forever new; he will feel more alive than he ever has before.

—M. Greene (1973: 270)

Have you ever discovered something new in a place with which you are very familiar? Perhaps a secret compartment in a desk you have used for years? Or, in an attic box, love letters written by an ancestor or photos of family members from past generations? An out-of-the-way alley or street in a city where you have lived for years? Whatever it is, what was it like to make this unexpected discovery? Were you surprised? Delighted? Perhaps a little sad? Why do you think you never saw this thing before?

In this book we invite you to explore a familiar place – classrooms – and the interaction within them, their pulse. We invite you to share in the excitement, fun, and challenge of discovery and rediscovery of your teaching beliefs and practices and to find things in your teaching and classroom interaction that have been hidden from view. We invite experienced and inexperienced teachers alike. If you are an experienced teacher, you likely have explored aspects of your teaching already. We will show you how to go beyond your usual ways of looking. If inexperienced as a teacher, you are not new to classroom life. After all, you have participated in classrooms as a student since you were very young. You have probably spent thousands of hours observing classroom behavior from the unique position of the student. As such, we invite you to rediscover classroom life from a different perspective, that of the teacher, so that you might have opportunities to become aware of new things in a very familiar place.

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Of course, an exploration may not merely be of some *thing* that is new, but also of an insight about yourself, about others, or about the bigger context in which our teaching lives are situated. About climbing Mount Everest, Thomas Hornbein wrote, “at times I wondered if I had not come a long way only to find that what I really sought was something I had left behind” (in Krakauer 1997: 51). When we explore teaching, we simultaneously probe ourselves and the larger meaning of our endeavor. Although we will stay close to the classroom in what we cover in these pages, we occasionally will stray into the more personal as well as the sociopolitical realms.

To begin this journey of discovery and rediscovery, in this chapter we offer our answers to the following questions:

- What do we mean by exploration of teaching?
- What beliefs and assumptions underlie exploration of teaching?
- How can we go beyond superficial awareness?

While addressing these questions, we also highlight several distinctive features of our exploratory approach to teacher awareness.

What do we mean by exploration of teaching?

The central reason to explore is to gain awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices, or, as Fanselow puts it, to see teaching differently (1988: 114). In assuming the role of teacher as explorer, we carry out such activities as collecting and studying taped descriptions of our own teaching through self-observation, as well as observing in other teachers’ classrooms. We also work on action research projects, talk with colleagues about teaching, write in teaching journals, and reflect on and relate personal experience and beliefs to our teaching. How to carry out such explorations is central to this book.

Before providing guidelines for how to explore, as we do in Chapter 2, we first address the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our exploratory approach to developing awareness of teaching.

What beliefs and assumptions underlie exploration of teaching?

We build our approach to exploration around nine beliefs and assumptions:

1. Taking responsibility for our own teaching
2. The need for others

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3. Description over prescription
4. A nonjudgmental stance
5. Attention to language and behavior
6. Avenues to awareness through exploration
7. Personal connections to teaching
8. Attention to process
9. A beginner's mind

Taking responsibility for our own teaching

As you read our assumptions underlying our approach to exploration, notice that we use the first person plural *we* to include not only you, but also ourselves as explorers. One reason for doing this is that we genuinely like to explore teaching beliefs and practices and prefer not to distinguish ourselves from other teachers in this regard. Perhaps more experienced than most of our readers, especially considering our combined half century of teaching, we are every bit as much learners as you are. In fact, the activity of writing our ideas, constructing what we think is a coherent text, and then discussing it with each other has forced us to internalize our learning of the ideas in this book at a very deep level. Much of what we have learned in our co-construction of knowledge is evident not only in what appears in these pages, but also in what we chose to modify or leave out of earlier drafts of the book.

A second reason for using the first person plural is our belief that each of us has to take responsibility for our own teaching. The desire to explore must come from within each of us. When we turn John Donne's *Meditation XVII* upside down, as Lou Forsdale (1981) does, we have "Every person is an island, isolated from all others in his or her self, forever physically separated after the umbilical cord is cut" (p. 92).

Not dismissing Donne, who wrote in 1624 that "No man is an island, entire of itself," Forsdale goes on to say, "The anxiety, the loneliness of the isolation moves us to create bridges between our islands . . . transitory bridges, pathways of signals, that carry delicate freight of meaning" (ibid.). We believe, then, that we must, all of us islands, take responsibility for our own teaching. Nevertheless, we must also reach out to others in the process.

The need for others

Exploration cannot be done in a vacuum. As Fanselow (1997) suggests, seeking to explore by ourselves, alone, "is like trying to use a pair of scissors with only one blade" (p. 166). In other words, and as Edge explains

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I want to investigate . . . my own teaching. I can't do that without understanding it, and I can't understand it on my own . . . [I] need other people: colleagues and students. By cooperating with others, we can come to understand our own experience and opinions. We can also enrich them with the understandings and experiences of others. (1992: 4)

Another reason to explore something with others is the joy of seeing it through another person's perceptual filter, one who has a fresh take on it. A former student once told one of the authors, Robert Oprandy, of her young son's first visit to Washington, D.C. They looked down the mall from the Lincoln Memorial at the Washington Monument. When she told her son that was the next place they would visit, he stared at the vertical height of the obelisk and whined in a somewhat scared voice, "I don't want to go into space!" Seeing the monument as a spaceship, the boy gave a fresh perspective that made sense when seen through his eyes. Undoubtedly, he had seen TV and photographic images of spacecraft liftoffs. Perhaps he and his mother had earlier visited the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution and images of its spacecraft and airplanes were fresh in his mind.

In our teacher education programs, we relish having novice teachers mixed in with experienced ones. Fresher observations and thoughts about classroom practices and teaching theories rubbing up against the reality checks provided by more experienced visions of teaching make for rich discussions and more topics and questions to explore. Differing perspectives provide choices.

Others help us to explore our own teaching through the consideration of such choices. Fanselow explains:

The need I have for others to enable me to travel roads on my own at first seems to be paradoxical, if not contradictory. But I feel I need others to have experiences with so I can make choices. The insights, knowledge, and advice of others provides me with choices as well as stimulation. With choices I can compare. (1997: 166)

In writing this introductory chapter together, for example, each of us had to be responsible for our own thinking. At the same time, though, we had the need for our cowriter to attach himself to our thoughts and words and bridge the gap between our styles of writing, the relationship we are trying to establish with you the reader, and the ideas we wish to communicate to you.

Description over prescription

Before discussing our preference for a descriptive approach to exploring, we begin with a story that illustrates prescription:

I had taken a part-time job at a well-known language school, and as a part of that job I was expected to be open to being supervised. One day a person I had never

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seen before walked in and sat down as I was in the process of teaching a reading lesson. I was trying out a few new ideas and wanted to see the consequences of not going over vocabulary before having the students read. Instead of presenting vocabulary, I was having the students read a story several times, each time working on a different task such as underlining words which described the person in the story or crossing out words they did not know. The supervisor sat in the back of the room taking notes, and I became nervous. After the class, the supervisor came over to me. She smiled and whispered that she would like to meet with me at her office after the class. At this meeting, she opened by leaning over, touching me on the arm, smiling and saying, "I hope you don't mind. I'm not one to beat around the bush." I sank a little further into my chair. She proceeded to tell me that I should always write difficult vocabulary on the board and go over it before the students read, that students should read aloud to help them with pronunciation, and that in every class there should be a discussion so that students have the chance to practice the new vocabulary. (Gebhard 1984: 502–503)

You can likely identify with the teacher's experience of being supervised. The supervisor believes that she knows the best way to teach and tells the teacher, in a prescriptive manner, how he should be teaching.

Whether it is a supervisor who is prescribing, or other teachers or even ourselves, we see several problems with the use of prescriptions. To begin with, there is little evidence that any one way of teaching is better than another in all settings. Research on the relationship between teaching and learning does offer some interesting and relevant ideas that we can try out in our teaching, but research has not, and likely never will, produce *the* methodology we should follow to be effective teachers (Kumaravadivelu 1994).

A second problem with prescriptions is that they can create confusion within teachers. Some teachers might want to experiment by trying something different just to see what happens, but they might refrain from doing so because they (or others, such as the supervisor in the story above) believe that there must be a *correct* or *best* way to teach. This quandary over exploring versus teaching in the best way could very well lead to a feeling of "half-in-half-out engagement"¹ in which the teacher has mixed feelings over conforming to someone else's preferred way of teaching and exploring his or her own way.

A third problem concerns the rights of teachers. When others tell us how we should teach, we lose the "right to be wrong."² The right to teach the way we want to is very important for teachers. If we lose this right, we may

1 This idea of "half-in-half-out engagement" is mentioned in Rardin (1977), who describes ESL students who do not feel fully accepted into a class.

2 This idea of having the right to be wrong comes from reading Rowe (1974).

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lose the courage to try new ideas, to explore more than one alternative, to explore freely.

A fourth problem is that prescription can force us to comply with what those “in authority” believe we should be doing in the classroom. This does not allow us, as teachers, to become our own experts and to rely on ourselves, rather than on others, to find answers to our teaching questions.³ As a result of others making decisions for us, we also lose the chance to discover awareness of our own teaching beliefs and practices. Such experiential knowledge can liberate us and build our confidence so that we can indeed make our own teaching decisions based on our teaching context and knowledge about students, teaching, and ourselves.⁴

Rather than encourage teachers to follow prescriptions, we urge them to collect descriptions of teaching. Descriptions provide a way of portraying what happens in classrooms that can be useful to us. They can provide a mirror image for us to reflect on our own teaching, as well as to talk about teaching possibilities. If we have a detailed description of classroom interaction, we can analyze what went on in the classroom, offer interpretations about the value of what went on, and generate alternative ways we might teach specific aspects of the lesson. Throughout this book, we offer many ways to collect, analyze, and make use of descriptions of teaching. It is through descriptions, more than prescriptions, that we can gain deeper awareness of our teaching and empower ourselves to know how to make our own informed teaching decisions. We have found that descriptions are more powerful than prescriptions in fostering the spirit of exploration we seek to promote.

A nonjudgmental stance

In addition to believing that exploration is both an individual and a collaborative endeavor and that there is more value in description than prescription, we strongly believe that as teachers as explorers, we need to let go of our judgments about our own teaching or the teaching we observe because such judgments can get in the way of seeing teaching clearly. In other words,

- 3 The idea that teachers need the opportunity to become their own experts, rather than to depend on others, is not new. Jarvis (1972) was one of the first teacher educators we know of to emphasize this need. Fanselow (1977a, 1987, 1997) and Fanselow and Light (1977) have also voiced this opinion and have shown ways that this can be done.
- 4 Mehan (1979) points out that prescribing is oppressive. However, providing people with ways of looking reminds them that they are capable of acting on the world, and that these actions can transform the world.

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Task Break⁵

1. Choose a topic you know a lot about. Discuss it in as descriptive a way as you can and see if your detailed descriptions help you explore some aspect of the topic in a novel way.
 2. Why do we recommend descriptions over prescriptions? Are prescriptions always wrong? Can you think of any situations inside or outside a teaching context where prescriptions might be useful?
-

judgments, whether positive (“Good job!”) or negative (“I’m not very good at teaching grammar”), can raise emotions that interfere with a focus on description.⁶ In this regard, we have found the ideas of W. Timothy Gallwey (1974, 1976) to be useful.⁷ He emphasizes that we need to let go of our human inclination to judge ourselves and our performance as either “good” or “bad.” He suggests that tennis players replace such judgmental remarks as “What a lousy serve!” and “I have a terrible backhand” with descriptions that allow the player “to see the strokes as they are” (1974: 30). For example, the player can pay attention to the spot he or she throws the ball during the serve before making contact with the racket, the direction the ball goes, and so on. Gallwey makes the point that when the judgments are gone, so are the feelings that are associated with them, feelings that can create tension and take attention away from gaining awareness of what is actually going on. The mind, he says, can be “so absorbed in the process of judgment and trying to change this ‘bad’ stroke, that [the person might] never perceive the stroke itself” (ibid., 32).

Over the years we have related Gallwey’s tennis examples to exploration of our own teaching, as well as introduced his concept of *nonjudgment* to other teachers. Our message is that, rather than make judgments about our own or others’ teaching, we prefer to explore by describing teaching, something we emphasize throughout this book.

- 5 We encourage you and other teachers you know to do the tasks on your own and then to share your ideas with one another.
- 6 Simon and Boyer (1974) first brought our attention to the effect both negative and positive judgments can have on describing teaching.
- 7 Earl Stevick (1980) was one of the first to relate Gallwey’s (1974) ideas on judgment to second language teaching. Fanselow (1987) also discusses Gallwey’s ideas on judgment.

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Task Break

1. Besides the verbal use of language, list other ways we express or demonstrate judgments. Can silence be judgmental? If so, can you think of an example?
 2. Do you feel you are capable of achieving Galloway's state of nonjudgment (*a*) in regard to your teaching, and (*b*) in other aspects of your life?
 3. Listen to conversations in everyday places. Jot down short dialogues you hear that include lines that show judgment. If needed, add intonation markers and sketch or write a description of non-verbal behaviors, for example, a facial expression that shows judgment. Analyze your descriptive notes. What did you discover?
-

Attention to language and behavior

In addition to nonjudgmental description, we see value in paying close attention to the use of language and behavior. We have listened to and participated in a multitude of conversations about teaching, and one thing that is obvious is that teachers and teacher educators often use vague words to talk about teaching.⁸ We have heard teachers say such things as “My instructions weren’t very clear,” “The students need more encouragement,” and “I like the atmosphere in the class.” We have also heard teacher supervisors say things such as “Get the students more involved,” “Show more enthusiasm,” and “Try to get the students to be more interested in the class.” As we listen, it is apparent that such language is vague and, as a result, discussions about teaching seem to be based on a great amount of miscommunication.

Words such as “encouragement,” “clear,” “atmosphere,” “enthusiasm,” and “interested” are *high-inference* words. In other words, they have different meanings for different people. For example, when one teacher hears the word “involved,” she might think of a class of students attentively listening to a teacher lecturing from the front of the room. Another teacher might think that “involved” means students talking loudly in groups and the

8 For years, Fanselow (1977a, 1987, 1997) has pointed out the vague language that teachers use to talk about teaching. His ideas have directly influenced our understanding of the problems associated with the use of general vague words to describe teaching.

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teacher walking from one group to the next. A third teacher might envision students deeply engrossed in reading silently at their seats.

Task Break

Study the following lines from M. M. Bakhtin's book *The Dialogic Imagination*:

"The word in language is half someone else's. . . . [It] is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily. . . . It is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others" (1981: 292). What do these lines mean to you?

Recognizing a need to have a common language that can be shared by teachers, some educators offer observation systems that can be used as a metalanguage to talk about teaching. One such system that has gained some recognition for its usefulness is Allen, Fröhlich, and Spada's (1984) COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching). The most detailed we know of is Fanselow's (1977a, 1978, 1982, 1987) FOCUS (Foci for Observing Communication Used in Settings), which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Such coding and observation systems raise awareness through the precision of the metalanguages they provide for teachers in talking about what they do. Teachers trained in the use of such systems can get beyond the vagueness of high-inference words such as "atmosphere" and "enthusiasm." Good and Brophy concur with us when citing one of the reasons why teachers are often unaware of what happens in their classrooms: "Historically, many teacher education programs have failed to equip teachers with specific teaching techniques or with skills for labeling and analyzing classroom behavior. Too often they gave teachers global advice (e.g., teach the whole child, individualize instruction) without linking it to specific behavior" (1997: 35). They agree that "*Conceptual labels* are powerful tools in helping teachers to become aware of what they do" (ibid., 36) and cite research findings that point to instances in which teacher education programs have failed to give teachers the metalanguage for labeling and monitoring their classroom behavior. Terms such as "quarterback sneak" in U.S. football or "checkmate" in chess have unique meanings in the context of playing or discussing those games. Participants or observers have a limited understanding of those games if they do not understand such terms. Why should teaching be any different?