

*Courage to Teach* Personal Reflection Paper  
Patrick Osborne - Summer 2008

Palmer begins *The Courage to Teach* by describing some of the most common, and most difficult, aspects of teaching. The challenges are familiar to anyone who's spent time in a classroom at a school, a company, or almost any other type of learning organization. My own experience is that teaching is interesting in that it can be either deeply rewarding or utterly frustrating—sometimes in the course of a single day. Here Palmer speaks to me (and a lot of others, I imagine) in a deeply personal way. I immediately started underlining sections and writing things in the margins like “Finally!” and “That’s what I’ve been saying!”

It’s tremendously validating to recognize you’re not suffering alone, instead you are part of a community of educators who face the strikingly similar problems, fears, disappointments, and systemic contradictions. Teachers are in a difficult position. For instance, the organizations we work for have the power to enforce the teaching method and simultaneously hold the educator accountable for the results (or lack of them). These Catch-22 situations are a persistent and familiar part of a teacher’s world.

I’ve come to understand that teaching is unlike most other types of jobs. It’s personal. It’s one thing for a boss to say I don’t like the way you wrote that report, welded that frame, or drew that architectural plan. That’s a criticism of work *product*, whereas a teaching evaluation is a criticism of *who you are*, and *how you are* as a person. That’s much more visceral, and much more risky.

The teacher observation form we use records information about how enthusiastic you are, how engaging, how knowledgeable, how credible...even intangibles like how successful you are at developing “rapport” with students. As Palmer says, “Unlike many professions, teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life.” Student evaluations are like postcards from that intersection.

I recently spoke to an intensive care nurse who described to me how frequently they have to treat patients who fight their caregivers, curse them, or even bite them. There are few things more demoralizing than to arrive on the scene (hospital or classroom) ready and willing to help, only to have the very people you intend to assist lash out at you. I’ve seen some student evaluations like that, and I’m ashamed to admit, some of them have been for classes I taught.

According to Palmer, “As we try to connect ourselves and our subject with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects vulnerable to indifference, judgment, and ridicule.” Most of the educators I know dread receiving evaluations and feedback for that reason. It’s like looking into a faulty mirror. It sometimes reflects exactly how you look with all your faults and imperfections. If that isn’t bad enough, that same mirror can also show you a wildly inaccurate reflection—a much better or worse you. You never really know which picture you’re getting. Add to that the fact you may only get to look in that mirror a few times a year!

Palmer has some helpful news for us though. The connection we seek with our students is not arrived at by any specific technique of teaching. This is deeply liberating in that one need not teach in a particular style or structure to reap the benefits of creating a link with learners. The methods we use may be varied, but the authenticity we bring to them is what enables us to establish connection. There have been many times I've wished I could replicate particular aspects of another teacher's style. The sad truth is that, for me, even when I could do a passable imitation it didn't feel "real" to me. I knew I wasn't being myself.

Although Palmer doesn't forward a particular method as best, he does offer several examples from his own teaching and from other communities of practice. His choices suggest to me that collaborative settings, with the teacher as the guide and facilitator of learning rather than the sole conduit of it tend to best create community, assuage everyone's fear, and foster learning that is holistically connected to emotion and experience.

Palmer describes how he conducted a *Methods of Social Research* course by beginning with the microcosmic view and proceeding outward from an initial point. In this case, he started by looking at a chart relating income to race. I found myself wondering how one would go about designing training of this sort. The challenge is that this method is highly reliant on several things which aren't found in any facilitator guide: deep subject-matter expertise, the ability to tease out student experience, careful listening, creation of purpose-built mini-lectures on specific topics in the moment they are needed.

I can see why fear is an issue—these are what I would call “high risk” activities in the classroom, both for facilitator and learner.

I’ve suffered the pain of the class discussion that just didn’t work. Perhaps it wasn’t set up well, or people didn’t feel comfortable contributing, or the questions I posed weren’t sufficiently engaging. The net result is that learners don’t get much out of the interaction, everyone leaves frustrated and disappointed, and rather than strengthening the sense of community people move further apart. My lectures don’t generally have that kind of kinetic energy. The worst I’m likely to be able to produce is a boring lecture!

I think this kind of collaborative learning can be designed, but it requires a different and more flexible methodology. It will demand a non-linear structure--something akin to a mind map, where the route through the material isn’t fixed, but instead is free-flowing. Timing is the aspect I’ve yet to sort out. Further, I would say this method is strongest in academic and organizational development settings. There are some types of skill-based training where I feel there are better methods to use, and I think Palmer’s ideas allow for individual variations based on the situation at hand.

When this method does work, Palmer explains we may have yet another challenge to face. “If we embrace diversity, we find ourselves on the doorstep of our next fear: fear of the conflict that will ensue when divergent truths meet. Because academic culture knows only one form of conflict, the win-lose form called competition, we fear the live

encounter as a contest from which one party emerges victorious while the other leaves defeated and ashamed.”

For me, this idea ties directly back to the cognitive development reading in Merriam & Caffarella where dialectical thinking was discussed. I think this concept applies to groups as well as individuals. For dialogue to flourish, valuing each person’s unique truth as legitimate is paramount. As a participant in discussion, I know I tend to thrive when I feel that my individual experience is valid—at least in that it is mine. I’ve found that small group work gives both me and my fellow students an opportunity to contribute in a safe environment.

Palmer says, “Many of us are so deeply identified with our ideas that when we have a competitive encounter, we risk losing more than the debate: we risk losing our sense of self.” If that is the case, contributing to a discussion where competition is the focal point becomes a game with high stakes indeed.

I found one of the most striking stories was Palmer’s tale of the “student from hell”—the disengaged student in class that affects him so deeply it blurs his professional judgment. Later, he discovers a connection with this student, and has a paradigm shift regarding what was actually going on with that person in class.

One thing I have learned is that silence can accompany a variety of internal states: fear, anger, boredom, contemplation, confusion, inattention, disagreement, even rapt attention. I reaffirm before each class that I will try to be empathetic. It helps me to imagine the reasons why people might behave in the seemingly awful ways they do. It's not so much about understanding exactly what's going on with an individual, but rather an exercise in broadening the ways I can interpret behavior.

This past week I found myself racing to the hospital to see my father who had suffered a heart attack. I didn't know if he was going to live or die, or even how to get to the hospital. My mental state was at near panic level. In retrospect, I'm certain I was demonstrating very poor driving technique: weaving across lanes, talking on the phone, going too fast, and dodging around slower drivers. What must the other drivers on the road have thought of me? Perhaps that I was reckless or drunk? Maybe both? I wonder, they would have thought differently about me if they knew my situation?

What this experience reminded me of is to ask myself what could be going on for another person that causes the externally visible behavior? Even if it's not true—it's a helpful perspective with which to view the world. It reminds me that the sullen student may have received bad news before class. The person who leaves my wildly interesting demonstration to take a cell phone call may be awaiting important test results. The person who doesn't contribute in class might just be afraid to speak up or even deep in thought.

When I can give other people “the benefit of a doubt” and assume the best in them, it eases my own anxiety about *my performance*. I am reminded of a comedian I heard who described the following advice he gave to his mate, “If I say something that can be interpreted two ways, and one of the ways hurts your feelings...I meant it the *other way*.” If I assume poor intentions in others, I risk behaving in ways that alienate and discourage rather than support and validate.

Another idea of Palmer’s that really resonated with me are his views on practicing paradox in the classroom. In particular, he says that personality tests polarize us into beings that can be only *this* or *that*. Rather than celebrate our complexity, we compartmentalize and limit ourselves. He makes a related point about the utility of objective and subjective thought. Each has its place and advantages; the trick is to know when to use one style or the other, and when to use them together.

He argues the idea of objective thought has become so favored that we lose opportunities for deeper understanding by maintaining a distance from that which we study, ourselves, and our students. In Palmer’s words, “Intellect works in concert with feeling, so if I hope to open my students’ minds, I must open their emotions as well.” This is an area where I must take special care to attend not only to logic, but also the emotions of the learners.

Another paradox I found helpful was the acknowledgement that no text addresses all the right questions, and answers them perfectly. Given that, I can proceed to the business

of finding value in the things a text does have to offer, and explore the gaps with learners.

A gap is just an opportunity for both the learners and I to add insights and knowledge from other sources (including ourselves) to bridge the gulf.

The solution to many of the problems Palmer highlights is solved through his idea of community. We are in communal relationships with our colleagues and fellow practitioners. We're also in community with ourselves, joining in an authentic way our inner selves and our outward behaviors. We are in community with our subjects of study—where the topic becomes a “thou” we can relate to, rather than just a pure “object.” We exist in a community of paradoxical ideas.

Ultimately, we end up back where we began--at the intersection of public and private life. This is the community we share with those we teach, and who, in turn, teach us.