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## Personal Reflection: What If...?

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## Personal Reflection: What If...?

### **Abstract**

**Excerpt:** Parker Palmer (2003) describes an activity in the book *Teaching* where he asks people to introduce themselves by talking about a teacher who made a difference in their lives. He suggests that as the stories are told, the imprint of good teachers remains long after the facts that they have given us have faded. He goes on to say, "Then I ask the question that opens the deeper purpose ... 'What was it about you that allowed great mentoring to happen (Palmer, 2004, p. 14)?" Palmer suggests that it is more than meeting the right teacher; the teacher must meet the right student. As I read Palmer's chapter on "The Heart of a Teacher," I began to consider his questions and to think about an educator who had made a significant difference in my life. His second question was more difficult- what was it about me that made the positive connection with this educator?

### **Keywords**

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## What If...? Sandra

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Parker Palmer (2003) describes an activity in the book *Teaching* where he asks people to introduce themselves by talking about a teacher who made a difference in their lives. He suggests that as the stories are told, the imprint of good teachers remains long after the facts that they have given us have faded. He goes on to say, "Then I ask the question that opens the deeper purpose... 'What was it about you that allowed great mentoring to happen (Palmer, 2004, p. 14)?" Palmer suggests that it is more than meeting the right teacher; the teacher must meet the right student. As I read Palmer's chapter on "The Heart of a Teacher," I began to consider his questions and to think about an educator who had made a significant difference in my life. His second question was more difficult- what was it about me that made the positive connection with this educator?

My story unfolds in this way: In the mid-1980s, as a graduate student in a Masters of Education degree, I enrolled in a course for all the wrong reasons- more than anything I was looking for a six week summer course that would meet the elective requirements for my degree. But I was also looking for an easy way out of too much work during July and August and the course outline and suggested assignments seemed reasonable. After a busy year, all I really wanted was time to sit on my deck and relax.

What I didn't know was that this visiting professor would turn my world upside down as far as my beliefs and values about teaching and learning. He challenged everything that I had experienced in previous classroom settings and I found that I was initially distressed by his approach to teaching and learning as he focused on our participation in class and encouraged us to be independent, creative, and insightful learners with a philosophy related to the continuous seeking of new knowledge. I was not able to sit passively in his course as he used instructional strategies that were fun, innovative, and engaging and rarely used the strategy that I was used to- that of the lecture. I think the easiest way to describe my reaction to the course was that he challenged everything that I had always believed about teaching and learning and then slowly built up my beliefs about the need for a new way of teaching and learning. What I didn't know at the time was that he was using a process oriented, student-centered approach to deliver the content for the course. By the time the course came to an end, I realized that I valued his teaching approach but would I be able to adapt what I had learned about teaching and learning to my own philosophy?

A few months later, I decided to try some of his approaches in a course that I was assigned to teach and I could not believe how nervous I was about making this transition. All my previous learning experiences had been very teacher-oriented and my initial attempts at teaching reflected the way I had been taught. I spent K-12 in a very traditional rural school where the teachers were considered the experts and students were expected to sit quietly and passively until the bell rang for recess. Following completion of high school, I was

accepted into a school of nursing and many schools of nursing in the late 1960s still followed the motto of Canada's first school of nursing established in 1874 at the General and Marine Hospital St. Catharines, Ontario which was "I see and am silent" (Coburn, 1974, p.140)

Imagine the following scenario: *A 1960s learning environment with nursing students (adult learners) sitting quietly in their starched white uniforms and nursing caps, facing the lectern, and quietly listening to lectures from a nursing instructor about diseases, illnesses, and human suffering. The controlled behavior of students in the classroom was viewed as positive by educators since they believed that it provided the quiet and pensive environment needed for teaching.*



I decided to do a brief scan of the literature about the history of teaching and learning to see if what I had experienced was reflected in the literature. The literature suggests that in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adult learners generally experienced a disciplined and authoritarian approach and learned to defer to their superiors in their educational experiences. The students

were silent as a result of educator expectations and given little opportunity to use their voices (Weir, 1932). Generally, students were not involved in the overall delivery of content in the teaching and learning context. Educators emphasized accuracy, not comprehension, and early institutions had little interest either in expanding knowledge or enhancing critical thinking (Duderstadt, 2003; Meyers & Jones, 1993). "Historically, learning spaces were designed around teaching or maximizing the number of students in a room" (Oblinger, 2006, Space shaped by learning, ¶ 1).

But at what point did obedience and passivity become undesirable? A curriculum revolution in education occurred in the mid 1980s and was inspired by the need to critique the beliefs and assumptions that guided traditional education and to re-create the teacher-student relationship (Bush, 2006; Duderstadt, 2003; Harden, 1996; Selman, Selman, Cooke, & Dampier, 1998). Educators began to explore ways to move from the traditional classroom approach to that of a process oriented approach and build on student participation in the design and delivery of the curricula. Change started occurring in educational environments as educators debated how to develop and deliver curricula that would support students in meeting course outcomes.

What I realize now is how fortunate I was to be a graduate student in that summer course where the educator had already embraced the curriculum revolution. He remains my most memorable teacher and I believe that although I did not recognize it at the time, I was ready for someone to challenge my beliefs and values about teaching and learning. I know that my quest for constantly improving my teaching comes from his influence. As Parker (2003) states about mentors, "Their power is in their capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives (p. 13).

But what if I had never enrolled in his course? What other resources or experiences might have been a catalyst for me to change my values about teaching and learning? As stated on the site for the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, SoTL is one key way to improve teaching effectiveness, enhance student learning outcomes, and transform academic cultures and communities. I also believe that as educators we have a responsibility to share the results emerging from decades of research about teaching and

learning and to move the results into our professional practice. We need to open our classroom doors to other educators and be willing to discuss how our pedagogy supports evolving and engaging environments for students. It is all about making a difference.

*Note: photo is from author's private collection*

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