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Teaching as Emotional Labor: Preparing to Interact with All Students

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Teaching as Emotional Labor: Preparing to Interact with All Students

MITRA DUNBAR AND W. DOUGLAS BAKER

When we first began teaching, we were deeply interested in fostering classroom communities that would allow students to thrive in a safe environment, particularly as readers and writers. We strove to practice what Jeffrey Berman (2004) calls empathetic teaching: to develop professional relationships with students and to encourage them to take academic risks and share opinions or positions without ridicule. We wanted to be what Hargreaves (1998) describes as "good teachers," "emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy" (p. 835).

Each of us taught secondary school English for over a decade, and although we believed in preparing and nurturing all students, we discovered that we were drawn to some students more than others because of similar personal experiences. As writing teachers, we often learned about students' backgrounds through their journals or responses to literature, and some students disclosed personal information that allowed us unique perspectives on their lives. At times, the students' backgrounds resonated personally with our own, and we discovered that our responses to early-life experiences influenced how we interacted with those students.

Now, as teacher educators, we reflect on selected classroom interactions and student-teacher relationships to better understand how to prepare teacher candidates to negotiate the ambiguous lines of mentoring and teaching. In particular, we began to wonder: how do teachers' personal experiences, especially traumatic ones, inform how they interact and engage with students? How do teachers develop the emotional competence (Goleman, 1995/2005; Hargreaves, 1998; 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) to manage not only the challenges that students bring to the classroom each day but also to recognize when teachers' life experiences might interfere with their teaching and mentoring?

We have learned that while a teacher-student interaction may begin as a mentoring session for academic support (e.g., writing a memoir), the teacher might recognize that more emotional or personal experiences, either the student's or the teacher's, are impinging on the moment. For example, Mitra recalled her interactions early in her career with a student named Anne:

> I first met Anne, a sophomore struggling in her classes, as a student teacher volunteering in an academic support classroom. Anne and I immediately fell into a pattern of working together each day. She was quick to share stories about her family and friends, and I learned a great deal about her personal life during our tutoring sessions. But Anne was also inquisitive about me. She wanted to imagine my life outside of school and asked probing questions. I found myself sharing details of my own experiences, and in one of our more personal conversations, I revealed to Anne that my mother had passed away when I was young.

As a beginning teacher, Mitra wondered about the value or risk in sharing personal information to students. *In Self-Disclosure as a Strategic Teaching Tool: What I Do-and Don't- Tell My Students*, Lad Tobin (2010) argues, "we should decide as teachers whether, when, and how to reveal something personal to our students in the same way that we decide as essayists whether, when, and how to reveal something personal to our readers" (p. 198). Although he suggests a pragmatic, case-by-case approach of "developing protocols and criteria for making strategic decisions about potentially tricky self-disclosures" (p. 197), designing appropriate criteria for the diverse situations teachers face is challenging for beginning teachers. Mitra's experience with Anne serves as an example of the risk involved when a strategic approach to personal disclosure is neglected.

> Weeks later, Anne appeared at the classroom door in tears. As we stood in the hallway, she told me

that her mother had suddenly and unexpectedly died. I was shocked to learn that I was the first person Anne turned to for support. I found it hard to believe that, in our limited time together, she had grown comfortable enough to share such a profound and intimate experience with me only hours after her mother's death. I understood that she came to me because she knew I had also lost my mother; I recognized that I had opened myself up to interactions like this by disclosing to her my personal history. Yet, I imagined a room full of family members at Anne's house, gathered to grieve, and I wondered why she would not rather be with them.

As Mitra reflected on that experience, she considered other students who had approached her for counseling in ways similar to Anne. For example, Macy, whose family was in a fatal car accident the year before she became Mitra's student (her father was killed instantly and her mother sustained a debilitating injury). Macy struggled that September and Mitra became the primary person she sought for guidance. Mitra recounts that, "At first I viewed Macy's openness with me as a sign that I was doing a good job—I had heard experienced teachers say that they were often called upon to play the role of counselor." However, Mitra soon found herself in an unfamiliar and precarious situation, as she describes:

Macy often confided in me about her personal life, describing problems at home and her involvement in activities that clearly put her academic success in danger--and maybe even her life. My professional obligations compelled me to consider reporting her behavior; however I was sure that the school would initiate a process that could have led Macy into foster care, and I firmly believed it was in Macy's best interest to stay with her mother. So I remained quiet and straddled an ambiguous line of personal and professional roles: trying to meet my responsibilities as a teacher while simultaneously struggling to keep Macy safe and her family intact. I wondered how I had arrived in a position of trust and obligation beyond my role as Macy's English teacher, and what the ramifications would be for Macy and for me.

As early career teachers, our eagerness to engage with and support distressed students often created situations that our teachers' education programs had not prepared us for, although we were consistently reminded about our legal obligations if we suspected a student's involvement in potentially dangerous situations. We soon recognized a conflict: although we might have felt responsible to support these students who trusted us enough to share aspects of their personal lives and seek advice, were we crossing a line? As Mitra describes in terms of her experience with Macy: "I felt like I was breaking an unwritten rule by somehow stretching the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship. However, a resolution for Macy was years away, and I believed it was part of my professional responsibility to support her emotionally." The challenge Mitra recognized, as all new teachers must learn, was to negotiate the tension between our personal and professional lives as teachers (NCTE, 2007; Berman, 2004; Tobin, 2010).

Upon further reflection, Mitra realized that her past, personal experiences appeared to influence her interactions and decisions with students such as Anne and Macy: "Once I began to closely examine critical experiences in my life outside the classroom, I uncovered implications of my own childhood on my career as a teacher." This epiphany led us to explore representative literature on the value of teacher reflection on emotion, especially on learning how to negotiate the intersections of emotions that emerge from our experiences (some of them traumatic) with those of our students'. We also recognized that some of our teachers' training, particularly writing pedagogy courses, offered insights into connections between personal and professional experiences.

Preparing to Enter the Classroom

In education and writing courses, teachers are commonly asked to reflect on their academic histories and experiences as students and to explore the often-inseparable connections of the past with their professional lives as educators. These reflective events help to make visible teachers' assumptions and contribute to how teachers construct views of students, the classroom, and perspectives of what it means to be a "good teacher." In *Inquiry into Experience: Teachers' Personal and Professional Growth*, Johnson and Golombek (2002) state, "What teachers know and how they use their knowledge in classrooms are highly interpretive and contingent on knowledge of self, students, curricula, and setting;" teacher learning is normative and lifelong, "built of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and as members of communities of practice in the schools where they teach" (p. 2).

One implication of this position is that teachers begin their careers with knowledge gleaned from personal and

academic experiences but should continue to reflect on and examine these views as they develop as professionals.

The National Writing Project (NWP) Summer Institute supplied some of those ongoing learning experiences for us. As fellows of our local NWP sites, we were encouraged to explore links between our personal and professional lives and to discover or expand on the type of knowledge that Johnson and Golombek argue teachers must possess. We were prompted to select, write about, and disclose childhood experiences, both to reflect on our own histories and early literacy experiences and to engage in writing activities and practices that we would one day ask our students to do, ones that value the experiences, knowledges and perspectives of the student writer (e.g., Kirby & Crovitz, 2013, p. 10). This principled approach of the NWP aligned with what other scholars have advocated for: recognizing value in reflecting on and developing personal knowledge, and learning how to use narrative structures to explore personal terrain for professional purposes (e.g., Schön, 1983; Murray, 1991; Burton et al., 2009).

After multiple iterations of composing reflective pieces about our personal experiences and their intersection with teaching, we wondered not only about issues of disclosure (Berman, 2001; Tobin, 2010) but about the implications of these reflections for teaching beyond our classrooms or academic experiences. Our essential question became: what can we learn about ourselves as teachers when we reflect on events in our lives outside of the classroom, particularly how those experiences inform our pedagogy, interactions with students, and professional growth—and even our image and personas as teachers?

In her study examining how practical knowledge helps to shape teachers' classroom image, Jean Clandinin (1989) examines teachers' personal, practical knowledge (i.e., the personal background and characteristics of teachers that are expressed in their teaching practices). This knowledge, as defined by Clandinin, is both emotional and moral and becomes part of a teacher's "life narrative" that contributes to "the context for making meaning of school situations" (p. 2). *In Teacher Narrative as Critical Inquiry: Rewriting the Script*, Joy Ritchie and David Wilson (2000) suggest that personal development is overlooked and undervalued in the professional development of teachers. They suggest that teachers be given the opportunity to reflect on their own stories and share these within a supportive community (p. 7). Doing so, they argue, would allow teachers to create new professional identities and practices constructed in part through

conscious, intentional reflection, as it has for many prominent educators (e.g., Mike Rose and Victor Villanueva).

Through personal reflection Rose (1989) described how his childhood and young adult experiences impacted his career path and professional life as a teacher. *In Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*, Rose recalls living in a Los Angeles ghetto and struggling to succeed in school. During his youth, he developed the belief that "students will float to the mark you set" (p. 7). He attributes his time in vocational education to his teachers' low expectations and concludes that his experience was a product of the larger, systemic devaluing of minority students in American education. Rose's experience with illiterate classmates motivated him to pursue a career focused on remedial education for minority students. *Lives on the Boundary* is an example of how personal experience can shape professional goals and how the examination of one's experience can facilitate meaningful changes in the way a teacher negotiates relationships with students, pedagogy, and classroom practices.

In B*ootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Villanueva (1993) describes his journey as a Puerto Rican growing up in New York City, attending trade school, going to community college and, eventually, choosing a career in academia. Villanueva explains the way his own examination of life as a student of color informed his practice as an educator and served as motivation behind his call to address the unique problems facing students of the academic minority (p. 11). Like Rose, Villanueva's awareness of his experiences as a marginalized student steered the path of his career and led him to encourage others to reflect on their experiences for the purposes of constructing or restructuring curricular opportunities for students.

As we considered these two illustrative accounts, we wondered how Rose's and Villanueva's experiences shaped their interactions with their students. Did they favor students with similar backgrounds? How did the emotional experiences described influence their interactions with those students? As we turned back to Mitra's relationships with Anne and Macy, we further explored why these types of students were drawn to her, and she to them.

For Mitra, reflection meant recalling what she could from her past and examining how those recollections informed what she was experiencing in the classroom and what she was striving for in her personal and professional development. However, Mitra discovered that her reflective journey led to deeper understandings of past events than she

had anticipated, and this effort highlighted profound ways of knowing herself as a teacher. This observation raised questions: What roles do emotionally charged moments or experiences—ones we rarely share—play in our personal reflections for teaching? How can teachers talk about emotions for purposes of clarifying and understanding, especially when some emotional experiences might contribute to the "baggage" that we are often encouraged to leave at the door?

"The Emotional Practice of Teaching"

Andy Hargreaves (1998) identifies key points that illustrate how emotions are represented in teacher-student interactions and relationships. According to Hargreaves, teaching is an emotional practice, and both teaching and learning involve emotional understanding. Teaching is a practice and a form of emotional labor in which teachers' emotions cannot be separated from professional pursuits: "Teaching cannot be reduced to technical competence or clinical standards. It involves significant emotional understanding and emotional labor as well" (p. 850). Making links between personal experiences and their influence on teaching is the key; yet, this type of reflection urges us to consider our persona as teachers. In *The Peaceable Classroom*, O'Reilley (1993) considers the tension between disclosing personal information while maintaining a professional persona in the classroom: "[T]he best kind of teaching comes out of a willingness to stand in one's condition. The best teaching does not come out of dropping one's feelings at the classroom door. You don't need to talk about being sad or happy, you just need to be present to your own inward life (cited in Tobin, 2010, p. 202).

In opposition to Hargreaves's understanding of teaching as emotional labor and O'Reilley's belief that teachers must be aware of their inward lives, we were told early in our careers that good teachers "leave their bags at the classroom door." Mitra reflected on that assumption: "I understood this to mean that any remnants from my personal life should be closely guarded and kept separate from my teaching practices or interactions with students. I should not bring my 'baggage'— anything personal that is not relevant to my efficacy as an educator—into the classroom. Instead, I should focus on the students and their needs."

In the next section we further describe Mitra's experiences, disclosures, and representative challenges teachers face when heeding the traditional advice of our mentors. In fact, we question whether we *can* leave experiences that are integral to who we are at the door as we enter the classroom.

Mitra's Example: Making Connections

Early in her career, Mitra thought leaving her "bags" at the classroom doors would be easy, especially because, as she says, "I have few childhood memories before the age of fourteen," the approximate ages of her middle school students, "so I figured that I could not burden students with the trauma of my past." However, years later this disclosure raised questions about the role of her past, challenged her initial assumption, and led to further exploration:

"I falsely believed that 'no memories' translated to 'no baggage.' But for me, no memories of anything from childhood would include any memory of my mother who died after a prolonged battle with cancer when I was nine. I learned that this lack of memory was linked to, according to one expert, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and I was encouraged to try a form of psychotherapy called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). Apparently, my memories of childhood, and more specifically my memories of my mother and her illness, were inadequately processed and stored. I was encouraged to view the brain as a filing cabinet and imagine not only that some vital memories were misfiled, but also that the file holding those memories was jammed, out of reach and unable to be accessed. The goal of the therapy, then, would be to unjam the file and reprocess the memories so that they may be desensitized and correctly stored. Although I was able to gain some memory and information through the process of EMDR, I had not yet taken the time to make the connections between the unfolding past and my professional life as a teacher."

> What can we learn about ourselves as teachers when we are given time and space to reflect on our lives outside of the classroom, particularly on those events that are considered part of our emotional "baggage"?

Mitra's inquiry into the connections between personal experience and professional growth continued when she enrolled in an intensive, two-week Teachers as Writers workshop that borrowed principles from NWP (e.g., the practice of teachers teaching teachers and the value of teachers working as writers—see "NWP Core Principles"). Through written reflection she was able to understand the undeniable implications of her childhood on her life as a teacher: "That workshop was a chance to continue exploring the significant events of my childhood. The writing I composed allowed me to further process those experiences and understand how they shaped the person and teacher I had become."

Mitra began to recognize the interactional pattern that began with Anne and continued with Macy. As a teacher, she had gravitated toward students experiencing or having had experienced loss, particularly the loss of a parent: "I would find myself giving extra attention to these students: reading and responding to their writing with greater consideration, instigating conversations before and after class, and maintaining an acute awareness of their well being in my classroom and in school."

Mitra finished the workshop with an emerging understanding of the role of personal reflection on emotionally charged events: "I learned that events outside of my life as a teacher, things that happened long before I dreamed of having my own classroom, shaped the teacher I became." The writing and analysis of reflective narratives brought a sense of professional clarity. Once she began to understand that her life outside the classroom had impacted her practices as a teacher, she was able to identify a need for change in the way she approached students and the interpersonal relationships she formed with them. As a teacher educator, she pondered what this might mean for other teachers.

In *Mixed Emotions: Teachers' Perceptions of their Interactions with Students*, Hargreaves (2000) suggests that teachers may harness their emotional intelligence to further their teaching:

> The capacity to use emotions well is grounded not just in individual competence or emotional intelligence. Emotions are located not just in the individual mind; they are embedded and expressed in human interactions and relationships. As such, the capacity for people to use their emotions well in the workplace depends on two other things in addition to individual emotional competence: what people's jobs or professions expect of them emotionally, and how their organization structures human interactions in ways that help or hinder emotional expression and understanding. (p. 824)

We wondered how other teachers might have recognized similar epiphanies and how they negotiated their pedagogy as a result. What insights might reflection on our personal experiences provide us as educators? What can we learn about ourselves as teachers when we are given time and space to reflect on our lives outside of the classroom, particularly on those events that are considered part of our emotional "baggage"?

Examining the Experiences of Others

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) propose that teachers with "higher" social and emotional competence will influence students' capacity to learn and to develop social and emotional skills, particularly through modeling, since teachers are role models of desired social and emotional behavior (p. 493). Furthermore, they argue:

"Socially and emotionally competent teachers know how to manage their emotions and their behavior and also how to manage relationships with others. They can manage their behavior even when emotionally aroused by challenging situations. They can regulate their emotions in healthy ways that facilitate positive classroom outcomes without compromising their health. They effectively set limits firmly, yet respectfully. They also are comfortable with a level of ambiguity and uncertainty that comes from letting students figure things out for themselves" (p. 495).

A question we raise from this idealized perspective and vision is how do teachers learn "to regulate their emotions in healthy ways," particularly given past experiences that affect how teachers interact with their students? Building on her reflective work of observing connections between emotionally charged events from the past and her teaching, Mitra interviewed two colleagues whom, she believed from previous discussions with them, had had similar experiences.

No. 61 (Rust and Blue), **Mark Rothko**

The two teachers represent "telling cases" (Mitchell, 1984). According to Mitchell, a telling case provides a way to demonstrate theoretical perspectives and explore links between theories and practice (p. 237). Therefore, to build on our reflections on and understanding of Mitra's experiences, we sought to further examine the connections between theoretical perspectives and the two teachers' experiences. The interviews would provide an opportunity for us to pinpoint significant events in the teachers' lives outside of the classroom and to see how their reflections on these events informed their teaching. In addition to transcribing the interviews, Mitra observed the teachers in their classrooms, examined curricular artifacts (e.g., syllabi, lesson plans, and assessment of student work), and conducted follow up interviews in order to uncover links between the self-described lives of the teachers outside of the classroom and their interactions with students in the classroom. (Note: both teachers granted permission to disclose their stories, although pseudonyms are used.)

Telling Case: Mr. Kevin Kersey

Kevin Kersey, an English teacher and co-director of a suburban high school's peer facilitation program, stated that personal trauma led him to become a teacher, one who was motivated by developing professional, caring relationships with students as well as by designing curriculum. He described how his future as an educator was determined on a summer evening when he was fifteen years old.

After a fight over undone chores, Kevin rode off on his father's bike. Later that evening, Kevin's parents decided to go for a bicycle ride, but Mr. Kersey was left with his daughter's much smaller bike to ride. A few miles from home Mr. Kersey turned the front wheel of the bike while looking back and was pitched forward, head first into the pavement. He died instantly.

Though Kevin remembers almost nothing of the months that followed (his junior year of high school), he credits the support he received from a dedicated teacher and from a psychotherapist with helping him to survive his father's death. He knew then, before graduating, that he wanted to support kids when they needed someone most. The impact of the trauma of his father's death, the guilt he was experiencing, and a desire to "give back," led Kevin toward a career in psychology. However, he soon discovered that his work as a clinical psychologist was unfulfilling and that he was not reaching the children he counseled in the "state-approved three-to-five sessions." Kevin returned to school to pursue a teaching degree and was introduced to a peer facilitation program. His mentor teacher immediately saw in Kevin the potential to assist with the program that he now helps to coordinate. In his role as co-director of the program and teacher of the peer facilitation classes, Kevin says that he is able to incorporate his background in applied psychology with his pedagogy.

During the interviews, Kevin detailed several of his encounters with students in the peer facilitation program and described the broad range of challenges his students face daily and how he adapts his instruction to meet their varying personal and academic needs. Having creative control over his curriculum allows Kevin to lead students to develop skills in "values clarification, crisis intervention, and problem solving." His training as a psychologist has helped him to support students in multiple ways, from the most basic to the profound, including counseling students who are experiencing trauma, preventing suicides, resolving disputes with peers and family members, encouraging students to enroll in drug prevention and rehabilitation programs, and empowering students to navigate conflict and overcome adversity on a daily basis.

Kevin said that his work at the school brought him full circle from the boy who lost his father at such a critical time in his development to a teacher who works to guide students through their own difficulties. He believes that doing so brings him a sense of peace: "I know my dad would be proud." Kevin demonstrates, through his description of his developmental process as a human being and as a teacher, what Hargreaves (1998; 2000) and Jennings and Greenberg (2009) describe as an emotionally competent teacher. He has reconciled the emotional "baggage" he brings to the classroom with his teaching practices and professional interactions with students.

Telling Case: Mrs. Tara Burrows

Mrs. Barrows says she can pinpoint the exact moment her teaching persona crumbled. It was a persona she worked endlessly to perfect and struggled to maintain after being warned by a mentor early in her teaching career that she physically looked like a student. She was urged to draw a clear line between her life as an educator and her private life, to dress conservatively, share nothing personal about herself, maintain an emotional distance from her students, and behave professionally at all times.

Mrs. Barrows embraced the advice, yet she struggled to maintain a teacher-directed classroom, adopting the view of herself as the sole authority and dispenser of information and striving diligently to construct that ideal role. For example, she would spend weeks planning a lesson, preparing until she was sure that she knew answers to all potential questions the students might ask. Her syllabi from those first classes reflect an emphasis on student recitation of specific course material. In class, Mrs. Barrows refused to engage in conversations about popular culture and current events, or to disclose personal information or background experiences. She did not join in when students discussed events on campus, and she had what she described as "little tolerance" for students who did not embrace her coursework with the degree of dedication she exhibited and expected. She described herself as "strict and firm" in her assessment of student work with "no acceptance for late work or distractions created by students."

Then Mrs. Barrows got pregnant and realized that there was no way to continue to evade questions from students about her life outside the classroom. She said, "As my stomach grew, my carefully crafted persona slipped away," and she began to see her own priorities shift to allow room for her new role as a mother. This change led her to recognize the multiple roles that students played in their own lives as, for example, members of families, as friends, and even as "students with obligations to classes in addition to her own." Through classroom observations, Mitra witnessed the new Mrs. Barrows, who now encourages students to call her by her first name, Tara, and appears to be more approachable as she moves around the room and interacts with students.

According to Tara, her classes have shifted from teacher-directed to student-centered, as evidenced by her emphasis on group work, discussion, and student presentations. Even her syllabus has changed, with a shift from formal academic essays to portfolios and reflective writing. The word that Tara uses to describe her new teaching persona is "real." In her final interview with Mitra, she acknowledged recognizing "the realness of her students" as well. Tara's initial attempts to be a "good teacher" obscured the emotional component vital to creating connections with her students (Hargreaves, 1998). She now sees her students as "multi-dimensional people with their own stories and their own needs."

Conclusion

The three example teachers initially shared a common theme and goal: Mitra, Kevin, and Tara, upon entering the classroom, sought to become exemplary educators capable of supporting students throughout their academic journeys and to practice empathetic teaching (Berman, 2004), although Tara's approach was much more traditional. However, each of them eventually addressed personal reflections, ones that are often called the "baggage" teachers are supposed to drop outside of the classroom door.

Mitra began teaching under the assumption that she had left the trauma of her childhood behind; however, she learned whom she was as a teacher by analyzing what happened in her childhood. She was able to see that her overzealous engagement with students experiencing loss was not always in the best interest of those students. She explains, "I thought I was providing for them what no one provided for me as a child in trauma. Now, I realize I was not necessarily giving students, such as Anne and Macy, what they needed in terms of engaging them as readers or writers or guiding them to develop skills that might lead to effective personal reflection. And in focusing so intently on those students, I might have been ignoring other students, those not actively experiencing trauma." These insights allowed Mitra to revisit and refine her practices to ensure that all of her students were given similar academic and personal opportunities to connect with her as their teacher. She believes that her classroom became a more democratic environment for students in the process. Furthermore, these recollections and current explorations have informed her approaches to teacher candidates in the writing pedagogy courses she now teaches.

Kevin chose to become a teacher because of his traumatic past. He made a conscious choice to devote his working life to helping others reconcile their emotional lives with societal expectations and personal goals. As he transitioned into a teaching career, he was able to apply his psychological training to his relationships with students and model an example of an emotionally competent teacher. In some ways he represents the ideal of an emotionally competent teacher, mainly because of his training as a psychologist and his enhanced capacity to reflect, although becoming a therapist did not guarantee his success as a classroom teacher.

As she began her teaching career, Tara prepared to abandon all sense of self, past or present. She followed her mentor's advice and drew a solid line between her personal and professional lives. However, as her life grew to include

more than her role as a teacher, Tara began to see the multidimensionality of her students and chose to engage with students more personally. Doing so allowed her to recognize and better meet their individual needs as diverse students and learners.

These telling cases illustrate that teaching is emotional work (Hargreaves, 2000). It demands a level of emotional reflection and labor in order for teachers to arrive at what Jennings & Greenberg and Hargreaves would recognize as emotional competency. The teacher stories demonstrate the potential of personal reflection as professional development, a practice that English language arts teachers often encourage in their students. The choices of stories to tell reflects decisions they make about themselves as teachers and educators. However, we recognize the value of the insights of Tobin (2010) as he reflected on what to disclose and the framework he has developed, "I've become less interested in trying to identify best practices that would cut across the differences in individual styles and circumstances; I'm more interested in asking whether a particular practice might help a particular teacher become a better version of her own teaching self" (p. 205).

For teachers to make choices about disclosing or making connections between their past experiences and teaching demands time and space. When teachers are given the time, through quality professional development within supportive communities, to inquire into their life experiences and make important connections to their lives as educators, they are better prepared to do the emotional work of teaching (Hargreaves, 2000), and will more effectively contribute to guiding students on their academic and personal journeys. Teacher stories, similar to the telling cases we present, have the potential power to illustrate the experiences of educators and their professional and personal relationships with students for themselves and for those outside the classroom who wish to look in the windows of American education.

As we approach our students, elementary and secondary teacher candidates, we encourage them to explore links between their past experiences and their preparation for teaching. However, we are now more cognizant of the need to guide them to recognize dilemmas in disclosing information, especially traumatic experiences (cf. Berman & Wallace, 2007, for another example), including the implications, potential values and challenges of doing so (Tobin, 2010; Berman, 2001). Most importantly, we have come to recognize the need for them to examine their experiences, juxtapose them with the academic and personal goals they will have for

their students, and incorporate these practices with and for their students and for their own professional development.

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BECOME THE BEST TEACHER YOU CAN BE

STEP 6

Become a Teacher Leader

Mentor colleagues. Take a student teacher. Mentor new teachers. Lead a book club. Craft curriculum. Serve on improvement committees. Present at conferences. Develop workshops. Publish your works. Do classroom research. Be an advocate for public education.

STEP 5

Connect with Other Teachers

Many schools offer professional development communities that will help nurture your growth as a teacher. But also think about communities that connect teachers across school districts, like one of the National Writing Project sites across the state. Or follow the blog of a teacher you admire or join one of the regular twitter chats sponsored by professional organizations.
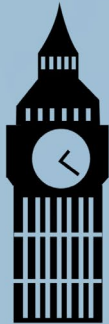
STEP 4

Choose Professional Development

School districts offer many opportunities for professional development. Think carefully about those offerings, considering your long-term goals. Make sure to challenge yourself and attend sessions that truly match your needs and interests as a developing teacher.

STEP 3

Start a Graduate Program

Continue learning about research/practice connections by taking graduate courses at your local university. Ask yourself, "What do I want to improve about my teaching?" and find courses that meet your needs and interests.

STEP 2

Join a Professional Community

Become part of the community of English teachers across the state and nation. Join professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English, the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the Michigan Reading Association. As a member, you receive journals filled with current research and learn about conferences.
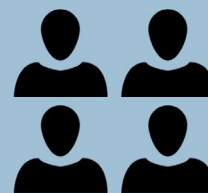
STEP 1

Begin your Journey

Choose an accredited undergraduate institution where you'll learn both the content knowledge of English studies and the pedagogical knowledge of how to teach English to all students.