

In search of the "Aha!" moment: Reflections on the scholarship of teaching and learning

Alissa Bick Ehrenkranz, Faculty, Qualifying Studies/Adult Basic Education, Kwantlen University College

Abstract

What makes good scholarship? A moment of enlightenment, an "aha!" moment that resonates and gives rise to a paradigm shift is the hallmark of great scholarship. Teaching and learning live in a reciprocal relationship that charges the classroom with a constantly changing dynamic dependent on the Discourses of the participants. Teachers and students inhabit learner and expert roles within the paradigm of literacy education.

Key Words

Discourses, Literacy, Situated learning, Paradigm shifts

1. In Search of the "Aha!" moment

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the verb to teach as "to enable a person to do something by instruction or training". Considered an action, teaching in this context constitutes an act of giving to or endowing an individual with something of value, presumably a set of skills. The definition for learning is "the act or process of acquiring knowledge". According to this paradigm, teaching gives and learning receives, a relationship based on transference. This is the model my teacher training embodied. I was certified to convey a specific body of knowledge to a group of individuals who had self-selected to receive this gift. In teaching literacy, I was able to impart the keys to the kingdom, the cultural and social capital to succeed. The relationship was defined as a one-way procedure, with the power and authority vested in the teacher.

Scholarship is defined by OED as "learning of a higher level". To remain constant with our prior definition of learning, this suggests a qualitative increase. For me, the difference is experiential. What constitutes scholarship is a moment of revelation, an "aha!" moment of conceptual clarity that results in a paradigm shift expressed in a fundamental and measurable change in practice.

2. Practical magic

In education, scholarship is generally presented in one of two forms. The first manifests as evidence-based research. Carefully conceived theses are generated and proven through a solid method in measurable terms, the standard empirical experiment. From a classroom perspective, this is generally a means of conveying a concept from theory to practice with maximum speed and efficacy. With a daily learning lab at their disposal, teachers are great judges of pragmatics.

For me, the classic in practical pedagogy was Anna Gillingham's method for teaching phonics, later called the Orton-Gillingham method. Dr. Samuel Orton, the discoverer of Dyslexia, had stumbled onto the underlying neural mechanism for the

majority of reading disabilities. By 1936, Anna Gillingham, reading teacher extraordinaire, had taken the basic science and operationalized a method to work around the faulty wiring and encourage compensation (EPS, 1997). **And she did it with a pen and a pack index cards.** From 1966 to 2000, over 100,000 research papers were published referencing her system of literacy support (NICHD, 2000). I use it today for basic literacy with adults, ESL students, and students with learning disabilities. I am convinced that with enough time, I could probably teach my dog to read with this method (the difficulty there lies in motivation). Anna Gillingham's method is the gold standard for evidence-based scholarship. She had an insight, an 'aha!' moment inspired by Orton's work and transformed literacy teaching from a factory-style, content-driven, assembly line model to an individualized interactive evidence-based format. Certainly, learning of a higher level.

3. Conceptual Shifts

The second kind of scholarship is fey in nature, harder to define in measurable terms. This genre deals with the nature of knowledge and how we perceive the value of what we teach. My "aha!" moment came when reading the first of many essays by James Paul Gee, a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Reading, as I initially understood it, was a neurological process that had a mechanical aspect. There was visual input, parietal-temporal processing (or not, in the case of dyslexia), and retrieval via short and long-term memory. Fluency was dependent on how fast the memory part worked. Reading is constructed as a psycholinguistic processing skill. (National Reading Panel, 2000)

Gee, in a clearer form than I had ever experienced with Bourdieu, describes reading as "situated language", integrating cognition, language, social interaction, and culture. Language, oral and written, is tied to embodied action in the material and social world. Discourse is the language that constitutes our social self (Gee, 1999b). Reading is part of that discourse, that language that expresses different experiences in the world, often in conflict with alternative and competing views (Gee, 2001). Words and grammar are not about giving and getting information for Gee, but about giving and getting different perspectives (Ibid).

In an instant, teaching for me changed from being a top-down exercise to one of competing scripts. What Discourses did the students bring with them? What scripts was I exporting through the curriculum? Beyond editing for the most obvious multicultural sensitivity, I had not examined the content of my curriculum for other messages. Clearly, there were institutional values being expressed. As I operated in the classroom, I became increasingly aware of contested areas, of unrecognized expertise among my mature students, and of proficiencies of language among my ESL students. I experienced a different sort of "aha!". As a conceptual paradigm shift, this one was longer in gestation, perhaps, than my Gillingham moment. I think that conceptual changes permeate consciousness like an infusion, slowly transforming practice over time until it is of an altogether different substance.

4. Conclusion

As I reflect on the meaning of scholarship in regard to teaching and learning, I am presented with the task of defining my terms. Scholarship must have some kind of intellectual resonance; it must exert a powerful impact on my understanding of my craft. Teaching and learning, bound up in a reciprocal relationship, benefit from scholarship that recognizes the deeply embedded nature of those concepts. Good scholarship will refine both, in actual practice and in the larger implications of its cultural contexts. Great scholarship will give me an "aha!" moment, a truly mind-bending paradigm shift that should leave Goosebumps.

References

Gee, J.P. (1999b). An introduction to discourse analysis: *Theory and Method*. London: Routledge.

Gee, J.P. (2001). Reading as situated language: A sociological perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(8), pp.714-725.

Gillingham, A. & Stillman, B. (1936). *The Gillingham Manual: Remedial Training for Children with Specific Disability in Reading, Spelling, and Penmanship*. Cambridge & Toronto: Educators Publishing Service.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Reports of the sub-groups. (NIH Publications No. 00-4754). Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office.