Some Practices and Approaches Are Clearly Better Than Others and We Had Better Not Ignore the Differences

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I love Professor Peter Smagorinsky as I would love a son. He is my excellent friend, colleague, and former student. I need to reveal these sentiments at the beginning of this dispute. If you were to ask, my tributes to him would be monumental. However, he argues that it is time we gave up on the idea of best practice in the teaching of English, and I tend to agree. At the same time, I feel compelled to differ on some points as we might have in a seminar back in my office in Judd Hall at Chicago when that august university still honored education.

His argument is based on the idea that all of our practices, whatever they may be, have been enculturated through the various experiences, people, and institutions with which we have had contact. His major point is summed up in his statement that "different teachers may be more skillful with one approach than with another due to their training, their dispositions, their experiences and other factors" (18). Because teachers' processes of socialization into teaching are different, what one may regard as effective, another will reject as ineffective. Let me say at the start that I agree with this contention. But I do have questions.

What Is a Practice?

Peter discusses three models, or paradigms, of teaching English. He claims that the one he attributes to me has been the most effective for him. It has certainly been most effective for me and for many of my students. When I arrived at Chicago, I was primarily interested in the design of curriculum and instruction. Since my arrival there, a good deal of my work has attempted to investigate and test the effects of the practices I taught my students. I had to ask, is it better to teach them how to lecture effectively or how to run effective small-group discussions? Is it better to spend time on how to craft clear objectives and criteria that permit judging when the objectives have been met, or is it better largely to ignore the complexities of structuring clear objectives and their criteria and simply allow any sort of statement of goals including those about the glories of literature and cultural heritage that I heard as a beginning teacher? Is it better to analyze thoughtfully the tasks you hope students will learn to deal with successfully, or should you simply assign the tasks believing that those who can do them will and those who cannot will fail? Is it better to assign a story for reading right out of the book, or is it better to invent an activity designed to capture students' interest and engage prior knowledge as a means of introducing the story and setting up a central problem for interpretation?

After my first two years of teaching, long before I arrived at Chicago, I began to elect small-group discussion, clear objectives and their criteria, task analysis, and gateway activities over activities against which they are juxtaposed, even as I was learning how to do them. Subsequently, I have argued that these are all highly interrelated. The analysis of the task reveals the objectives and their criteria. Both of these are fundamental to inventing an effective gateway activity. All are mandatory to ensuring effective daily small-group discussions in which students discover, for themselves, the processes they will need to meet the objectives: to interpret the relationships among characters, to interpret the symbolic relationships among images

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in a poem, to develop a strong argument or narrative, and so forth. (See my *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice,* especially Chapters 7, 8, and 9.)

To the extent that practices disallow students the possibility of pursuing these discoveries themselves, the practice will be less effective. When my objectives are not clearly thought out, the tasks in which I engage students will not be clear. When the task is not clear, students will likely have difficulty and I will provide inappropriate feedback, often providing the "correct answers," thus putting an end to student thinking and rendering the process of thinking through solutions unnecessary. When I provide answers, rather than encourage my charges to develop their own solutions, I deprive them of the opportunity of learning the processes for developing those solutions, which, I am convinced, is what English teaching should be all about.

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It has become clear to us, from our earliest workshops, that for teachers to adopt such practices they had to believe the practices would result in increased learning for most, if not all, of their students. The corollary, more fundamental, belief is that, with appropriate instruction, all or nearly all students are capable of learning what our strongest students learn. (See Benjamin S. Bloom for a full argument about this issue.)

But all these "practices," "best" or not, can hardly be seen as one practice, let alone a "silver bullet" (Smagorinsky 15). It is unlikely, for example, that having clear objectives and criteria, in itself, as a practice could facilitate effective small-group discussion. A well-thought-out and accessible task has to go with it. In addition, the teacher needs to know how to ask questions and suggest problems for discussion; how to group students; how to move students in and out of groups efficiently; how to move from small group to small group observing each and making suggestions as necessary while continuing to watch the whole class; how to provide feedback efficiently; how and when to encourage students; when to call an end to the discussions; how and when to allow students to share their group ideas with the whole class; and how to lead the class to develop interpretations and arguments as a whole. (Some of my students have written an excellent book about these practices: *Talking in Class: Using Discussion to Enhance Teaching and Learning* by McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, and Flanagan.) Each of these is a practice that we can code as a result of interviews with teachers and classroom observations. Discussions of such practices and their coding appear in *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching* (Hillocks).

The Difference between a Paradigm and a Practice

What Peter calls *Structured Process* is not so much a discrete practice as it is a group of practices that appear in conjunction with each other and the belief that nearly all students can learn, a paradigm of teaching that is quite complex. Three decades of helping my Chicago students learn even one part of that paradigm, how to operate small-group discussions, have taught me that learning all this is no simple task. In the University of Chicago MAT English program, learning how to run effective group discussions began in the fall workshops with planning, using, and critiquing such discussions and then doing it again and again. The work continued through student teaching, usually with good results.

Further, small-group discussion is only one part of the paradigm. The small-group discussions are in service of reaching larger goals, which are always focused on developing students' abilities to deal with tasks of increasing complexity independently. One of the first units I worked on with such a design was developed collaboratively by four teachers in Euclid, Ohio, for ninth-grade honors students. The unit focused on satire, and the final evaluation involved students' reading a satiric work independently that they were to interpret in an essay written independently. We wanted to determine if students had learned strategies and skills for reading and writing that they could apply in a new task. It appears that most teachers do not use such evaluation procedures. Rather, they hold students responsible only for what has been "covered" in class. According to Elizabeth A. Kahn, tenth-grade teachers in the cohort she studied used test content as a kind of bargaining chip to help control their classes. Teachers promised that if stu-

dents paid attention in class, they would be able to pass the tests. Kahn studied the teachers' quizzes, unit tests, final exams, and composition assignments. She found that about 65% of the points available for the semester were based on multiple-choice, matching, or true/false items, most involving literal information that had been presented in the textbook or by the teachers in class.

Teachers gather at the 2008 NCTE Annual Convention in San Antonio.

Many teachers have told me that it is simply unfair to test students on material that has not been "covered" in class. They conceptualize teaching as a matter of arranging material in sequence of some sort, presenting bits and pieces of information about the material, including interpretations, and testing to determine if students have learned that material. There is little or no thought about preparing students to do more and more complex tasks independently or about evaluation procedures to determine if students have gained in their ability to work with those problems. These practices are characteristic of what Peter and I both call presentational teaching.

On the other hand, the objective for the final unit evaluation of the satire unit was as follows:

> To write an essay interpreting the satire of a play, novel, or a series of essays or short stories by a single author. [Students could not use material studied in class. List included some nonsatiric work, e.g., *The Jungle.*]
>
> Criterion statements: the student must
>
> a. Decide on the basis of criteria in a definition whether or not the work is satiric.
> b. Identify the targets of satire and explain why they are satirized.
> c. Explain how plot, character, imagery and satiric technique provide the satire. (Hillocks, McCabe, and McCampbell 268–69)

Four teachers worked on the original design of the unit in 1959. All of us were pleased with the results. In our judgments our ninth-grade honors classes in three schools had fulfilled the objectives. Students were able to read satire independently, identify the targets of satire, explain the satiric techniques, and so forth. I hasten to add this does not occur by magic. The unit begins with sarcasm that students use in their everyday language, moves to simple cartoons using exaggeration, to fables using exaggeration and simple symbolism, to cartoons and fables using both of these and irony, and thence to relatively simple poems using irony and other techniques, and finally to plays and novels—all prior to the independent reading and writing. At every stage we paid close attention to the writing problems involved in these simpler tasks. For example, students wrote about interpretations of cartoons, fables, poems, short stories, and of the shared major works. Eventually, students wrote original parodies and satires. (See Hillocks, McCabe, and McCampbell for much more detail.)

I have known for well over four decades that many teachers cannot or will not use even detailed instructional units that my colleagues and I have found to be tried and true. In 1962, The United States Office of Education proposed to support demonstration centers for the teaching of English. I developed a proposal through Case Western University in Cleveland and my local school district (Euclid, Ohio) to host a demonstration center on curriculum and instruction for junior high English. We proposed conferences (six per year for two years), curriculum materials in the form of fairly extensive unit descriptions (see ERIC documents ED 017 491, ED 017 492, and ED 017 493). We were fortunate to win one of four demonstration center projects, the only on-the-spot-come-and-see center. The other three were all for movie and TV-taped demonstrations.

Between 130 and 240 participants attended each conference to visit classes, meet and talk with teachers, hear speakers, and accept several printed copies of instructional units. During the first year of the center, 1963–64, at one conference one of the distributed units was our ninth-grade honors unit on satire. This was the fifth year that I had used the unit, and I had revised it every year. As far as I was concerned, it was a winner. Students were excited about it. Their discussions were lively and their writing insightful. Recently, one young man and two of his classmates from my ninth-grade class of 1963–64 had recently celebrated their 40th high school reunion. The talk at the reunion prompted them to contact me. That led to a dinner party mini-reunion at my home. When our conversation led to our discussions in class, we set about reconstructing some of them. Rick Yeager recalled them as having been "exhilarating." That is how I recall them too.

To answer Peter's question of the paradox about why teachers do not change, I would argue that the more complex the paradigm, the more thinking and work it involves outside the classroom. Then again, any teacher who does not or will not believe that most students can learn what our strongest students learn, will see no reason for greater complexity.

One of our visitors during that first year of the Center told me that she was going to try the unit with her twelfth-grade students. She returned to a later conference and confronted me to say that the satire unit had not worked with her students. I evinced some surprise and talked with her for a while. She spoke mostly about using the major works. Eventually I asked her directly if she had used the early parts of the unit, those parts designed to introduce students to interpreting exaggeration, symbolism, and irony, to simplify the early learning tasks and make the later more complex tasks more accessible. "No," she said, "my students didn't need that. They are older, you know. I simply do not have time to do all that preliminary stuff. We have so much to cover." With that, she turned and walked away. Here was a teacher who had simply cut the foundations of the proposed learning and then blamed the failure of her unprepared students on the unit. It did not occur to me until much later that this teacher was one who had been socialized simply to assign tasks without preparing students for how to do them. She saw no reason to help students learn how to do the basic tasks of interpreting irony, for example. She is not alone in this thinking.

It may be relatively easy to shift a simple practice from one kind to another. For example, it may be relatively easy to begin providing at least some positive feedback to students on their writing instead of simply marking all errors, although some teachers appear unable to make even that change. But it is much more complex to shift from one large cluster of practices, represented by the paradigms that Peter describes, to another, especially from the relatively simple presentational to the highly complex structured process. To answer Peter's question of the paradox about why teachers do not change, I would argue that the more complex the paradigm, the more thinking and work it involves outside the classroom. Then again, any teacher who does not or will not believe that most students can learn what our strongest students learn, will see no reason for greater complexity.

Are Some Practices Better Than Others?

Peter says that "different teachers may be more skillful with one approach than another due to their training, their dispositions, their experience, and other factors. As a result, what works best for me in my classroom might not work so well in yours" (18). I believe him without question. If a teacher does not know how to use any given approach, especially a complex one, it is likely to fail in terms of student learning. No question.

The more important question is this: Does one method, practice, or paradigm work better for our students than another? This is a question that I will contend. I believe that practices or paradigms make huge differences, not only in student learning but also in student dispositions toward learning.

An example: My partner, Vera Wallace, and I prepared a unit on writing narrative at the request of Vera's principal to be taught at her Chicago high school. The unit was not developed in a vacuum but rather had been taught in many different forms by my students and me in Chicago schools for a period of nearly 20 years. The principal had seen the unit in action, had been impressed, and had asked that it be taught by all teachers in the department

at the ninth-grade level. Vera and I spent several hours adapting the 1996 version of the unit for her teachers. She subsequently distributed the unit, and I received frequent reports about its progress. Teachers at the school were required to submit daily lesson plans that their chairs were to review. Vera invited me to visit one of her interviews concerning a lesson plan submitted by one teacher. This teacher we visited had departed from one of the key lessons in our narrative unit.

The lesson, which we have come to call the "sea shell lesson," focused on helping students learn to generate figurative language in their narrative writing. It began with examining univalve sea shells (not clams) in order to describe them in terms of what they looked like. The emphasis was on color, patterns, similes, and metaphors. The lesson, which I have reported in detail (Hillocks, *Narrative*), begins with the teacher asking students to suggest ideas about what a large helmet shell looks like. At this stage the shell garners many similes: like an athletic trophy, like an elf's hat, like a ball gown, like a large trumpet, like an ear, a shark's mouth, an evil smile, and so on. After this teacher-led discussion, the students work in small groups examining two shells, one of which the small group will write about with some help from the teacher, and finally to writing individually about one shell that is different from all other shells used in the class. In the latter, the compositions are redistributed to the class, the shells go onto a table, and readers of the compositions are asked to find the shell described in the composition from one of their classmates and provide feedback to the writers. My students have had great success with these activities. After uses in two inner-city seventh-grade classes, for example, we found that while none of our youngsters used figurative language on a narrative written as a pretest, 70% were using figurative language three to four weeks later on a posttest of narrative writing.

Ms. Gallopolli, the teacher whom we interviewed together, had decided to abandon the sea shells altogether and instead use illustrations from her literature book. She was happy with the results as she showed us examples of the student writing. Vera and I looked through several pieces in vain for figurative language. I finally asked Ms. Gallopolli to show me the figurative language in one of the compositions. She promptly pointed to a sentence that read, "She looks like she's angry." She said, "There, that's a simile." I did not know how to respond. I had to think. Finally, I said, "Well, it uses the word *like,* but it doesn't compare two unlike things in some way. It just attributes a characteristic to the woman in the picture." I remember being too embarrassed to say more.

According to theorists, any learning process is a social one. Thus, learning this error is the result of socialization. Can we possibly argue that this bit of ignorance amounts to good practice because it has been socialized? I fervently hope not.

Another example: My first year of teaching, I was hired to teach junior high along with several other young people. I knew one young woman vaguely because she had graduated from the same college as I. She had been hired as a Latin teacher. I recall that in the days before school opened in the fall of 1956, I was terrified that I might not be able to control my seventh- and ninth-grade students, let alone teach them anything. I had forgotten that, for a couple of years before I went to college, I had been a junior assistant scout master at a scout troop located in the same school where I had been hired to teach. I had taken as many as 70 rambunctious scouts on daylong hikes in the winter without losing any to weather, traffic, fighting, falls from cliffs, or anything else. I had learned from Scoutmaster Robert Holloway how to do that, how to involve the boys in games and projects to keep them interested and at least relatively happy and pretty much under control. The first day I met my seventh graders, they had me in their thrall. I liked them immensely. I knew there would be no discipline problems. I found that I had no trouble with ninth graders either. I also found that learning to teach these students something in a thoughtful way would take time, although I did not predict it would take a lifetime.

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The Latin teacher, who taught in a room in a different corridor from where I taught, disappeared sometime in late November or early December. When I asked what had become of her, I learned

that she had been fired. As a new teacher, I was personally concerned. This could happen to me. I eventually learned, from a supervising teacher, that the Latin teacher had been fired for bending back students' fingers to control them. Apparently, she had bent fingers back until students had cried and become submissive in class, but reported the practice to their parents. Clearly, the two of us had been socialized into quite different methods of teaching. My school administration did not approve of the result of her socialization.

If the teacher is the only one who counts in these matters, then perhaps one practice, method, or paradigm is no better than any other. But if the learning of students counts, then there can be no question that some methods, practices, and even paradigms are better than others.

I think that there is no question that teachers whose classroom practice is dominated by one of the paradigms to teaching that Peter Smagorinsky adumbrates have been socialized into using them. But the fact of socialization does not render them equivalent. The teachers in the traditional program Peter describes did receive positive yearly evaluations, tenure, and opportunities for sabbaticals, but all of that positive feedback does not mean they were effective, only that their administrators did not know any better—which is not unusual—and so rewarded them.

It happens that this same school was the object of study by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as one of the several studies leading to his well-known discussion of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* Here is Csikszentmihalyi's description of optimal experience based on thousands of interviews and questionnaires with people in many widely diverse cultures and activities ranging from motorcycling among Japanese youth groups to mainstream scientific research and to meditation among elderly Koreans.

> When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention at least one, and often all, of the following. First, the experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing. Second, we must be able to concentrate on what we are doing. Third and fourth, the concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Fifth, one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life. Sixth, enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Seventh, concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over. Finally, the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours. The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it. (49)

Most of us have experienced such feelings on at least certain occasions. In the midst of such experience, one loses track of time and other responsibilities, even certain needs. It is as though everything else disappears from the radar of our conscious state.

Flow among Adolescents

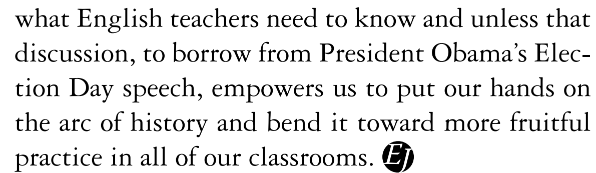
To study the occurrence of such experience among adolescents, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleague Reed Larson conducted research with high school students. At the traditional school whose English faculty Peter describes, a sample of 75 students carried beepers and were beeped randomly eight to ten times per day for a week. When beeped, students were to write where they were, what they were doing, and what they were thinking about. They were also asked to respond to semantic differential scales of seven or ten points about their emotional states, e.g., "alert——drowsy, happy——sad, active——passive" (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 52). Positive ends of the scales represent flow experience while negative ends indicate the opposite. The researchers' examination of more than 4,600 reports from students reveals that time in school is largely entropic. Individuals feel sad, passive, bored, disaffected, and wishing they were doing something else. In some activities, such as sports, music, and art, students reported much more often that they felt active, interested, happy, and pleased to be doing what they were doing. They also reported relatively positive affect in academic areas when they were engaged in group work or discussion.

The authors conclude that "schools are essentially machines for providing negative feedback. They are supposed to reduce deviance, to constrain the behavior and the minds of adolescents within straight and narrow channels" (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 198–99). Schools, for the most part, do not provide what the authors call *flow* experience; quite the contrary. These results are confirmed by the many other studies that show schools to be places in which students are surrounded by deserts of ennui (Goodlad; Hillocks, *Ways*; Nystrand et al.).

Whose Learning Counts Most?

If the teacher is the only one who counts in these matters, then perhaps one practice, method, or paradigm is no better than any other. But if the learning of students counts, then there can be no question that some methods, practices, and even paradigms are better than others.

At the same time, my argument supports the notion that urging teachers to use these "best" practices is probably silly. If they do not know how to use them and all the corollaries of their use, nearly all teachers will certainly fail to use best practices effectively. Peter suggests reflective practice as a substitute. The problem is that reflective practice is a part of the most complex paradigm. Efficient reflective practice is dependent on being able to construct clear objectives and their criteria, to evaluate outcomes in terms of the criteria, to identify reasons for failures, and to invent better approaches to reach the objectives. None of this is likely to happen unless we, as a community of teachers, administrators, and university people concerned about teacher effectiveness, have a serious discussion about what English teachers need to know and unless that discussion, to borrow from President Obama's Election Day speech, empowers us to put our hands on the arc of history and bend it toward more fruitful practice in all of our classrooms.



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