
To Write About Teaching, Keep Your Eyes and Ears Open

Focus on the classroom, the lives of students and teachers, and the interchange between them.

By Mike Rose

“Detail,” wrote Beat novelist Jack Kerouac, “is the life of literature.” And of education, as well: Detail can not only animate an education story, but provide insight into the thought processes of students and teachers.

These days, talk of teaching and learning is dominated by test scores, rankings, standards and guidelines, and about how student transience and socioeconomic status correlate with achievement. Such data are important but not the key to getting at what goes on in schools. For that, reporters need to use their training to keep their eyes and ears open – and focus on the transaction between student and teacher. Let me suggest four prisms for observation: the classroom itself, the ways teachers talk to students, the lives of students and the lives of teachers.



The room. Classrooms are so familiar to us that we can easily miss the significance of obvious things, like how desks or tables are arranged. So, Suggestion One: follow the anthropologist’s adage and try to make the classroom strange, unfamiliar.

I begin by sketching the room in my notes, starting at the door; sometimes, I’ll even take a photograph. I focus on details that reveal something about a teacher’s creativity and resourcefulness. For instance, in a third-grade bilingual classroom in the California border town of Calexico, teacher Elena Castro had set up learning stations – math, reading, art, etc. From the arrangement, I could see that a student’s day would mix whole-class instruction with rotation through the stations. I was struck by the way every part of the room had a purpose and enabled students to explore their interests and access areas where they needed help. Also, clear from

my sketch, Mrs. Castro had positioned her desk (“the teacher’s workshop,” she called it, revealing in itself) so that she could survey the room while privately attending to the student sitting alongside her. Finally, there was Mrs. Castro’s skill in using meager materials – old tape recorders; unmatched encyclopedia volumes; small, wobbly tables – to fashion a vibrant classroom.

Scientists sometimes say that nothing interesting goes on in a neat laboratory. I think the same could be said of classrooms. Look for the physical residue of learning. Are any books lying around open, and do you see them in places other than the bookshelf – for example, by the science displays or the plants and animals, if the classroom has them? Are there scraps of paper here and there with writing on them? What about the remnants of projects? Here’s a snapshot from a first-grade classroom in Baltimore:

The table itself was small and cluttered with the remnants of experiments past, the messiness of good science. There was a cluster of acorns and orange and yellow gourds, the head of a big sunflower, a bird’s nest, some stray twigs, the corpse of a newt – carefully laid out on cardboard and labeled – five or six small magnifying glasses, several Audubon Pocket Guides, and a pile of crisp maple leaves.

Teacher talk. As a teacher myself, I’m fascinated by the way talk can impede or advance learning. Watch how a teacher models the analysis of a problem. Does he think out loud? Walk the student through the process? Or simply tell the student what to do? Here’s an example from an electrical wiring class in Phoenix:

Hector, in a quarter-twist of his torso, arms over his head, is trying to fasten a conduit strap into tight quarters. “Mr. Padilla,” he moans, “the screw won’t go in. Dang. I can’t get leverage!” Jim Padilla rests his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, one hand on the rail, watching. “Try a smaller screwdriver, Hector.” Then, “Turn the hammer sideways.” Then, “No? Well start the hole with a nail.” Mr. Padilla intersperses these suggestions with homilies and exhortations: “Hector, there’s more than one way to get milk from a cow, verdad?” And, “I’m not gonna let you give up.” And, eventually, Hector does get the vexing strap affixed.

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Studies have found that the most common form of teacher-student interaction is this: The teacher asks a question, often factual (“Is freedom of speech a guaranteed right?”), a student answers (“Yes, it’s in the Bill of Rights.”) and the teacher evaluates (“That’s correct.”). This kind of questioning has its place, but if it predominates, learning, not to mention classroom vitality, is narrowed. Look for questioning that is interactive and opens up a wider range of thinking.

An ongoing study of mathematics instruction at UCLA is demonstrating that it’s not so much the teacher’s immediate response that counts – e.g., “How did you get that answer?” – but the question that comes after the student has explained her answer. I try to keep a record of the kinds of questions a teacher asks and get a sense of sequence. Rich questioning and exchange signals a teacher’s respect for students, and students pick that up; in my experience, the students then mirror that respect for each other. Intellectual respect is a wonderful topic to write about. See if you can sense it – or its absence – in the air.

The students. Whatever you do, make sure to spend time with students. Find out about their responsibilities and duties in jobs, hobbies, church and home. Ask what languages they speak, whether they’ve migrated, if they travel, what kind of knowledge they’re exposed to at home, from child-rearing practices to craft traditions to parents’ talk about work. I’m always curious whether they have opportunities in the classroom to use the skills and knowledge they develop outside of school. Conversely, I want to know if they have opportunities to use school knowledge out in the world, bringing a new perspective to the familiar.

Try to talk with students while they’re working on something; general questions about schooling will likely elicit the generic “It’s boring” or “It’s OK.” But if you can get students to talk about what they’re doing while they’re doing it, you might get some insight into learning.

The teacher. Teaching is such a familiar occupation – we’ve all been exposed to lots of it – that we can fall into the trap of thinly representing the work, missing some of the skill involved. So, as with classrooms, I recommend the anthropologist’s strategy of making the familiar strange.

First, ask yourself what it would require to do what you’re observing. Take, for example, the work of the primary teacher. Most depictions address her kindness and patience, or her nice way with children, or the problems the children bring into the classroom. But few

focus on the work’s cognitive demands and complex interactions. Here’s a moment from a primary grade in Los Angeles:

Ms. Cowan was all over the floor, on her haunches, kneeling, turning quickly on her knees, stretching backward, extending her line of sight. “Count those out, Joey.” “Watch, Sebastian, what happens when I do this.” “Mantas, show Brittany what you just did.” It is remarkable, this ability that good primary teachers have: to take in a room in a glance, to assess in a heartbeat, to, with a word to two, provide feedback, make a connection, pull a child into a task.

Second, ask teachers about specific classroom events. “I was interested in that question you asked,” you might say. “What were you trying to achieve with it?” Or, “Is there something about that student that led you to ask it?” Or “I saw this, what do you make of it? Do you remember what you were thinking?” Questions like these can reveal teachers’ broad strategies and goals, give insight into their moment-to-moment decisions and reveal their underlying values and beliefs. Third, explore these values by asking teachers about their own histories, particularly what school was like for them. I also find it fruitful to ask about their first year of teaching: the big surprises and revelations, the crucial role an older teacher played. I’m interested, too, in the things they struggle with, their professional dilemmas, or the kid who has them tied up in knots.

I find these stories compelling, especially the ways teachers’ histories and experiences interact with the work they do in the classroom. There are all sorts of human interest moments – a teacher’s first-year hell, a teacher going back to work in his community – but I also look for intellectual and ideological complexity: the teacher trying to reconcile her fundamentalist religious beliefs with Darwin, the teacher who creatively integrates into her curriculum standardized tests that she deplores. These are stories worth telling. ■

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