Always Teach with the Door Open

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A Mutual Escape

An open classroom door signals so many things, offers so many opportunities for interaction and intrusion: the messiness that is real life invigorating my classroom. Yet, as a new teacher, I kept my classroom door open to allow me to escape. What sane person, I thought, would close herself in a room with 30 adolescents whose last desire in the world was to listen to someone talk about Shakespeare’s immortal plays or Donne’s arcane poetry?

But as I matured—in every way, not just as a teacher—I came to realize that this open door could mean much more. Certainly, the open door allows the easy flow of people in and out. If it started as a psychological escape route for me, perhaps my earliest students took similar solace in it. Since my pedagogy in those early days rested firmly on the belief that I was to fill their heads with knowledge and listen to them give it back to me as accurately as possible, they probably took great comfort in that open door. They were mostly docile and obedient, but, at times, rebellion jettisoned them out the door. Some managed to escape through misbehavior because, in my early years, my classroom management consisted of asserting my power over them (Kreisberg).

I clearly remember the first time one of my sophomores had had just about enough of my heavy-handed directions about improving his behavior, and he simply yelled right back at me. Momentarily astounded, I recovered enough to evict him from class; but reflection, as always, proved to be insightful. I realized he had pressed the right button just to get away from me, but I had no idea how to change. It was easier to blame the student for his inattention, his lack of preparation, his... (litany is a faculty room standard). My open door symbolized an escape hatch. Students and teacher alike sought the open door as a respite from the stifling educational practice within.

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Back then, my upbringing, academic training, and lifestyle all demanded “right” answers, tight-fitting interpretations, closed and finished understandings, and safety in given wisdom. I bought books that told me what novels and plays “meant.” I relied on the teacher’s edition of my poetry book to give me the “right” answers. My education had taught me that my own voice was unreliable, and I was passionate about giving my students the best that others had to offer. The ambiguous open classroom door—resented both an escape for me from the students’ vital, demanding, inquisitive, flesh-and-blood presence in the classroom as well as an opening into the students’ world. I still did not want to go with them out that door into the scary world beyond my single interpretation of it. I ignored—or silenced—my ideas, preferring instead the safety of authoritative citations that would validate my teaching.

My students must have been bored with this packaged pabulum, but they memorized and regurgitated and probably went elsewhere for inspiration, enjoyment, and relevance. One day when my students were taking a test on Romeo and Juliet, one of my more capable students raised her hand to draw me to her desk. She looked up at me somewhat challengingly and asked, “Is it OK if we can’t remember exactly what
you said?” I am ashamed to admit I was proud that she was trying to imitate me; after all, was I not supposed to be the oracle? But it did not escape my attention that I was never the teacher asked to be class sponsor or sought for advice and counsel.

**An Invitation**

Life is its own teacher, and mine rattled the bars of my self-erected cage with death and divorce. My classroom actually became a life-saver: the students expected me to continue even when I felt nothing held meaning anymore. They were still there. They looked at me expectantly, faithfully awaiting my next pronouncement. I remember the day I returned to school after my mother had died, and their faces, mirroring my loss, beseeched me to let them in. “We are here with you; we want to accept all of you, not just the you that is teacher,” their compassionate abiding seemed to say. It was the first time I felt the frisson of excitement heralding an actual, human relationship connecting my private being with that of my students. They showed me that day that my classroom, our classroom, could hold us together. I plunged ahead: with them, with life.

With my survival tied to theirs, I began reading journals, picking up books, and developing my ability to reflect on my practice. One of Spencer Kagan’s earliest books on cooperative learning made relinquishing my stranglehold on my classroom possible. I embraced his ideas and sometimes (gasp!) took myself off center stage to allow students to perform, share, and demonstrate. My colleagues were another stimulating resource. As I prepared to teach Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* by discussing it with my female colleagues, I found that these women emancipated my voice. They listened to my tentative offerings, and their graciousness strengthened my foray into a less authoritative classroom. I surprised myself when I accepted my students’ alternate interpretations of the canon, soon delighting in their ability to defend their newfound voices from my New Critical stance. Literature became capable of stimulating a world of related interpretations, each redolent with other ways of seeing (Jardine et al. 75). My students demanded that the open door mean something more than egress. Their questions, skepticism, frustration, exasperation, and dedication to their own views cracked my carapace. I realized I did not need to escape from them through that open door; I needed to run with them through those academic doors, and out into the world.

My students taught me to learn with them; the open door transformed into an invitation. It signaled that, although we were all here by the machinations of the institutional demand for Carnegie Units, we could open this classroom to conversations that were not limited to the knowledge in the books on the shelves or in my educated head. Nothing fell apart, the ground held firm, the heavens continued to circle around rogue interpretations of Donne’s “Valediction Forbidding Mourning.” More days than not, we learned together. The literature became a springboard for writing and speaking our own worlds.

**A Portal to Our World**

Opening those academic doors meant open-ended discussions. I dutifully created and wrote daily objectives on the board, but I spent much more pedagogic thinking about the questions I would ask, never knowing exactly where they might lead. I experimented with different approaches to classroom discussion, but usually the conversation surpassed whatever artificial structure I had created. Our faculty had been studying student learning styles based on Carl Jung’s four continuums of human personality with Hanson, Silver, Strong, and Associates, and I used this paradigm to create questions. I invited the reticent into the flow; I urged the flighty to think more deeply; I directed provocative questions to the disengaged; I reassured the struggling; and I attempted to create a classroom atmosphere that was an invitation. Come in and find yourself in this literature. Come in and help construct the knowledge that is never finished, never a final answer, and always individual, contextualized, relevant, and malleable (Greene).

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In one of my last years of teaching, I proposed something irregular for my seniors’ final exam. I had read James McBride’s *The Color of Water* and was sensing a
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nascent belief about the importance of those liminal spaces in education that define us (which I am still struggling to integrate into a clear vision). I wanted something for them that would be far more meaningful than a test. Together we devised a plan for individual presentations on self-selected, personally relevant pieces of literature to demonstrate what they had learned throughout the year. They suggested visual and auditory components, and they levered open my initial definition of “literature” to include children’s literature, song lyrics, and even prayers. The presentations that week vibrated with compassion, laughter, awe, and tears—all the human emotions that literature helps us understand. And two years later, the seniors asked me to be the graduation speaker.

Behind all this energy was my own maturation. “Understanding,” notes Hans-Georg Gadamer, “is an adventure, and, like any adventure, it involves risk” (141). I opened my classroom door one day to realize that I was no longer teaching, or even interested in teaching. I was eager, instead, to experience this day, with these students, in this room. The “Zone of Between” (Aoki 161) had slipped in the door unseen. The curriculum guide had become just that: a guide, rather than a bible or a recipe. Interestingly, classroom discipline became far easier to maintain as students felt recognized, validated, and valued. Teaching without an answer key is risky, but the unfinished nature of what we understand as knowledge demands that it be a participatory project, an almost-daily re-creation of a world of ideas that responds to my students.

The cultural heritage of British, American, and world literature, the marvelous gift that is writing, the immeasurable advantage that is reading, and the heartfelt nature of speaking one’s truth: all these language arts must be taught with the door open.

Works Cited

After 25 years of secondary English language arts teaching, Mary Grace Snyder worked in staff development, focusing on the needs of new teachers. She earned her PhD from the University of Maryland in 2009, and she continues her work with teachers as an adjunct education professor at Johns Hopkins University, Hood College, as well as the University of Maryland.