

Wobbling in Public: Supporting New and Experienced Teachers

This article describes an approach for supporting preservice teachers as they prepare to meet the inevitable challenges of teaching.

Cindy: I remember you told me that you were the whitest person some of your students saw during school.

Antero: Yep. At my school in Los Angeles for many of my students, their only interaction with white people was their teachers. And a lot of those interactions were really negative interactions. A lot of my students hated school and implicit behind that is that they hate their teachers in those schools who are representations of power.

Cindy: I spent eleven years as a high school teacher in Oklahoma and my classes were far, far more diverse than they are here. . . . Certainly weren't the same demographics as at the school where you taught, but much more diverse than the school I grew up in, which was all white and Native American. And I wanted to be a good teacher. I was aware that some of my students might have the reactions that you were talking about, and I pretty desperately wanted to prove to them: I'm not one of "those" teachers.

Even though I didn't know the term at the time, I wanted to be a "culturally responsive" teacher. I wanted to know about my students and to teach in ways that would help them have success in school, but I got stymied sometimes. And I still feel this tension in my own teaching: I want to be culturally responsive, but how do I do that without making assumptions that a student is from this background, therefore they have these needs?

We conducted the above conversation in front of our college students in Cindy's Teaching Composition class at Colorado State University in an effort to reproduce our informal conversations about similar questions and issues arising in our teaching. An overwhelming percentage of our students, most who are studying to be teachers, reflect the demographics of the larger teaching population in that they are mostly white, middle class, and female (Feistritzer). We know from anecdotal evidence that many of these students are reticent to talk about issues of cultural and linguistic diversity in class or, on the other hand, are weary of such discussions, feeling like their education classes put an undue emphasis on issues of privilege. When we ask students to respond to readings that focus on such issues in reference to teaching, many see little relation to pedagogy, but consider them to be personal indictments instead. In written reflections on these readings or on course evaluations, students complain, "Why do we have to talk about *this* all the time? Why can't we just learn how to teach English?"

Suspecting that our students might therefore be reluctant to publically share these views in class—as part of a group discussion, for instance—we decided to re-create the above conversations for them. We then used our conversation as a jumping-off point for discussing ways that cultural positionality can shape teachers' literacy instruction. In doing so, we attempted to demonstrate that we, even as experienced teachers, continue to wrestle with our commitment to teach in culturally

responsive ways (Gay). Because there are no easy answers in this territory, our questions persist.

How, for instance, does Antero address concerns about cultural positionality while preparing a mostly white, female, middle-class population when he is often the only person of color in the room? How does Cindy make claims about “what diverse students need” without essentializing various student populations or lumping them together as a homogeneous group? Moreover, how do the few students of color who are studying to be preservice teachers in our classes participate in these conversations without taking on the responsibility of “representing” others who share their particular backgrounds?

In this article we highlight how considering questions such as these, especially from the perspectives of career teachers, can help support communities of teachers still in the developmental stages of their practice. In doing so, we (1) challenge preexisting stereotypes of “master” and “novice” teachers; (2) offer a new framework for identifying and working through challenging areas of one’s teaching that we call Pose/Wobble/Flow; and (3) underscore how the practice of public reflection is sorely needed in today’s teacher education programs.

We Are Masters and Novices All

While risky, sharing our own challenges as career teachers with preservice teachers has allowed us to reframe the many challenges we continue to face as experienced educators, especially concerning privilege and positionality in classrooms. After observing the conversation we excerpted above, our students reflected that it helped them think more deeply about “unpacking” privilege (McIntosh). We were somewhat surprised to discover that conducting the conversation publically was equally helpful for us: it illuminated that something was missing from our classes, namely language that acknowledges teaching as a continued process of growth and struggle. Instead of positioning students and teachers on a “novice-mastery” binary (i.e., they are novices, we are experts), we want students to see us, even as career teachers, moving along a spectrum of growth.

Many, if not most, of our students, however, are hopeful that if they study long and hard enough, they can transform from error-prone novices into

expert teachers, regardless of their teaching contexts. Entering into the admittedly daunting profession of teaching, they seek a foolproof “playbook” for their practice (Ellis and Holt). Along with other teacher educators, we worry that the notion that a boxed set of “best practices” exists out there somewhere only reinforces this belief (Fecho, *Is This English?*; O’Donnell-Allen). Students’ desire to believe this myth is understandable. The realization that their hard work, while important, will be insufficient to guarantee positive results is unsettling.

Yet seasoned teachers know that feeling unsettled is an inevitable element of practice. Thus an equally dangerous myth is that we will ultimately “arrive” as master teachers. On that magical day, we will know all the answers to all the questions, and our well-behaved students will thrive! For us at least, that day has yet to come. Although we’ve gradually learned that some teaching strategies and assignments are more likely to succeed than others, we also know that because contexts change (sometimes from one class period to the next), students change, and *we* change, our practice must change accordingly. The most thoughtful career teachers we know acknowledge that they, too, have chosen a profession that requires continual renewal and growth. This growth necessarily includes humbling steps of frustration.

As we mentioned previously, for the preservice teachers with whom we work, one particular challenge looms large. While the number of white teachers has actually increased from 69 percent in 1986 to 84 percent as of 2011 (Feistritz), the student population is becoming more racially and linguistically diverse. In Colorado, for instance, the number of English Language Learners has grown 260 percent in recent years, as opposed to 16 percent growth in the overall student population (Office of Language, Culture, and Equity); national statistics mirror similar changes (Shin and Kominski). Consequently, in addition to meeting the needs of students with cultural backgrounds similar to their own, our future teachers must also learn how to teach students whose culture and first language they may not share (Ortmeier-Hooper).

Along with others (e.g., Christensen), we have long shared the view that both student and curricular diversity is a source of strength rather than a liability. It enriches our community, allows

us to consider other perspectives with respect, and thus enlarges our worldview. Depending on how we view the jarring contrast between the homogeneity of the teaching population and the heterogeneity of the student population, we can see an insurmountable obstacle or an inviting opportunity for growth, not just for our students but also for us as teachers. Both preservice and practicing teachers need tools for recognizing our cultural positionality so that we can adjust our practice accordingly. Regardless of cultural background, our identities and the changing nature of classrooms shape our instruction; furthermore, what looks “masterful” one year may not be even close to as effective as the next.

By observing our own perpetual growth in these areas with preservice teachers, we intend to demonstrate that we are masters and novices all. We can simultaneously hold expertise in some areas while experiencing acute need in others. But by teaching intentionally from a point of inquiry and by joining colleagues with similar concerns, we can deepen our understanding about practice (Nieto). The struggle, however, is key, and we need a language to describe it.

Pose/Wobble/Flow: A Vocabulary for Teacher Growth

With the above challenges in mind, we have developed a model called Pose/Wobble/Flow to help teachers—preservice and practicing alike—to see their professional growth as a lifelong process (Garcia and O'Donnell-Allen). We use the terms *pose*, *wobble*, and *flow* to parallel the practice of yoga, wherein growth is recursive, not linear. Regardless of their respective levels of expertise, yoga practitioners consistently attempt new poses (e.g., tree, plank, warrior) to increase their muscular strength, flexibility, and sense of well-being. When attempting a new pose or holding a familiar one for an extended period of time, they inevitably wobble. Rather than giving up in frustration, however, committed practitioners view wobble as a sign that they are growing stronger, expanding the capacities of body and mind. Persisting through wobble signals a disciplined commitment to that process and projects a confidence that with time and practice, one can eventually achieve a modicum of flow between poses (much as in the sun salutation sequence

in vinyasa yoga, one flows through poses). Because yoga is a lifelong practice, practitioners must engage in repeated cycles of pose, wobble, and flow—moving from novice to master and back again—if they are to reap the benefits of growth and renewal.

Similarly, teachers can take up stances, or poses, toward their practice, reflect on areas in which they wobble, and then identify strategies for attaining flow, those provisional moments that mark professional progress. In this article, we offer brief personal examples of the Pose/Wobble/Flow cycle in relation to privilege and positionality to illustrate how this distinctive framework can support the growth of teachers across a developmental spectrum.

Pose: Committing to Professional Growth

Taking on a pose is the first step: teachers must *name* the practices they want to improve. They might commit to providing optimal support for the literacy development of ELLs, for instance, or honing the use of formative assessment, or creating a more equitable learning environment for all students. We have found that approaching our teaching from an inquiry stance is essential

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to identifying poses that can spur on cycles of Pose/Wobble/Flow (Cochran-Smith and Lytle). In fact, practitioner inquiry might even be considered an all-encompassing pose, especially when practiced in the company of like-minded colleagues.

This article articulates a pose we are currently highlighting in our own teaching: we want to be mindful of how our own cultural positionality shapes our classroom practice. This shared pose materialized one day when we were routinely discussing how things were going in our teaching and discovered that two incidents connected to the thorny issues of privilege had recently occurred in our respective classrooms. The incidents were still needling both of us, so we determined it was important enough to take on this pose and wobble together.

Wobble: Moving in Parallel with Students

We are borrowing the concept of *wobble* from Bob Fecho, who uses it to characterize those discombobulating instances in the classroom that mark moments

of learning, such as when an unanswerable question hangs in the air (Fecho, *Teaching*). Contrary to what our preservice teachers believe, we haven't gotten teaching down to a perfect science; indeed, we wobble on a regular basis, refining and reconfiguring our approaches to teaching. In addition to confronting issues of positionality, we sometimes struggle with maintaining student interest, for instance, or using technology to support student learning. However, students often assume we move seamlessly from one class to another, with little struggle. Like other career teachers, we know this isn't the case; even years into the profession, we are constantly noticing new aspects of our practice that demand refinement. We try to convey this recognition to our students, not as a sign of weakness, but as evidence of our commitment to professional growth.

In class, we share our poses and wobbles pragmatically with our students: "This week, I am wobbling with increasing the diversity of voices in our discussions." This is not merely a humbling rhetorical device but an effort to shift future teachers' understanding of proficiency and growth. The notion of "best practices" so common to the texts and rhetoric of teaching in teacher education programs suggests that teachers know the singular "right" way to teach. We mean to reset these assumptions for our students. As Cindy tells her students, "You gotta wobble if you ever want to flow."

In their written reflections and class discussions, the notion of wobbling has resonated powerfully with students because they share an uncertainty in grasping the methods and pedagogies they are studying. By articulating our poses and being forthcoming about how we ourselves are wobbling, we can metacognitively model our thinking processes and the kind of dialogue we expect our students to engage in long after they move on to their own classrooms.

Public Wobble

In addition to emphasizing the cyclical nature of Pose/Wobble/Flow, we want students to experience the value of sharing, commiserating with, and learning from a community of colleagues that extends far beyond their university classes. As often as possible, we ask them to make their thinking and dialogue public. Both of us use online forums to make class conversations accessible to outside

audiences. Additionally, Antero has asked students to use the venue of his personal blog, <http://theamericancrawl.com>, to interact and reflect on various educational issues relevant to the class. In one such public reflection, a student wobbled with the relevancy of the work in his education classes:

I understand the need to teach planning strategies, but I feel like the way it is done is more for the professors than for the students in the college class. If that is the case don't tell me things like, "this is mainly for you," because if you do I will write lessons that I can understand and explain to someone and not lessons that you want me to write. I don't think I will ever write down a full mini-lesson to the extent that I am asked to do for assignments in class. There is no need for me to write down in what ways I will assess student work, I will just do those things, mind you this is just one example. I guess my question is how many teachers actually write out the mini lessons to the degree that we as students are asked to do in the real world?

Antero subsequently acknowledged that he did not write up every lesson plan he taught in his high school classrooms with the same depth and specificity as those he was required to write by his university professors. Cindy didn't either. Yet both of us are confident that the detailed lesson plans our professors required us to write in our preservice programs helped us learn the *thinking* process behind instructional planning. Becoming adept at this thinking process has allowed us to adapt our teaching in line with varying classroom contexts, sometimes from one period to the next. The result is a valuable pose we attempt to practice to this day; that is, rather than just "winging it," we plan our instruction mindfully with student needs and learning goals in mind.

We see similar benefits in requiring students to engage in public wobble with a robust community of experienced, digitally connected educators present on Digital Is, an online network of the National Writing Project (<http://digitalis.nwp.org>). In addition to the opportunity to interact with experienced educators confronting various teaching challenges, users will find a plethora of instructional resources on the site. Cindy often assigns students to read and respond to Digital Is resources just as they do with other print-based

texts in her class. When her Teaching Composition class was wobbling with how white teachers can effectively teach a diverse population of students, she assigned “Using Media to (Re)Claim the Hood: Essential Questions and Powerful English Pedagogy,” a resource created by Danielle Filipiak, formerly a secondary English teacher in inner-city Detroit. The class’s online comments resulted first in written interactions with Danielle on Digital Is, then in a “face-to-face” meeting with her via a Google Hangout during Cindy’s class. The interchange was so mutually beneficial, Danielle went on to create “Using Digital Is to Explore Writing Instruction with Preservice Teachers: A Love Story,” a new resource on Digital Is documenting their shared experience of creating a “dialogic ecosystem.”

Recently for the final project in his Teaching Reading class, Antero even assigned his preservice teachers to create Digital Is materials in small groups so that they could synthesize and share a semester’s worth of their thinking. In a resource called “Teaching Reading: A Semester of Inquiry,” students explored many topics, including the relationships among literacy, power, and diversity; the impact of digital and multimodal literacies on reading practices; the connections between standards and textbooks; and some practical methods for teaching reading. Two of these students have gone on to write frankly about the challenges of that collaboration in an e-book on connected learning in classrooms (Geier and Neisler).

Although some students have resisted broadcasting the vulnerability inherent in their Vygotskian moments of uncertainty and growth, we continue to ask them to engage in public wobble for the same reason we ask them to write detailed lesson plans. We want our preservice teachers to experience the value of collaborative thinking with an expanded community of colleagues early on in their careers so that they will become accustomed to sharing their thinking in online networks, at conferences, and for journals like this one—even when they are no longer required to do so for a grade.

Flow: “Indistinguishable from Magic”


In “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination,” science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke comments, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is

indistinguishable from magic” (21). The same is true for flow. Just as we are familiar with the wobbling process, we know from personal experience that “flow” is achievable though temporary, given the always shifting contexts of teaching. We most likely would have left the profession long ago if this were not the case. But the same baffling feelings of wonder that Clarke uses to describe technology also apply to what masterful teaching can look like from the eyes of overwhelmed new teachers.

That is why just as students benefit from seeing us wobble, they also benefit from seeing us flow. Experienced teachers need to model the satisfaction of arriving at moments of provisional insight because it is hard evidence that wobbling is worth it. Whether by observing reenactments of conversations about cultural privilege or by watching classroom teachers struggle through interpreting a poem in real time, students need to see

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how we move from being novices to temporary masters. They need to be disabused of the idea that master teachers move directly from pose to flow; otherwise, our skilled work looks just like magic.

We are confident that all teachers who remain in the profession intentionally engage in cycles of Pose/Wobble/Flow. They continue to take on worthwhile poses, to engage in wobble, and as a result, to reap the benefits of experiencing flow. They do so knowing that they will never be masters once and for all; rather, they will move from novice to master to novice again and again as new challenges arise. To be sure, the transformations captured by the Pose/Wobble/Flow model require hard work. But as our classrooms become more diverse and as cultural and technological shifts continue to shape literacy practices, *all* teachers must be prepared to take on new poses that will benefit students’ learning and our own learning as well. We suggest beginning with the lessons of yoga: a deep breath and a deliberate stance are what we need to maintain balance and growth over time. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

As a class, students evaluate a nonfiction or realistic fiction text for its cultural relevance to themselves personally and as a group. They first write about a story that they identify with and share their responses as a group. As a class, they then analyze the cultural relevance of a selected text using an online tool. After completing this full-class activity, students search for additional, relevant texts; each chooses one and writes a review of the texts that he or she chose. Selected texts can be any nonfiction or realistic fiction piece—books, documentaries, television programs, and films—and students are encouraged to choose texts that are personally relevant to themselves and their peers. This lesson is an especially powerful choice for English language learners. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/assessing-cultural-relevance-exploring-1003.html>