

The Messy Teaching Conversation: Toward a Model of Collegial Reflection, Exchange, and Scholarship on Classroom Problems

➤ Heidi L. Johnsen (New Voice), Michelle Pacht (New Voice), Phyllis van Slyck (New Voice), and Ting Man Tsao

This essay argues that only by sharing our mistakes and uncertainty can we fully reflect on our own process as teachers, only by understanding our process can we begin to identify the many factors that contribute to classroom messes in the first place, and only by acknowledging the perpetual messiness of our practice can we fully engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

As a young teacher, I yearned for the day when I would know my craft so well, be so competent, so experienced, and so powerful that I could walk into any classroom without feeling afraid. But now, in my late fifties, I know that day will never come.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

College faculty should have no difficulty identifying with Parker Palmer's humble admission in his classic text, *The Courage to Teach*. Teaching at LaGuardia Community College in New York, for instance, we—Heidi Johnsen, Michelle Pacht, Phyllis van Slyck, and Ting Man Tsao—are frontline workers struggling to meet the needs of a diverse student body, who “by any statistical category such as race, ethnicity, lack of academic preparedness, poverty, [family obligations], or immigration status are not only the hardest-to-serve, but the least likely to succeed” (Mellow 8). In helping our students master critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, we face numerous problems, few of which can be entirely overcome: we misjudge students' abilities and backgrounds; we try out promising but untested pedagogies and materials; we get overwhelmed by large class sizes, heavy workloads, and insufficient resources; we lose the balance between maintaining high expectations and being flexible with students.

Yet, whether we teach in junior or senior colleges, we appear less humble than Palmer in workshops, conferences, and journals. We more often than not represent our teaching in the best possible light, leaving little room for missteps—for the acknowledgment and discussion of uncertainty or errors. Indeed, it seems the only acceptable way to discuss a setback is as part of a larger narrative, one where a “failure,” if we dare use the word, is simply a precursor to success, a way of highlighting a challenge overcome. In our narratives, we gloss over our teaching messes,

mentioning them only in passing rather than fully representing them. We eschew the unexpected, messy, and slippery process through which our classes unfold in favor of clean solutions, well-designed lessons, and so-called “best practices.” We are quick to assume “the stance that has figured it all out” (McKinney 23) and bypass the endless trials and errors that all good teaching necessarily entails.

Our “success narratives” can be inspiring, but they can also be stifling. As Kinsey McKinney admits in *TETYC*, she dreads “faculty-lounge conversations” and feels “awful” when browsing journal pages that offer “solutions to every conceivable problem” (22). For she is not invited to experience the journey the author took in solving the problem; she has no opportunity to “understand how [her] own practice could be such a mess” (22). Not allowing ourselves to admit to failings does more than make us dishonest and give credence to the cultural implication that to fail means *you* are a failure. It denies, or at least limits, the possibility of reflection on the teaching and learning process.

This wall of silence about pedagogical problems is deemed all the more unfortunate in light of recent efforts to encourage college faculty to pursue the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (e.g. TYCA; Tinberg, Duffy, and Mino; Huber and Hutchings). Working at LaGuardia, one of the growing number of community colleges that *requires* scholarship for tenure and promotion, we (the authors) feel as though we were liberated by the Two-Year College English Association’s (TYCA) recent “Report of the Committee on the Two-Year College Teacher-Scholar: *Research and Scholarship in the Two-Year College*.” Juggling teaching, service, and scholarship commitments, we embrace the report’s highlight on “the scholarship-teaching connection” (TYCA 8); we agree that we can, through reflective practice, engage in scholarly inquiry and improve our teaching.

However, when we reflect, it is still difficult to follow Randy Bass’s call to change the status of our teaching problem “from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation.” Teaching, after all, is considered our “primary function” at LaGuardia, as in many other teaching institutions; “excellent performance” in teaching is the first requirement that we must fulfill for tenure and promotion (Human Resources Department 14). Our college does encourage the SoTL; however, exposing classroom problems, not as something already solved, but as something for “ongoing investigation,” can be risky for us, especially if we are untenured or working toward promotion.¹ In fact, untenured and junior faculty establish their records of “excellence” in teaching by staging perceptibly faultless (or almost faultless) one-hour classes for their observers in a number of semesters until they become full professors. In tenure and promotion documents, we have to reflect on and assess our own teaching, but when it comes to pedagogical problems or missteps, we feel pressured to frame them as matters already resolved, rather than puzzling problems for ongoing inquiry. Institutionally, then, we face a fundamental obstacle to breaking the wall of silence about our messes, an obstacle that we think prevents us from honestly reflecting on our day-to-day work without fear, from deepening our understandings of complex classroom dynamics through public scholarly exchanges. This wall of

silence, in short, hinders our whole-hearted engagement in the SoTL movement despite its value for the college and students.

We need to break this wall of silence, but how? How can we create a safe, collegial space not only for identifying our classroom problems but also for reflecting on them as scholarship? How can we share and learn from our messy teaching processes—as McKinney suggests—without feeling (too) vulnerable? For over a year, the four of us have been engaging in what we would now call a Messy Teaching Conversation. We have had ups and downs, doubts and differences, but we think that we have moved toward a model of collaborative faculty reflection on classroom problems that valorizes process over product, inquiry over solution.

The Messy Teaching Conversation

The conversation was partly inspired by Lee Shulman’s exercise in the peer review of teaching that asks faculty to document and reflect on “a telling episode or some incident of classroom practice that reveals something distinctive about your approach to teaching your field to your students” (*Teaching* 179). Having facilitated a discussion of such incidents in a faculty seminar,² Heidi and Ting Man found the exercise helpful in moving faculty from making generalizations to focusing on the particulars of our teaching. But having had our fill of “success stories,” we craved instead the moments in class when, despite our best-laid plans, things go amiss. So we invited colleagues to present their messy moments in a roundtable discussion (sponsored by the Composition II Committee), aware that the request invited risk. In fact, when announcing the event at a department meeting, Heidi felt the need to joke, “Now, I know none of *you* has ever had a messy moment, but perhaps you know someone who has.” However, the roundtable was unexpectedly well received. Both senior and junior faculty members volunteered to present, and we all learned from the honest reflections—including the knowing laughter. We believe we opened the door to more reflective exchanges in our department.

Encouraged by the warm reception of the roundtable, some of the presenters—the four authors—decided to turn our individual presentations into an act of collaborative scholarship. We each wrote a reflective memo on the messy teaching moment we had presented, and we collaborated on this introduction and conclusion. We then circulated, critiqued, and revised our drafts. We discussed, we disagreed, we paused because of our teaching and service commitments, but we continued to think about not only our classroom “messiness” but also our very process of focusing on such “messes” in the larger context of higher education.

We didn’t know that the joint writing would prove to be more challenging than the roundtable (which was short and sweet). Our unconscious reluctance to focus on the problems without jumping to solutions was a factor, but our greatest difficulty lay in the very complex nature of daily classroom messes. It takes deep reflection on our own, as well as critical but trusting dialogue among colleagues, to better represent and understand what a mess is like, why it happens, and how it unfolds.

In addition, as we read the feedback provided by *TETYC* editor Jeff Sommers and other readers, we have discovered yet more layers of difficulty. We find that, as trained academics, we are so used to writing smooth scholarly arguments that we inadvertently cleaned up some of the teaching messiness we had purported to represent.

We are also reminded that we have not clearly defined what “mess” means, and we are pointed to Tassoni and Thelin’s “Blundering the Hero Narrative,” which, like our present article, is also committed to challenging the “success story” or, in their words, “the teacher-hero narrative” (5). Tassoni and Thelin distinguish between two types of pedagogical errors: 1) blunders are mistakes from which the teacher learns something and gains “a better understanding of blunders themselves”; 2) bumbles are mistakes that “provided no insights for teachers” (2–3). As the following individual reflections show, our “messes” were mostly bumbles at the beginning, but through our Messy Teaching Conversation of over a year, we are in the process of turning these bumbles into blunders. In this light, then, our terms—“messy teaching,” “messes,” “messiness,” “problems,” “missteps,” and so on—are situated somewhere between the two, and our goal is to put all these messes through a collaborative critical thinking process so that they will become more like blunders, and less like bumbles, to benefit our scholarly pedagogical growth and to contribute to the larger SoTL.

After a year of conversation, we still have more questions than answers. Yet, during the process, we believe we have turned what Lee Shulman calls our “pedagogical solitude” into a “community property” (“Teaching”), which we are now sharing with you. This community property, we hope, will invite others to participate in discussions about messy but nonetheless good, and good but nonetheless messy, teaching practices of the twenty-first century.

A Mess with Primary Documents

Heidi L. Johnsen

When I realized that as co-chair of the Composition II Committee sponsoring a roundtable discussion of “messy teaching” I would have to be one of the presenters, the biggest problem I faced was choosing the mess I’d share. Over the course of ten or so years, I’d witnessed plenty of messes in my classrooms, but in choosing a moment I could admit hadn’t gone perfectly, I leaned toward a problem that had since been “solved” in some way. I knew that I couldn’t share a moment that was still messy. Even in that safe space of shared faculty reflection that I was intent on providing, I, the organizer, was careful to choose something I could represent as “fixed.” Not consciously. Well, not overtly so. In my untenured mind, I knew the importance of representing myself as a problem solver.

The particular mess I chose was the first time I asked my freshman composition students to write about a primary document from the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives housed within LaGuardia Community College. The historians at the archives had found a pamphlet published by the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1945 about

a proposed World War II monument in Brooklyn. The thirty-eight-page pamphlet describes a contest to choose the best design for the memorial, complete with a proposed timeline for the monument's construction and descriptions of the winning entries. Since the theme for the course was monuments and memorials in New York City, the detailed pamphlet was a perfect fit. I thought students would have an easy time relating the ideas they saw in the pamphlet to what was (and is) happening with the September 11th memorial.

Furthermore, one of the key skills on which I focused in this class was the ability to analyze texts—including various essays, advertisements, and photos relating to the course theme—and identify the purpose of each text along with techniques used by the author in conveying that purpose. By modeling the process and helping them move from group analysis to individual work, I believed my students had slowly developed the skills to analyze texts. I thought that after an hour-long orientation to the archives and a brief discussion about the differences between primary and secondary sources, students would be able to analyze the pamphlet and write a thoughtful argument.

So I was shocked when I read my students' essays a few weeks later. Almost every essay was a summary of the text, not the required analysis. This, in itself, is not so unusual; moving from summary to analysis is difficult in the best circumstances, but the summaries indicated that the students hadn't really understood the text. Moreover, it was clear from reading their essays that the students didn't know how this text fit in with the class theme, and they surely didn't know what I wanted them to write about. While they struggled, students said little, if anything, about these difficulties, and since I thought I'd prepared them sufficiently, I did not follow up, as I should have. Only when I read my students' essays did I understand the difficulty they had had.

As a new faculty member at LaGuardia, I was part of a group of faculty working with the archives educators to incorporate primary sources in our composition courses. I was happy to do it since the project seemed like an excellent opportunity to expose students to specific moments in New York City history and teach them critical reading skills, but I didn't really know *how* to prepare students for this unique experience. Looking back, I don't think I fully understood that I had to do something special by way of preparation. My own literary training as an early Americanist means I work with primary documents often, but now I think my experiences actually worked against me in preparing my students. I'd forgotten that reading little-known primary documents is very different from reading other texts with more familiar contexts, and it wasn't until I started writing this article and researching how others use primary sources that I realized just how big a mess I'd made. For example, Katherine R. Morgan writes in her article "Using Primary Sources to Build a Community of Thinkers" that when teachers gently introduce students to the practice of using primary sources in the classroom, it can "offer valuable opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking in all fields of study" (69). But the process must be gradual and careful, or students don't gain much benefit. I realized this later through reflecting on the experience,

but not at the time. I think that by treating all texts as equal, I denied students the unique historical skills to read and understand little-known materials without familiar contexts.

When I talked about this messy moment at the roundtable, colleagues were very supportive and understanding. Still, after describing the classroom experience, I launched almost immediately into how I had since “fixed” the problem by staging the assignment more carefully; I assured the roundtable audience (and myself) that I had already learned my lesson and improved my pedagogy. I didn’t mention that it took many semesters to work through most of the kinks and that the difficulty of the assignment meant the process was and is never perfect.

As I continued to reflect in the process of writing and rewriting this short section, I realized a few more things that might have contributed to the mess I made: my students have only a vague sense of what World War II meant and how it affected U.S. citizens at the time. I engaged in no conversation about the author of or audience for the pamphlet, and I ignored the difficulty in reading smudged or lightly inked printed words, something my students had a very difficult time getting past. This skill and the ability to read closely and around difficult words were things I had acquired over years of practice. I had an opportunity to talk to students about the value of developing these skills, but I was too eager to get “through” the assignment, to the writing. As a new faculty member, I was determined to make this special teaching project “succeed.” That may well explain why I quickly dismissed the few protests I heard from students about the pamphlet’s readability, effectively silencing the feedback they were trying to give me. Failing to understand students’ abilities and failing to slow down and listen to students’ concerns combined to make a very messy assignment.

But I did not discuss the combination of these factors in any detail during the roundtable. I was all too busy reassuring my colleagues, my chair, and myself that the mess had been cleaned up. By obsessing too much about the “solutions,” I almost missed the real messes and the opportunity to reflect on how often I let my academic experience, my expertise, stop me from exploiting a true learning experience.

The Sound of Silence: When an Entire Class Skips the Reading

Michelle Pacht

With its rich and varied themes and vast popular-culture appeal, I couldn’t wait to begin *Frankenstein* with my literature students. We had just finished reading *Macbeth*, and while it was a struggle at times, the class managed the difficult language and concepts of the play beautifully. I was proud of our accomplishments with Shakespeare and looked forward to having some fun with Shelley. After all, who wouldn’t want to talk about monsters? After introducing the main issues and themes that informed the text, I asked a series of leading questions. This technique had worked well for me before, and I expected the discussion to take off. Instead, I

received blank stares. I asked a few more questions, calling on students who could always be relied on to comment. Still nothing. Several painfully quiet moments later, they sheepishly confessed. Some had gotten through ten or so pages of the fifty-page assignment. Most hadn't gotten past page one. I was crushed. I had spent so much time preparing what I thought would be an exciting lesson. How could the whole class have let me down? And, perhaps more importantly, what was I going to do now? Here I had a roomful of unprepared students and two long hours to kill. I always had a Plan B, and even a Plan C, up my sleeve, but both required the students to have read the book.

My first mistake, of course, was to take their failure to do the reading as a personal betrayal. Unfortunately, it's not altogether surprising that our students have trouble doing their homework, and it often has nothing to do with the person at the front of the room. According to the TYCA's "Two-Year College Facts and Data Report," 60% of two-year college students "work more than 20 hours a week, 34% spend 11 or more hours a week caring for dependents, [and] 20% spend 6 to 20 hours a week commuting to and from class." These commitments make it difficult for students to get work done at home, and I've come to expect that some will come to class unprepared. But I wasn't ready for all of them to have skipped the assignment. They weren't ready for it either, each clearly thinking that he or she could slip by unnoticed while the rest of the class picked up the slack during our group discussion. So why did this happen?

I'm still not sure, but talking and writing about this messy moment has given me more insight. Coming off of a difficult read, like *Macbeth*, may well have played a role. False expectations may also have been at fault. My students knew that Shakespeare would be a struggle, and they were prepared to work at understanding his words. But *Frankenstein*? How hard could it be? Of course, as anyone who has read the novel can confirm, its romantic prose style is quite difficult, and its structural framework can be confusing. Not being prepared for the challenge facing them may have tempted students to give up. In her *Advocate* article, "Why Students Skip the Readings," Linda B. Nilson suggests that students are often insufficiently prepared for reading assignments. Her advice is to "preview and promote the next reading assignment . . . letting [students] start reading key pieces in class" (6) and "assign readings-related activities that are worth points" (7). Since points are not usually given for doing the reading, students with more homework than they have time to finish may focus on those assignments most directly linked to their GPAs.

In *College English*, Dale M. Bauer recounts an "epiphanic moment" described by Jane Tompkins in *A Life in School*:

"It was eighteen years before I tumbled to the notion that it's necessary to know, on a given day, how the students are feeling, where they are in their thinking, whether they have desires or discontents that aren't being addressed" (94). Even for a master teacher such as Tompkins, teaching is a generational struggle . . . and requires attending to the contingencies of our students' lives. (Bauer 427)

Clearly, I did not know where my students were in their thinking that fateful day. Reflecting on this messy moment forced me to step away from my own hurt feelings and see things from their point of view. Feeling betrayed had put the focus on me, not them, something I hadn't realized until I shared this moment publicly. I was reminded that our students face many barriers and often have their own, very good reasons for skipping the reading; an important lesson for me to learn.

The process of sharing this messy moment taught me other lessons, as well. My first reaction upon seeing the invitation for the roundtable was amused disbelief. Community colleges operate in an increasingly competitive atmosphere, and there's often an expectation of perfection, especially when it comes to teaching. Given that fact, "who would dare portray themselves in anything but the most positive light?" I thought. But I was encouraged by the names of tenured faculty members already on the roster. If they could admit their mistakes, why couldn't I? As I told my story at the roundtable, I felt vindicated; heads nodded vigorously, people smiled and even laughed out loud in sympathy. It was a huge relief to have revealed a flaw and still feel welcomed as part of the community I longed to join.

And then came the Q&A. Our presentations were designed to avoid "solutions," but someone asked me how I had handled the situation. Suddenly, I was intensely aware of just how many people were in the room, including our department chair. I paused, uncertain. Dare I admit to what I had done? Would my new colleagues be supportive, or horrified? After a deep breath, I came clean: I had told my classroom full of students that it made little sense for us to discuss a text no one had read. I then packed up my things and walked out. I had never done anything like that before (nor have I since), and it was a frightening moment for me. But after sharing it with my colleagues, it became an empowering one. There was an eruption of supportive chatter after my admission, and I felt an enormous rush of relief.

What had been a moment of uncertainty became an opportunity for me to learn something. Admitting what I had done publicly, and reflecting on its effects in my classroom, reminded me of the importance of student-centered learning. This pedagogy might explain why, at our next class meeting, chagrined students were anxious to participate and hands flew into the air before I could finish my first question. By refusing to excuse my students' lack of preparation, I had placed the responsibility for their education into their hands, forcing them to become active participants in their own learning. Of course, I didn't realize this at the time of my messy moment, nor did it occur to me as I prepared my roundtable presentation. The many lessons this moment taught me did not come quickly or easily, and I am still struggling with the ramifications of sharing the moment publicly. While I believe that an environment of open, fearless communication is crucial to reflecting on our messy moments in a productive way, I am aware of possible negative consequences. The fact of this publication can help me as I move toward tenure, but I do worry that its content may prove a liability. Despite this concern, I know that presenting at the roundtable and writing and revising this article have made me a better teacher. I am grateful that this process has given me permission to reflect on my experience and provided a space within which to share that reflection.

The Mess of Representing the Teaching Mess

Ting Man Tsao

OK. This is the fourth draft of my teaching mess narrative. The revisions helped widen the perspectives from which to understand the mess. Working with my co-authors, I find that not only my mess but also the whole process of reflection and going public were more complicated than I had originally thought. I have experience in publishing in teaching journals and some other academic venues; however, I don't think I have any firm grasp on writing reflectively about my teaching, something I do every day. But let me try again, and I look forward to feedback from readers.

The mess happened five years ago in my third semester at LaGuardia. I had ordered equipment to show a Kurosawa movie, *Yojimbo*, for my Writing for Literature class. But the machine didn't come. I ran downstairs to the media department to urge them. When the equipment came belatedly, the video fluttered. A student grumbled loudly, "There is yet another technical problem." I rushed back to the media department to inquire. They said my video was not compatible with the player. Thankfully, I had another Kurosawa movie titled *Sanjuro* in DVD format. The technician kindly agreed to send a DVD player up immediately. Five minutes later, the equipment arrived, and yes, *Sanjuro* was playing.

I should have been relieved, but I soon noticed another problem. I realized from their expressions that many students, except some Japanese and Chinese students, hated the picture. A student dozed off. Another complained about the poorly written English subtitles. A third student felt that I was forcing the film on her. She suggested, with an irony that she might not have intended, that I should use *Pearl Harbor* instead. I argued that the Kurosawa movies were part of the syllabus (I had planned to show three), and it was her choice to take this course.

It was a difficult day, but returning home was no solace. My wife had taken our two young children (one and eight years old at that time) to Hong Kong to see my father-in-law for the last time.³ He was terminally ill, which we had learned before the semester began. However, as a newly appointed full-time substitute with a good chance to land a tenure-track position, I dared not request a leave to go with my family. I worried about my father-in-law. I was at the same time concerned about my wife thousands of miles away from me: she had to take care of the kids while dealing with her own emotions all by herself. Stressed, I continued to teach, but I could hardly handle another disaster. I quickly "fixed" it by replacing all remaining Kurosawa movies on the syllabus with short stories. With no "exotic" materials left, the semester continued and ended without additional complaints. My father-in-law died in peace, my wife told me. She came back with the kids, and our life returned to normal. I later got the tenure-track position and was making good progress toward promotion and tenure. As for the Kurosawa mess, I hadn't given it too much thinking until the roundtable.

The mess, as told by this fourth version of my narrative, was a confluence of different factors—technical difficulties, teaching experience, cultural barriers, and my personal problem. I was emotionally strained by the family crisis, and, as a

new instructor, the unexpected technical difficulties tested me to the very limit. Yet, the mess became messier still with the successful showing of *Sanjuro*. Why didn't Kurosawa work in a culturally diverse urban college? My students read poems and short stories drawn from the canonized literature anthologies without complaints (though not necessarily with enthusiasm). After the roundtable, a colleague confided to me in private that race might have played a role in the mess. Perhaps because I am Chinese (an immigrant who, as a student once observed, speaks with a "thick accent" but does know something about English), and because what I was showing was Japanese, some students might have reacted to my use of Kurosawa as an "Asian invasion" of an otherwise "American" classroom.

All this orientaling could have subtly affected the reception of a Japanese film in the "contact zone" of classroom—defined as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 175).⁴ But what did I do to intervene? Nothing. Instead, I simply showed *Sanjuro*, hoping that students would immediately enjoy what for them was a very "traditional," very "exotic" film, and in the meantime would appreciate its Japanese comical and philosophical nuances through the poorly written subtitles. In retrospect, this was wishful thinking. And worse still, I responded to the students' cool reception of the movie simply by canceling future Kurosawa screenings. Having studied postcolonialism for a decade, I should have done better.

But why didn't I do better? My answers evolved as I revised my reflective narrative. For the roundtable presentation, I began by describing the problems related to the machine and my inexperience. Delivered with a sense of self-denouncing humor, this introduction won approving laughter from the audience. Afterward, I explained the cultural barriers and my lack of strategies to engage students cross-culturally in the contact zone. For my write-up, however, I narrowed the focus on the contact zone dynamic without mentioning the technical difficulties and my lack of experience. I thought that teaching journals would be interested in only large "academic" issues such as postcolonialism. Technical messes and the inexperience of a new teacher were merely incidental problems and would therefore detract from the coherence of my cultural master-narrative.

On the other hand, the personal problem, which clouded my semester, was different. It had never occurred to me to even consider mentioning it in any public forums: the roundtable for my department or any publication for the wider scholarly community. In fact, I had never associated the teaching mess with the family crisis in my own reflection. It was a private matter. It was a *de facto* non-issue. A department chair once admonished untenured faculty members in a forum on tenure and promotion at my college, "You're hired to solve problems in this college. You don't bring your own problems here." When I revealed my "own problem" to one of my co-authors, she suggested that keeping silent about it had an effect, albeit subtle, on my teaching.

Although it is hard to gauge the effects of the family crisis on my teaching performance at that time, my colleague's suggestions have led to new questions I never thought of. What if I had humanized myself by sharing my family crisis with

my students? Would my more “human,” less “stoic” persona make it easier for me to manage the unforeseeable technical difficulties? Would my attempt to develop a more personal relationship with students set a different tone for classroom dialogues? Would this new dynamic in turn change the way some students expressed their dislike of *Sanjuro* and the way I handled their complaints? Would I be brave enough to turn the crisis into a “teachable moment” by fostering discussions among students who liked the movie and those who hated it? I do not have any answers now. But I feel that the exploration of these issues in an honest and supportive forum has helped me better understand my messy moment. This has also led me to question the artificial barrier between personal life and the classroom—something I used to take for granted.

Yet, even now with my fourth revision, I still am not sure I have *fully* represented this mess. I agree with the *TETYC* editor Jeff Sommers and the readers that in narrating the mess, I have cleaned up some of its messiness. Having learned quite a bit from this Messy Teaching Conversation, I will keep trying.

The Dialogue-with-Text Mess

Phyllis van Slyck

I had just returned to my office from what I considered a “failed” lesson with a class that had been going well for most of the semester. An email from a colleague popped up with the title “Messy Teaching.” That’s exactly the right phrase, I thought; sometimes we just have a mess on our hands, despite years of practice. Reading the call for faculty to participate in a roundtable discussion of their “messes,” I offered to share my experience. I will admit, though, that I had some second thoughts about exposing my vulnerable moment to my colleagues. My fear was later confirmed when I was presenting my mess in the roundtable. Midway through my presentation, just at the point when I was explaining that I had “pre-selected” some quotations for students to work on, I caught a glimpse of a senior colleague shaking her head as if to say, “You should know better than that.” Yet, when my junior colleagues came up with the idea for this roundtable discussion, it seemed to me both honest and brave of them: it was an important step in changing the way we talk about our teaching in the department. Reflecting on moments when we seem to have failed is difficult enough; we tend to blame ourselves or our students; staying with the experience and examining our reactions is close to impossible, but that was our agenda not only for the roundtable but also for our continuing conversation.

It was midsemester in my English composition class, and I was facing the same problem I had faced teaching this course for the last twenty-some years: how to get inexperienced writing students to incorporate primary texts into their essays as a prelude to the research paper. We had been discussing Homer’s *Odyssey* for several weeks, and they had just finished an essay. We now turned to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, and students were immediately engaged. They saw how much Odysseus and the father in *The Road* had in common, and they eagerly discussed comparisons between the two heroes. When it came to analyzing the text,

exploring insights into the characters, and seeing connections between texts from radically different times, the class was fully present, but integrating and analyzing quotations from those texts was, for community college students, like learning a new discourse, a new language. I had just reviewed a set of essays on *The Odyssey* in which students were 1) putting in quotations that were easy to find but not relevant to their stated argument, 2) giving either too much, too little, or even no information about the scene, and 3) failing to explain what the passage showed in relation to their argument.

So I spent the weekend rereading *The Road*, trying to think of a new way of teaching how to integrate quotations—one I had not used before. I was struck by the power and beauty of McCarthy's language, and I thought that perhaps if I selected quotations from the novel (which we had now discussed for two or three classes), we could go over them together and decide how these passages might be used to support a particular part of their argument. I chose passages that (it seemed to me) could fairly easily be related to a number of themes we had been discussing. For example, McCarthy describes a marauding band of predators in a post-apocalyptic world: "They came shuffling through the ash casting their hooded heads from side to side. . . . Stained and filthy. Slouching along with clubs in their hands, lengths of pipe" (60). I thought students would reflect on the monstrousness of the characters—and hear echoes of other kinds of monsters in *The Odyssey*.

Confidently, I handed out the worksheet with the quotations and instructions. Each group of students was to come up with a paragraph in which they introduced the context for the quotation, inserted the quotation, and then explained how it supported a particular theme. But everything fell apart. Students who were usually lively were almost comatose. They were stymied by the quotations and kept asking, "What is it you want us to do?" I went over the instructions one more time and took a step back to model an example with them, but I could tell they were not with me. So, of course, I began to question myself—what had I not taken into account about their ability to execute this task? Had I skipped a step, or had I somehow done too much—overstructured the activity?

Whatever the reason, they had lost all the energy they had had in previous classes in discussing a text they actually loved! So, as I stood there before them, I silently blamed myself: something that was already difficult for them I had made worse by taking away their power to find and choose the passages that would best fit *their* ideas, not mine. It did not help the situation that a junior colleague had come to visit my class that day as part of an open classroom exchange; perhaps if she had not been there I would have opened up the conversation more to find out from students what the problem was—or perhaps I would have set aside, or at least reframed, the exercise entirely. Instead, I soldiered on, feeling obligated to somehow rescue this lesson that had gone awry. Perhaps if I had been teaching in a culture in which it was acceptable, even encouraged, to admit and discuss mistakes, I could have owned up to my doubts and done something about them regardless of the junior faculty member's presence.

What interests me now, and what interested colleagues during our year-long

Messy Teaching Conversation, is precisely our tendency to rush to judgment—especially of ourselves. The question then becomes, what should we be doing instead? Perhaps it is simply this: we should be allowing ourselves the space to examine the messes and think, individually and in community, not only about what we should have done (though that may be inevitable) but also about our students’—and our own—process as learners. In our roundtable, and in our collaborative conversation about this piece, I glimpsed the possibility (however imperfect) of a safe space—the kind we try to construct with students in dialogues about difficult, sensitive topics—a space where, instead of criticism and judgment, we find support and new, more expansive ways of thinking—in depth—about our work.

Collective Reflections

When we began collaborating on this essay, one of our contributors asked, “Why must we admit our mistakes publicly in order to learn from them? I have messy teaching moments all the time that I don’t share with anyone, and I like to think that the lessons they offer aren’t lost on me. What’s the specific value of sharing them with others?” Answers to the question of going public emerged as we continued to work together. We have found that our academic environment compels us to emphasize successful solutions, often at the expense of an honest evaluation of error and our limits. In the name of accountability, the college system values and rewards products and results. The long process of inquiry and re-inquiry into the messiness of teaching is regarded with impatience. In fact, an earlier version of our article was rejected by a prestigious English teaching journal mainly because the editor thought we did not “develop much space to elaborating solutions” for our problems or bumbles. Our point was missed, revealing, once again, our profession’s deep-seated resistance to representing and delving into classroom messes as an act of scholarship. Ten years after the publication of Randy Bass’s often-cited article “The Scholarship of Teaching: What’s the Problem?” the teaching problem as a worthwhile subject for scholarly investigation and exchange is still an alien concept among many English faculty members.

Furthermore, many of us are untenured; we find it even more challenging, more risky, to be too open about mistakes. We, instead, find it tempting to represent our teaching in the safe mode of “how I did it” or “what works for me” because of the pressures in academia—including accountability and assessment, tenure and promotion. We can’t make such pressures disappear. However, by going public jointly and collegially with our counter-narratives to “success stories,” we feel empowered to critique “the tyranny of certainty” (favored by politicians and administrators) as “a plague” on our morale (Dudley-Marling vii) and acknowledge uncertainty and messiness as a real, and even permanent, part of good teaching.

The work we have done on this project has led us to offer a working model—one we called the Messy Teaching Conversation—for faculty members to deepen their understanding of what is (and is not) happening in their classrooms as a form of collaborative scholarship. Like other teacher-scholars such as Tassoni and

Thelin, and Crovitz, we have learned that only by sharing our mistakes can we fully reflect on our own process as teachers, and only by understanding our process can we begin to identify the many factors that contribute to classroom messes. This is a daunting task and one that presents as many obstacles as opportunities. We made this process intellectually stimulating by adapting it (and at times stopping it) to meet various challenges as they arose. Most importantly, we began as a result of a faculty-initiated conversation to respond to wider national debate on scholarship and reflection, not a top-down initiative foisted upon us by higher-ups based on their agenda. As such, we could be honest in our self-assessments without fear of recrimination.

We built a learning community of sorts, one in which we were equal partners in a common quest for knowledge, creating an inherent trust that was crucial in providing a safe yet critical space within which we could reflect. Our group, made up of both junior and senior faculty members, was large enough to include a range of perspectives yet small enough to allow for thorough analysis of each messy moment. Because we were working toward writing this article, we had a pragmatic goal that helped us get the work done, encouraging us to stay focused, even when other commitments forced us to step away from this work for weeks or months at a time.

Our rapport allowed for open communication, the benefits of which became apparent as we began to recognize the added complexity evident in each subsequent version of our narratives, from the initial roundtable presentations to early drafts of this article to the final revisions based on the *TETYC* reviews. With each level of scrutiny our messes somehow got messier, forcing us to accept the reality of the “perpetual mess” in teaching while also pushing us to sort through and represent each mess carefully so that we could be better informed and prepared for the fluidity of teaching.

In our first exchanges, we noticed that we were each dealing with pedagogical issues that were common, though not exclusive, to college English classrooms: unfamiliarity with a specific kind of academic discourse, lack of cultural awareness and historical knowledge; inability to complete reading assignments because of other obligations; generational gaps between teacher and student. We saw that we made mistakes because we had forgotten to take some of these realities into account. Yet, as we delved into the messes, we found that our messes were intertwined with other unique factors at the moments they unfolded—the teacher’s commitment to a pedagogical project, the timing of the assignment, the presence of a colleague in the classroom, technical problems, the influences of personal issues, poor teacher-student communication, and so on. We realized that even though we sensed something had gone wrong at the moment, we did not necessarily know what exactly it was, and why it happened. We now know that we cannot rely on our first impressions, our initial conclusions.

But the deepening of our understandings of the messy teaching moments took more than a few moments. Time was, in fact, one of the largest challenges

our Messy Teaching Conversation faced. We are all far too busy to dedicate large amounts of time to something that is not valued in our college community. We must therefore challenge the existing double “A” paradigm of Accountability and Assessment that tends to measure “successes” by scores, numbers, and a variety of other “accountable” indicators. We found that working in such a political climate, teachers like us tend to react swiftly and expediently in challenging moments, hoping to find a quick fix to any problems that arise in the classroom so that we can resolve them, move on, and obtain better “results.” Worse still, we are also tempted to quickly report our “success” in solving our “problem” without any truthful reflection. For faculty who are untenured and junior, it is tempting to oversimplify or even terminate the “problem” in public discourse, self-deceptively focusing on only “successes” and “solutions.” This breeds and sustains “the tyranny of certainty,” which shuts down the process of exploration into the complexities of learning and teaching. This may also help promote the “one solution for all” discourse in our larger political culture: the increasing use of standardized tests to “save our kids’ education” is a case in point.

“I think that certainty is a closed door,” says playwright John Patrick Shanley. “It’s the end of the conversation. Doubt is an open door. It’s a dynamic process” (qtd. in “John Patrick Shanley”). By rejecting certainty about our own teaching we allow doubt to do its work. The door to discovery closes—the learning process to turn our bumbles into blunders ends—once we think, “I’ve got it! I know what my messes mean.” Just as we encourage students to examine their process, we must challenge the long-standing beliefs in our profession that discourage us from self-reflection. Perhaps, if we step back from the breathless school routine and ponder how things happen and how we respond, we can begin to engage in truly “dialogic teaching”—an ongoing dialogue with our peers, our students, and ourselves. We can better “imagine where our students are and how to reach them,” and examine “how we come to generate our own embedded pedagogies,” as Dale Bauer suggests (428).

It is for the celebration of doubt and dialogue that we would like to offer you the Messy Teaching Conversation as a working model of collegial reflection, exchange, and scholarship—open to continuous critique, question, comment, suggestion, contribution, and revision. For talking and writing about our messy teaching processes is a lot more challenging than we originally thought. Working together, we have made progress in understanding and representing our messes, but we are not “there” yet (and probably we will never be). As our readers point out, our narratives are polished to an extent that portions of the messes we originally intended to unearth and represent are gone.

As teacher-scholars, we must question our “success stories” or “teacher-hero narratives” and need to explore newer ways of representing and reflecting on our work. Institutionally, we need to develop newer ways of not only evaluating teaching and scholarship for tenure and promotion purposes but also supporting untenured and junior faculty to be truly *reflective* teacher-scholars in an open, transparent, and democratic environment. Politically, we should also put our reflections

on the perpetual messiness of teaching and learning in the national discourse of education reform to question the “tyranny of certainty,” which sustains and informs standardization and testing as the panacea to educational problems.

That is why “the mess” has just begun to evolve. And we encourage you to take up the challenges, join in the conversations, and add your own thoughts and efforts to these discussions, for we have learned that only through open, ongoing communication can we fully engage as communities of learners, teachers, and scholars. ◀

Notes

1. LaGuardia faculty hired on the professorial track begin as assistant professors and spend seven years working toward tenure. They also work toward promotion from assistant to associate and from associate to full professor. Anyone below the rank of full professor is considered “junior.”

2. The Carnegie Seminar on Scholarship, Teaching and Integration, offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning at LaGuardia Community College (for more information visit <<http://www.laguardia.edu/ctl/programs.htm>>).

3. Lam Cham, to whom I dedicate this article.

4. Subsequent to Pratt’s publications on the “contact zone,” scholars used or revised her concept in their analysis of English classrooms in American higher education; see, for example, Hall and Rosner; Mejia; van Slyck.

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Heidi L. Johnsen, Michelle Pacht, Phyllis van Slyck, and Ting Man Tsao teach at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, in Queens, New York.