

## I WANT TO SHARE...

(Speech at the Celebrating Pedagogy Conversation-IX)

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My teaching career began in the early 1950's when I started playing school with my younger sister and other kids in the neighborhood. I was the teacher. Classes took place mostly during summer vacation and involved a combination of erasing the answers from various workbooks which we had been allowed to bring home at the end of the school year and redoing these pages, all under my supervision. There was a lot of writing on the board although I cannot recall exactly what—probably some sort of demerit system for bad behavior by my sister which usually was in the form of not doing what I told her to do. As you can imagine, I liked playing school much better than my students and was frequently frustrated by their resistance and lack of enthusiasm.

My own primary and secondary school education took place in NYS and therefore focused quite a bit on preparation for the state Regents exams. One of our annual spring activities was attending Regents Review classes. Taking the exams was quite a dramatic event, featuring the opening of envelopes which had been sent from Albany and stored in the school safe until the official giving of the exam.

Later, in the very early 1960's, just before “the revolution,” I attended Bates College where I majored in English. The English department at that time was headed by Professor Robert Berkelman. Professor Berkelman had not obtained his doctorate and the reason for this, he told us, was that no one felt sufficiently knowledgeable to direct his studies. There was no doubt in our minds that he knew the answers, all of them. We dutifully took notes in every class of the official interpretation of each piece of literature we read. We then constructed what we called “nuggies sheets” which we used to prepare for exams. I became quite talented at the nuggie sheet construction and directing nuggies' sessions.

I am sure that there are many people who experienced these same educational environments and were more able to resist the pressure to obediently do what was expected of them. But I was not. My vocational aspirations moved from being an airline stewardess, to being a nurse (inspired by Cherry Ames), and, finally, to being a teacher. In college, I took several education courses which I found very boring. And I practice taught English in the Lewiston Public Schools. I came to feel that the pressure that I experienced as a teacher to know the answers (which, by then, was, to an increasing degree, self-imposed) really got in the way of getting to know the students as people. I decided that I really did not want to be a teacher.

After graduating from college, I moved to Cambridge and watched with some awe the unfolding of events during the late 60's and early 70's. I also took a course with Kiyoko Morimoto, who worked with Bill Perry at the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard. Some of you may know Perry's work on the intellectual development of college students. In that course, which was on client centered therapy *a la* Carl Rogers, I felt that I had finally begun to find a place that I could call home. We wrote response papers to what we read and to cases. There were no right answers. I felt known as something other than a person who either knew the answers or did not.

For the next twenty years I pretty much forgot about teaching. I became increasingly immersed in and fascinated by the process of trying to understand subjective experience and the ways in which it

influences how we see, understand, and take action in the world around us. I developed a growing (still) interest in the power and the limitations of theories and the way in which our understanding of human behavior continues to evolve. I have also become increasingly fascinated by the power of relationship and the ways in which it influences an individual's experience of her- or himself and of others.

During this time, I have had the good fortune to have some very good teachers. I have, on an almost daily basis, been a student of the children and adults who I have encountered in my clinical practice. I have also managed to be in an educational program of one sort or another most of the time and to be challenged and supported by a number of good teachers. As I experienced education as an affirming and nurturing process, I became hungry for more.

I also began to think about teaching again. I began to feel that I actually knew something of importance and that I wanted to share it with others who were learning about human behavior and thinking about becoming helping professionals.

So, you must be wondering at this point, what do all of these threads have to do with my "pedagogical standpoint"? I think we all get to where we are at a particular point in our professional lives by following what is often a circuitous path. And, as you may have guessed by now, I am always interested in the paths, my own and others, which lead us to where we are. (This can be a drawback because it can lead to "going off on tangents," something that I have been known to do. And that is one of the reasons that I wrote out what I have to say, mindful of the time limits.) But it can also be a valuable approach in thinking about the learning and teaching process.

No one stays at the same standpoint. We are always moving. My own view of our job as teachers is that it is to invite students to see more clearly where they are and to offer them the opportunity, to cajole them and to push them to move forward with new knowledge of themselves and of the world in which they live. I believe that this happens when students are approached in a manner which actively engages them at the place where they "stand," with appreciation that they didn't just land there but arrived through a long journey of experience. Concretely, I try to teach in a way that invites and, at times, requires interaction. You might say that I try to force engagement. I try to do this within the classroom setting: rearranging the classroom itself to reflect an expectation of interaction rather than all eyes on the teacher/expert and by limiting the amount of time that I am talking (I am not always successful at that). I try to develop assignments which demand that students actively engage with the world and then reflect on that engagement and connect it with concepts which they are studying. For example, this week my SW Methods students completed a silent observation project which was designed to increase their awareness of the kinds of assumptions that they make about people based on what they observe. This is part of helping them to become more aware of their own personal theories about human behavior.

My belief in the importance of engagement can, at times, lead me to become excessively distracted or irritated by those students who repeatedly resist opportunities to engage. Because I myself learn best through interaction and engagement with others I sometimes forget that this is not always true for everyone.

I think what is most challenging for me and for my students is that I assume or wish for a level of enthusiasm/engagement from my students that matches mine. I have trouble "telling them what I want." This is particularly true when it comes to such learning projects as major research papers. It is also difficult for me to strike a balance between students' learning from experience, on the one hand, and mastering basic information and concepts, on the other. I find myself wanting, hoping, that they will read the text, identify key concepts, and bring that knowledge with them to class. I am working on devising strategies which involve interaction with the reading prior to class in order to make this a more likely outcome.

In summary, I see myself as a student of teaching rather than a teacher. I think that there are some people for whom performance of the teaching role comes more easily than it does for me. I am still learning.

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\* **SALLY BOOTH** attended Bates College where she majored in English. At Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she completed a Masters in Education, her interest in working with children and families become increasingly compelling. During her years of working as a caseworker at The New England Home for Little Wanderers in Boston, MA, her interest in the experience of foster care and adoption, for both children and parents, grew. Also during that time she obtained her M.S.W. from Boston College. For the past 15 years she has combined clinical practice with teaching. Currently, she is completing her doctoral dissertation on the experiences of mothers of children with Asperger Syndrome.