Bonding In and Beyond the Classroom: A Teaching and Learning Journey

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Introduction

In The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, a work that many educators consider classic because of the way it positions teaching excellence not as a fixed point on some methodological map but as the ‘nexus’ between a teacher’s identity and integrity, Parker Palmer writes that

“… if we want to grow as teachers, we must do something alien to academic culture: We must talk to each other about our inner lives, risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (1998, p. 12).

The following narrative attempts exactly that, presenting a reflection on my own 30 plus years in classrooms around the globe, at the same time considering those influences I have found essential in helping me facilitate the sort of student development and interpersonal bonding that might underpin not just the significant learning I hope to support but also more meaningful communication.

Since one September day in 1978, I have been standing or sitting in classrooms encouraging people, generally university students and strangers with each other, not just to consider me as ‘the teacher’ but also to bond with me and with each other in order to ‘learn with and among friends.’ For the most part, this has been a wonderful journey peopled with countless personalities from a variety of backgrounds looking for positive encounters and a pleasant, significant learning experience.

However, not every class was so positive. In my first decade or so of teaching, although even then I felt ‘born to teach’ and constantly made an effort at being friendly with students and creating a non-threatening and relaxed learning environment, the results were not always optimal. As I look back now, I realize that much of my early teaching was teacher-centered,
and while over the years my focus became more learner-centered, it was not sufficiently ‘communication-centered,’ as Dewey suggested it should be (Biesta, in Hansen, 2006, p. 33).

In my first years of teaching English, while I might have intended on helping students lower interpersonal barriers and communicate meaningfully within class, I often did not maximize such potential because I did not fully appreciate the value of bonding. In fact, on a broader professional level, at that time I was only loosely aware of my own guiding teaching philosophy; I had yet to find a “theory to live by, a story that provides structure for the growth of the students and the teacher.” This, according to Rogers, is fundamental for any teacher who intends to effectively bridge theory, practice and self (2002, p. 849). The result was that while I might have understood the importance of bringing students together in classes that were essentially platforms for communication, bonding activities were not a central part of my classroom practice.

First steps and stumbles in creating classroom cohesion

In winter term, 1985, I was teaching an EAP writing course for post-graduates at Ohio State University (OSU). The class was rather odd in that the students were a very diverse group, including over a dozen students from nearly a dozen countries (Israel, Greece, India, Hong Kong and South Korea, among others), some of whom were in their twenties while others (mid-career professionals) in their thirties. One older student was a prim Korean schoolmaster who had come to OSU to pursue a graduate program in education administration. During the first lesson he introduced himself as ‘Mr. Lee,’ with a long and impressive resume, and I thought that he and I might bond because of our common interest in education. However, it soon became apparent that he was quite the stoic gentleman, given to long, indirect stares and few words, and one who invariably would wear a suit and tie to class. In contrast, I was the expressive sort, directly opinionated, and most likely to be wearing jeans and a collarless shirt. Perhaps it was not surprising that though we were both in graduate programs in education, he reacted apprehensively toward me.

Two others in the same class were a married Israeli couple. They were friendly, articulate and energetic, and enrolled in OSU’s Physical Education PhD program. With them all seemed well. However, there was a problem. The husband had come to OSU with a manuscript for what appeared to be a dissertation and apparently expected me to help him rewrite the entire
document. Every page of the manuscript was virtually incomprehensible due to poor grammar, convoluted and inappropriate sentence structures and skewed organizational development. Eventually, I had to learn to give feedback without having to personally rewrite the guy’s thesis, which is the sort of ELT challenge that many English teachers have faced at least once in their careers.

During that same term, although I was largely uninformed of the sort of strategies that might have maximized a sense of belonging within the group that could have increased class participation and, ultimately, learning, still, I managed to effectively gain the confidence of Mr. Lee and the Israeli couple, assisting all three in the achievement of some of their English writing goals. This was pursued through guided conversations, coordinated activities and writing tasks with clear, negotiated outcomes. Helping them to bond with others in the class was not a high priority. Nonetheless, by the course end, I was able to witness Mr. Lee smiling, and I had gained credibility with the Israelis even as the husband’s expectations of my editing became tempered.

Such successes were eclipsed, however, by one resounding failure: My inability to connect with Mohammed, a young Palestinian post-grad engineering student, and to help him relate with others in the class. From the start, he had seemed aloof and embittered, perhaps because he had spent a lengthy period in a refugee camp in southern Lebanon. At the same time, he seemed resentful that he was required to take a course he viewed as being beneath him, a situation faced by many students not clearing a university writing exam. Ironically, his skills were weaker than those of everyone else in the course, including the Israelis, whom he despised on the basis of political preconceptions.

Perceptions in such a situation mean everything, and it soon became clear that any effort at bonding with Mohammed would be resisted. In fact, I can still recall how after a number of unsuccessful attempts made by various members of the class at befriending this particular fellow, everyone quit trying. Soon the situation deteriorated. One morning I arrived to witness Mohammed in a boxer’s pose standing aggressively over the desk of an intimidated male Indian student who was on the verge of tears. Mohammed was demanding that the lad acquiesce to his critical, Arab-centric view of Middle East politics. The best I could do was to hastily intervene and negotiate an awkward peace. Unfortunately, residuals of tension
between Mohammed and the rest of the class remained throughout the term.

Such a situation would never occur in one of my classes today. No matter what subject matter might be on the course syllabus, no matter the learners’ age level, study focus or socio-cultural background, now I enter the classroom first as a person who wants to know what the others in the room think, how they feel, what their motivation for learning is, and what apprehension they might have. I walk in the door ready to listen as my students share their ideas, opinions and even their ‘inner lives’ if they are willing to share. Of course, I am acutely aware of my responsibility as the fellow charged with leading the group on an English learning journey. But I also see myself as the one who needs to open the class to discussions of the affective dimension and to encourage self-discovery, interpersonal growth and life skills. Farrell (2011; 2013) mentions these varying teacher roles when he presents his ‘taxonomy of teacher identity’ within the context of systematic teacher reflection. His designation of the ‘teacher as manager’ is one part that in the past I could have easily related to, but the idea of ‘teacher as acculturator,’ including ‘subidentities’ as ‘socializer, social worker and caregiver’ might have been lost on me (2013, pp. 93-94).

With these roles in mind, today I would engage a student like Mohammed right from the start by talking to him after class or inviting him to chat in my office, all in an attempt to listen to his thoughts and better understand his feelings. With digital media available and through the use of pedagogical blogging (explained below), I could even encourage him to share some of his ideas in a free blog post, and I might nudge his more conciliatory classmates to respond as appropriately as possible, all in an effort to bring him closer to the group. Only after making an effort to gain trust from him would I mention his unfair stereotyping of the Israeli students and his general disregard for those who could not sympathize with his experience, areas that in 1985 I might have ignored. At that time, I had only minimally reflected on my general professional identity and on how more conscious decision-making and honest discussion could be utilized in a classroom management scheme.

Nearly 30 years ago, although I had in my possession a freshly minted MA in Language Education and could have differentiated between the various teaching methodologies and techniques du jour, I had little more than a superficial awareness of the impact that my students’ socio-cultural, cognitive and emotional selves might have had on their classroom
interaction and learning. Topics such as student bonding had played no part in any of my graduate course discussions. Pertinent ideas such as social relatedness being the basis for ‘optimal human functioning’ (Madill, Gest & Rodkin, 2011) or the co-construction of knowledge being supported by socially ‘situated learning’ within a ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) had not yet been fully explored. As with many other English teachers at that time, much of my teaching and classroom management style was based on instinct and what I had learned in my prior experience as a student rather than being grounded on relevant theory and reflective practice.

Also typical at that time, students in my classes sat in rows, lecture-style, rather than in small groupings of desks and learners as I would arrange now. Moreover, though my students might have known each other by name, and they would have had opportunities to interact with their peers in activities such as peer reviews of writing, they would not have bonded with each other or with me as equally recognized members of the group since I was clearly ‘in charge.’ At that time, my role was mainly the ‘arbitrator’ (Farrell, 2011), whose primary focus in any lesson was given to delivering information, motivating students to learn and stay on task, and giving feedback. Strategies for having students engage the relevant content so that they might achieve desired performance outcomes were a matter of clear consideration, but I made little effort to design and implement activities that might have deepened students’ consideration for the others in the class. My usual approach was, “I’ll explain it and then let them develop a response.”

**Forging ahead with teaching and learning**

In May 1985, after leaving Ohio State, I moved to Malaysia to teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for a Malaysian government-sponsored American university-twinning program, Midwest Universities Consortium for International Assistance (MUCIA Project), fronted by Indiana University, Bloomington. There I encountered an even more serious challenge to my views in a situation that put my teacher-centered classroom at greater risk. The learners were uniformly Malay, many from rural villages, with pre-TOEFL scores for English in the 400-450 range (lower-intermediate to intermediate learners). Most importantly, many of them showed little understanding of the value for communicating in English in order to develop better functional skills; they were seemingly content to let the teacher lead them. For various cultural reasons, including a tendency for not appearing outgoing in front of their
peers, the Malay students were satisfied never to raise a hand or express their opinions in class. Outside class, they returned to their first language. Clearly, English study was a tedious, solitary concern. Yet, ironically, the goal was to prepare them for full study in an American university curriculum within six months!

It was during this situation in Malaysia in the late 80s and then in a similar American university-twinning program in Japan in the 1990s that I realized that my previous teacher-centric approach needed to be supplemented with other methods. To deal more effectively with students in such a situation, my understanding of teaching and learning had to broaden. As a result, I began to explore alternatives to the traditional classroom structure and to employ new teaching strategies, some garnered from work with more experienced colleagues and others reported in literature. At this time, a number of paradigm shifts (Richards & Renandya, 2002) were taking place in education. One that has since been called the ‘soft communicative approach’ (The New School, 2012) had been evolving toward more student-centered learning (SCL) in league with an emphasis on cooperative learning through theme-focused, task-based work (Nunan, 1988; Slavin, 1995). Engaging students through team work and group projects that required them to interact with their peers and work toward a common goal became standard practice.

At the same time, I minimized the lecture-style, with my class sessions evolving into workshop-like environments. Within such a shift, I developed and taught content-based, integrated skills courses in areas such as business communication, the history of science, the sociology of deviance and Southeast Asian history, determined by needs analyses of content course faculty members. Both in the MUCIA Project and, later, in the Japan programs, students had a voice in selecting theme-related research topics that they would explore by searching for and reading text materials, watching related videos and analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing the content encountered, all the while taking note of relevant language features as they produced peer taught lessons, individual and group papers and oral presentations, debates and even dramatic productions. As I stepped away from the classroom’s center stage and encouraged each student to become more actively engaged with their peers in facilitating the various activities of each lesson, there was a palpable change in the classroom dynamics. The classroom setting, once dull and quiet, had become busy and noisy. With my teaching approach increasingly focused on cooperative learning, student
energy levels heightened, a greater sense of togetherness and apparent friendships developed, and more open interest in learning appeared.

At that time, it was also becoming increasingly obvious that in league with more one-on-one social bonding there was an enhanced sense of ‘class group,’ which was often commemorated at the end of study terms with group photos and class parties. This was in stark contrast to what I recall from my teaching days at OSU.

**Bonding in The Digital Age**

In Malaysia and then in Japan, my experience showed that students were highly motivated to work cooperatively on tasks, share responsibility and assist each other in learning. Through this period it also became clearer to me that students were aware of how this sort of interaction, with authentic bonding at its core, would not only make a class more enjoyable but also benefit their English skills development. Coincidentally, just as my use of task-based activities within a cooperative learning framework became the norm, my university in Japan expanded its computer lab and the Internet became accessible, professional discussions of the value of computer-assisted language learning became more commonplace, and my students started appearing with their own computers. The stage was set for a personal revolution in teaching and learning.

In 2005, just before I left Japan for teaching in Singapore, a colleague introduced me to a computer-mediated element that he had been experimenting with in his classes: blogging. By the time I left Japan for Singapore in 2007, pedagogical blogging had assumed a central place in my instructional toolbox, and with it, yet another platform that would allow me to encourage significant social bonding within my classes.

By now, blogging is a well-known instructional device, one that has served me and many other educators. Blogging for pedagogical purposes is a simple matter of having each student set up an individual blog and post academic writing assignments on it. What can make this process cooperative, ‘group-based’ and a perfect conduit for social bonding is the requirement that my students have of also providing critical comments on their classmates’ posts, and then responding via feedback to such commentary on their own posts. This is made more feasible when students are ‘trained’ in the sort of comments that are expected once they have been given a rubric of criteria on the content, organization and language use. Other
important components of my approach to class blogging include segmenting each tutorial section into subsections, or ‘blogging groups,’ whereby group members act as their peers’ regular readers and commentators, and the ‘blogging buddy,’ a student partner who critiques a classmate’s post before it is posted online (Blackstone, Spiri & Naganuma, 2007).

Pedagogical blogging such as that described above may seem ‘forced,’ and the resulting communication and bonding inauthentic. However, when implemented with an emphasis on social sharing rather than online diary writing, blogging becomes more cooperative and provides a platform for ‘legitimate peripheral participation,’ which Herrington and Oliver sum up as follows: “As learning and involvement in the culture increase, the participant moves from the role of observer to fully functioning agent. Legitimate peripheral participation enables the learner to progressively piece together the culture of the group and what it means to be a member” (1995, para. 2).

It is precisely through ‘membership’ in the class’s various social groupings (by acting simultaneously as a blogging buddy, within the blogging subgroup, and in the class group at large) that each student has ample opportunity to develop bonds within an authentic ‘community of practice.’ Central to this is the student assuming different roles in different situations, at times acting as ‘an expert,’ with the more digitally informed teaching others how to set up a blog, for example, and at other times, being the ‘novice,’ as might happen when one gains critical feedback from others on some inaccurate use of grammar or misconceptions about content.

A short overview of the writing activities and topics I used in a professional communication course may make the potential that blogging has for encouraging that sense of membership in the group and greater student bonding clearer. The first blog assignment was for students to write 250-300 words on why effective communication was important for them. This would be posted on their individual blog. They also needed to respond in writing to at least three classmates’ posts, including those of two members from their blogging group. For that first post, I would typically ask that the theme focus be made as specific as possible to the student’s own perceived needs and deficiencies, personally and professionally, and that it be written in reference to some of the main content topics taken from the course syllabus: interpersonal and intercultural communication, nonverbal skills, oral presentation skills and
professional writing. I would also suggest that when giving feedback, students look for and comment on similarities and differences between their peer’s ideas and what they themselves had written. In this way, though the writing often would be reflective and “personal,” it was initiated as an act of sharing.

The second blog post, with the same word limit, was assigned in conjunction with a unit on interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence. The task required students to present an interpersonal conflict scenario, with a description of the characters involved and possible background assumptions and motivations that underpinned the problem. Peers were then asked to respond to the scenario with suggestions on strategies for possible resolution, on the basis of what had already been discussed in the course. A subsequent post, assigned in conjunction with a unit on intercultural communication, asked students to describe an intercultural scenario, with a clear portrayal of differing values, beliefs and norms.

Each of these topics lent itself to meaningful interactions as the student writers developed a more acute sense of their own voice and of audience expectations, and then, when acting as post readers, asked for clarification, compared the scenarios their classmate had written about with their own cultural experiences, or suggested other viewpoints for the post writer to consider, all the while honing interpersonal skills such as empathy and courtesy by giving complements and extending thanks to their peers.

What made these assignments socially significant was the fact that, post-by-post, students gained greater familiarity with one another on various levels. In fact, during the first week of the term, even before many students had spoken with each other in class, they could have interacted via the blogs they had set up. In this way the blogging provided a sort of ‘cyber-social icebreaker.’ One former student, a self-proclaimed introvert, wrote that blogging for the course had served her socializing with peers particularly well because then she “didn’t have to feel weirded out or too ‘forward’ about interacting with them in person during in-class activities” (A. Pathi, personal communication, January 10, 2013). Indeed, by the second or third post, many students would be writing to their classmates in great detail, providing feedback, for instance, on their peers’ posts that exceeded in word count the length of their own initial post. Some, after receiving critical peer feedback, would leave lengthy responses to each person who had visited their blog post.
From many years of reading student blog posts on the themes mentioned above, one of my most lasting impressions is that the majority of students respond to a greater number of classmates’ posts than the three comments I typically require. In fact, in many of my most recent professional communication classes, students would comment on the posts of most of their blogging group members and on those of a good number of their other peers for any given assignment. (I have even had students who made a point of giving feedback to every classmate.)

Studies show that this computer-mediated approach to facilitating written interactions provides great potential for helping students better understand course concepts and for their practice of critical thinking and writing skills. What seems to have not been investigated is the way that blogging impacts interpersonal relationships, underpinning camaraderie throughout an entire study term.

Ultimately, student impressions have corroborated my positive experience with these blogging elements and processes. Anonymous student feedback, both qualitative and quantitative, from term-end surveys conducted on the blogging activities in my classes in Japan and in my EAP and communication courses at the National University of Singapore has regularly supported this opinion. For example, from the surveys I learned that while not all students liked writing, a large percentage typically expressed satisfaction with posting their writing on their blog. Many enjoyed giving feedback to others about their writing, while they were nearly unanimous in viewing the feedback that they would receive on their posts as useful for their learning. Though it might be difficult to argue definitively that significant development of writing skills occurred as a result of blogging, student feedback also consistently revealed that my charges were convinced that their writing and other communication skills did improve thanks to the blogging.

As for the impact of blogging on bonding, nearly every student who has blogged in my courses over the last ten years voiced the opinion that they were able to form closer bonds
with their classmates and with me thanks to the course blogging regime. Personally, I saw evidence of this impact not just in student survey feedback but also in the widespread student appreciation shown throughout our daily interactions.

**Final thoughts**

Reflecting broadly on my professional development during this teaching and learning journey, I will suggest that what has been most essential has been my role as a socially active participant. Within the framework of Farrell’s ‘taxonomy of experienced teacher identity’ (2011; 2013), I have served often as a ‘manager,’ one who variously:

i. acts as a ‘vendor’ by ‘selling’ each of the platforms that I utilize in my classes and their capacity for elevating communication skills and bringing us all together;

ii. performs as an ‘arbitrator’ by giving extensive feedback (on the blog posts and elsewhere), both positive and more critical;

iii. works as a ‘motivator’ to keep the class members on task and inspired to learn, in and out of cyberspace; and

iv. as a ‘presenter’ of my own knowledge of the world, within the context of my lectures, my own blog posts, class discussions and as a commentator on the ideas and opinions of others.

However, among these and other roles, perhaps it has been my ‘professional learner’ self that has been most engaged, ever seeking to widen my understanding of the places I have been and the people I have met and worked with through this craft of teaching. Among the many insights gathered, I have been fortunate to learn how to establish even stronger connections with a greater number of my students, on a level that better supports their individual wants and needs in a way that has been personally enriching beyond description.

If it is true that the decentralized classroom dynamic can empower students, then a more comprehensive recognition by any teacher of their teaching identity and various capacities can only enhance more significant bonding with ‘others,’ as a fully acknowledged member of a consciously interconnected social group. My only regret as I retrace some of my earlier teaching steps is that I cannot return to the past to ‘re-identify’ with Mohammed and other students who I did not get to know and serve as well as I might have, while repositioning our
interpersonal narrative by redefining my own.

Farrell states that “Over their careers teachers construct and reconstruct (usually tacitly) a conceptual sense of who they are (their self-image) and this is manifested through what they do (their professional role identity)” (2011, p. 54). My aim in this narrative has been to chart a path of personal discovery and interpersonal development and to show how ‘bonding’ has been central to that process. Hopefully, this reflection on the bonding initiatives that have evolved within my classes together with the means of communication that I have aspired to extend within groups of my students will resonate with and inspire others on their own teaching journey.

References


**About the author**

Brad Blackstone is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for English Language Communication at the National University of Singapore and Chief Editor of eltworldonline.com (ELTWO). Brad’s teaching experience began 35 years ago with Russian while a graduate student at Ohio State University. Since then, he has developed and coordinated courses and taught in university EAP and English writing programs in the USA, Portugal, Malaysia, Japan and now Singapore. He also has experience in corporate training and teacher development throughout Asia. His most recent presentations and publications focus on the use of social media in teaching and learning.