

Postcard Realities

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After I fly from one time zone to another one 13 hours ahead, or behind, I invariably wake up at 3:00 a.m. so alert and energetic that I feel much more like playing volleyball than sleeping. This feeling occurs in spite of the fact that I have not played volleyball for 40 years and then did so only under duress, as part of a required gym course. Even if I did regularly play, though, no partners are available at the hour of my jet lag resurrection and there is no place to play, at any rate. Surrounded by silent, dark apartments, I try to focus my energy on attempts to fall asleep. But inevitably, rather than fall asleep, I tumble backward in time and experience all sorts of episodes from the past. I remember the dreamlike episodes more than non-jet-lag-induced dreams perhaps because I'm only half sleeping, or perhaps only 10% sleeping, if that is possible. Maybe because the reason for changing time zones is almost always to work with practicing teachers in a different location from my regular base in New York, many of the dreamlike/unlike episodes contain incidents from my own first experiences as a trainee/neophyte teacher. One incident I constantly re-experience occurred 35 years ago when I was taking courses at University College Ibadan, Nigeria, as part of a Peace Corps training experience. I, along with around 30 other volunteers, had been living in university dormitories along with Nigerian students, practice-teaching in secondary schools near the university, and attending classes on Nigerian education, history, and teaching methods. All of a sudden, the Nigerian students, who had moments before been symbols of gregariousness, openness and friendliness, stopped talking to us, and, in fact were demanding that the Nigerian Government expel us all From the country!

We quickly discovered that the instantaneous reversal in attitude was caused in large part by the duplication of a few lines one of our group had written on a postcard. Our fellow volunteer had inadvertently dropped the postcard on the ground in front of a postbox rather than in the slot in the postbox. A passing student picked up the postcard and read the message, rather than posting the card. He shared the postcard with a few other students. And, before the day was out, had typed on a stencil all of the lines from the postcard, along with a demand that the Nigerian government expel insensitive foreigners from the country. (Stencils are waxed sheets used in mimeograph machines—the way we used to make copies before Xeroxing.) In a matter of minutes, hundreds of copies had not only been mimeographed but distributed to students all over the campus.

On seeing her previously thought private message to her boyfriend on a leaflet now not only being read, but being blown about the campus as well, the author of the postcard, together with all of the group, suddenly realized two things. First, her boyfriend wouldn't get the postcard she had sent. Second, there was a distinct possibility that none of us would be in Nigeria long enough to send, anyone any more postcards.

Because *Time* magazine and many other international publications soon re-duplicated the lines, the author's fear that the message would not reach the addressee was ill-founded. But the personal nature of the communication was, of course, lost forever.

The message on the postcard, which given even the distance of 30 minutes, much less 35 years, seems particularly innocuous to me and extremely provocative to many, went something like this:

The people cook in the streets.
The people eat in the streets.
The people do everything in the streets.
They even go to the bathroom in the streets.
Nothing in training could have prepared us for this!

The part of the incident that has had the most powerful impact on me was not the boycott, nor the lesson that one should make sure to keep one's eyes on the item to be posted as it goes in the slot in the postbox, nor the fact that we should be sensitive to differences when we are guests or visitors—even when we are neither, as far as that goes. No, we had been told over and over that we should be careful about how we acted and what we said. The central focus of the stateside training before we began the in country component of our training was the need to be aware of differences and accept them. So, if anything, attempts to prepare us were particularly intense. (We had also been told in training that there were some who probably wanted to try to sabotage the Peace Corps programs in some countries—we were in the first group that went to Nigeria and one of the first dozen or so anywhere in the world. But even this additional warning was limited in impact on what we said.)

Rather, the lesson that keeps coming back to me during my jet lag resurrections is the last line in the message: "Nothing in training could have prepared us for this!" We had all written descriptions almost identical to the ones on the dropped postcard, either on postcards that reached the postbox, or in letters. We commented on the phenomenon mentioned in the public postcard constantly in our daily conversations. Yet, during training, we had been told over and over not to make the types of comments that, in fact, we all made. I hasten to add that words similar to ones on the postcard were also used constantly by our Nigerian hosts and colleagues. The Nigerian press published much less-flattering comments than those on our postcards and in our letters. But, of course, citizens have privileges/rights that non-citizens do not have.' (Another lesson, taken up next, is how what to one is innocuous can to another be incendiary.)

The postcard incident has become significant to me for other reasons as well. Bateson's reminder of Korzybski's (1941) dictum that "the map is not the territory" could be paraphrased "the picture postcard is an idealized image of the territory" (Bateson, 1972, p. 183). I've never seen a fly or a mosquito in a scene on any picture postcard. Yet when I've visited the scenes depicted on many postcards, my first experiences, as yours, have involved mosquitoes, flies, and garbage.

The pictorial message of Nigeria on the postcard my fellow volunteer dropped represented one view of reality; the volunteer's written message represented another view. The pictorial side of the postcard was not duplicated, partly, of course, because mimeograph machines could not make copies of pictures. But even if the incident had happened in more modern times, when color Xerox machines would have been available, I doubt that the picture would have been copied.

When I hear or read professional rhetoric—be sensitive to students, make language meaningful, increase communication—I sometimes consider the clichéd rhetoric as postcard images. But ironically, just as the Nigerian students were more angry with the words on the back of the postcard than with the idealized picture on the front of the postcard, so many of us tend to see the questions about the clichéd rhetoric in our profession as the problem rather than the idealized/unreal rhetoric itself. Thus, when teachers

'It is perhaps critical to point out that the 1961 postcard incident was the exception rather than the rule: no other incident since has caused a comparable stir in spite of the fact that tens of thousands of Peace Corps volunteers have subsequently been living in scores of countries for 30 years plus.'¹

say their experience contradicts a theory, they sometimes question their experience rather than the theory. When some teachers do not understand a technical term, they see their own misunderstanding or lack of insight as the problem rather than the term and the ability of the person using the term to provide examples that enable others to engage the term.

Why didn't the university students say that the picture on the postcard was farther from reality than the

written words? Why did I and fellow volunteers not realize that what we considered innocuous was incendiary and insulting to our hosts? Why are we constantly taken in by what on one level we know does not represent the territory? And on another level trapped by our own view of reality as if our view of reality and reality are identical? But who of us can easily resist the palm trees and glittering skies on picture postcards? And who of us wants to buy postcards with pictures of a beach under swaying palms that also shows flies, mosquitoes, and garbage, with a paper mill close at hand spewing out waste water for good measure?

When we buy picture postcards with one view of reality, we are free to compose our own view of reality in the blank space reserved for messages. But the blank space provides less freedom than we realize. For one thing, the amount of space available is limited. For another, the message is public, even if we manage to get it into the slot in the postbox. Those who collect the mail, sort it, and deliver it all have access to our words. Finally, the place we mail it from often provides a context within which we compose our message. Although I could send a picture postcard of the Manhattan skyline on one side and a message about sheep farming on the other, the words we write are usually related to the place we are in as well as the picture on the postcard.

In the same way, the freedom we have in our professional lives is more constrained than it seems. When I and others write, teach, and present at professional conferences, the representations of reality we share, as well as the way we present our realities, are our choice. But the word *freedom* might be too strong. The usual question after a presentation at a conference is, “How did it go?” with, “Great.” being the expected answer. Almost all course evaluations have items on clarity of aims, clarity of expectations, and clarity of the syllabus. My response to “How did it go?” is usually, “I don’t know how it went. Ask some who came, or, better, overhear them talking about the session.” Participants in my courses or workshops are likely to say things such as, “There is no course outline?” “I enjoyed the guerrilla theater presentation you made.” “What was he getting at.” “What does he want us to do?” These comments remind us of constraints we have, and thus make me say that the word *freedom* might be too strong. Why is a presentation that does not start with aims and frameworks guerrilla theater and not just something different, even if the words *guerrilla theater* are meant in a positive way? Why are unclear aims an anomaly, or even considered different, rather than one of many options?

The subtle constraints that surround us in the form of course evaluations, formulaic questions about presentations at conventions, and in expectations of students have a powerful impact on us all. In fact, perhaps the subtle constraints are no less powerful than the more direct set of constraints I was introduced to soon after I arrived at the teacher-training college where I started my professional career.

Picture yourself, or anyone you wish, sitting on a stool around 10-inches in diameter and 24-inches high in the front of a classroom of 40 to 50 first-year pupils in an elementary school—surrounded with picture postcard palm trees, believe it or not! (But with infinitesimal sand flies too small to be seen even if photographed for the picture postcard ferociously biting us.) Sitting next to you is a person who has been supervising teachers for 30 years, on the same size stool and in the same location: in front of the classroom facing 80 to 100 eager/excited/vibrant eyes—none with glasses.

My mentor—he of the 30 years of experience—is wearing knee socks spotless, perfectly ironed white shorts and a perfectly ironed short-sleeved shirt, wearing a necktie—tied up,” as the practice teachers used to say. I am wearing baggy trousers and a wash-and-wear, button-down blue shirt ironed, but not perfectly. In common, we are wearing sandals, (Many of the students do not worry about sandals versus shoes as they have flip-flops on, at the most, their own feet in their natural state, at the least.) Heat and humidity, close to the figures we always wished we had earned on any test we took, add atmosphere.

The practice teacher we were observing was less shocked than I at the command shouted by my mentor: “You call yourself a teacher! Sit down and let me show you how to teach!” By less shocked, I mean that the teacher remained standing in a balanced position, not visibly shaken, while I almost fell off my stool. But maybe he remained balanced because it is harder to fall when standing than when sitting on a stool 10-inches in diameter. At any rate, the practice teacher moved to the side—not accepting the proffered space on my mentor’s now vacant stool next to me.

The practice teacher and I then watched as he of the perfectly ironed white shorts took over the class. The practice teacher appeared to me to watch without moving one muscle/nerve/hair—as if he was frozen stiff, in spite of the high temperature and humidity. (The only movement was his flowing perspiration.)

After around 10 minutes, what now became our mentor rather than my mentor moved toward his vacant stool and simultaneously shouted this crystal clear admonition: “Now see if you can teach right.” He resumed his position on his stool as if he had just gotten up momentarily to express a warm, pleasant greeting to a passing friend. I thought of the students’ rage at the lines on the postcard and their benign neglect of the lies/distortions/exaggerations in the pictorial representation. I seemed to be the only shocked person in the room, however. Neither the practice teacher nor the students, nor perhaps not surprisingly our mentor ‘acted as if anything untoward or unusual had happened. My view of reality seemed to be the only one affected. The lenses that I had worn until this time were shattered. Partly as a result, I have since that time tried to develop multiple lenses, the more the better, so I’ve got a lot of spares even if a few are shattered at the same time, which is not that uncommon! To accept and believe the first interpretation that comes to my mind, to assume we know rather than to accept the ambiguity of life as well as the need to realize that not knowing can lead to genuine questioning and the potential of seeing something we did not see before have become central to me.

No subtle constraints of a course evaluation form our mentor. No subtle implication that a presentation should go well. No. Instead, we had direct constraints from our mentor. Our mentor knew what was right: his reality. Had our mentor trained me and fellow volunteers, would we have mentioned what we observed in our letters and postcards? Or would we have kept our reality to ourselves?

At the end of practice teaching—around 3 weeks after my initiation into what might be called intense direct method—I received another lesson in direct constraints. The profound lesson in direct constraints and stifling of dissent from he of the “sit down; I’ll show you how to teach” school was shortly followed by a similar lesson showing me again why we all have a tendency to go along and accept, at least outwardly, or why constraints constrain us. An inspector from another area of the country was scheduled to evaluate all the practice teachers from our teacher-training college. Official title: External Inspector.

A few days before the External Inspector’s visit, as soon as the practice teachers found out the name of our External Inspector, the practice teachers asked me to reserve the school vehicle for the day of the inspection. It seemed that our External Inspector was into the use of pictures and objects. So, on the morning of the inspection, one hour before our usual meeting time, when we ordinarily met to walk to the primary school we used for practice teaching, less than 2 miles distant, I parked the school vehicle near the houses/dorms where the teachers lived. Three trips to and from the school were needed as the teachers had assembled what amounted to three vehicle loads of objects and pictures. (No teachers could fit in the vehicle; their materials alone made up the loads.)

For 3 weeks of practice teaching, they had used nothing more than graphic and striking chalkboard sketches and objects they had picked up around the grounds of the primary school or had asked the pupils to bring to class. But for the External Inspector, three vehicle loads of objects and pictures were needed. A new reality was taking over. New lenses were going to observe us or project another reality on us.

My mentor (who was really our mentor, as all the practice teachers also experienced his reality) and the External Inspector would probably not have accepted the claim in the last line of the postcard: “Nothing in training could have prepared us for this!” They would have probably argued that had the training been prescriptive enough, it would have been effective. Their beliefs, reflected in their behaviors, also seem to contradict Whitman’s oft-quoted line: “You must travel it (the road to learning and experience) for you sele’ (Whitman, 1950, p. 46).

But there is more to the story of our mentor and the External Inspector. When our mentor was not observing teachers he had set models for, these teachers were not following his models. And recall that the three loads of visuals were only necessary on one day: the day of the inspection. Remember, before the day of the inspection, no visuals were used other than sketches and objects gathered around the school compound. The behaviors of the teachers raise profound questions about the power of prescriptions and lend power to the claim that “Nothing in training could have prepared us for this,” short of experiencing a wide range of possibilities.

Between demos—demonstrations, not demolitions, or maybe a bit of both—my job was to make suggestions to the practice teachers. All the practice teachers had at least 2 years of experience more than I had—a prerequisite for entry into the teacher-training college where I had been assigned, but not a

prerequisite for teaching there. Many had as many as 20 years of experience. Partly as a result, I was not immediately ready to ~assume our mentor's model. I had a very unclear picture of the reality around 'me—looking at first with my lenses as a major in English and Spanish literature, with a bit of Peace Corps training, and subsequently with even these lenses shattered—and, as a result, could not impose my reality on anyone else.

Additionally, the teaching material was all news to me. In history class, Lord Lugard was as unknown to me as the elementary-school students the practice teachers were instructing. *Poles, rods, and perches* as units of measurement were as foreign to me as *pounds, shillings, and pence*. I joined the children in grappling with the conversion of pence and shillings into pounds during math lessons. Remember that in 1961, the monetary system in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya, which used money based on the British monetary system, had not yet been decimalized.

Add to the totally new information, the extensive experience of the teachers under my charge and the need to deal with 40 kids in each class sitting three or four to a bench designed for two, books often shared by groups, and there was no question about my showing the teachers how to teach:

imposing my reality! Even if I had not been inclined toward believing in traveling a road on my own to learn, there was really no option. Both the teachers and I had to travel many roads for ourselves. Fortunately for me, partly as a result of the fact that there were two streams of each class—two first grades (two standard ones to be precise), two second grades, and so forth—we did not have to travel the roads by ourselves alone. We were able to travel many as genuine partners. The teachers and I agreed that I would spend half of each period observing one of the two practice teachers in each grade. I took copious notes of each part of the lesson, during times when I was not struggling with the conversion of shillings to pounds or the distinction between the exploits of Lord Lugard and Mungo Park.

During planning and critiquing time, I would use my notes to describe to both teachers of each grade what the other teacher had done. Each practice that one teacher used that the other did not became an alternative practice for the other to try. I did not hide the fact that the suggestions for alternatives were not mine. Nor did I hide the fact that I did not know the material being taught. In fact, not knowing the material enabled me to ask genuine questions of the teachers, which in many cases enabled them to demonstrate or illustrate the meaning in ways that they could not have done had I already known and understood the material they were teaching. I also could ask questions about teaching practices that I did not have the answers to, as I had never before been in Nigerian primary schools. We were able to jointly build a reality or two and exchange a range of lenses in a genuine way.

Over time, I began to notice some practices that had consequences that the teachers liked, and, because I was observing, I could sometimes point out something about their practices that they had not noticed. It is almost always easier to see how another does something than to see how one does something oneself. A golf coach can point out moves to a golfer who would fall over if he or she tried to observe a movement as the movement was in process. Because I was genuinely ignorant, and thanks to the fact that the External Inspector determined their future, I was able to play a role that I prefer to play but which over time has been more and more difficult: a joint traveler. Not a fellow traveler.²

Immediately after I completed teaching in Nigeria, I became a trainer of other Peace Corps volunteers. From the role of ignorant observer, traveling various roads with teachers more experienced than me, I was placed in the role of experienced guide and mentor, with a bit of External Inspector thrown in, as my opinions were asked for during the process of selecting and weeding out volunteers.

As I took more courses and had more training experience, the asking of genuine questions became more and more difficult, due in large part to the role I was in. No matter how much I said that I really did not have an answer in my mind to questions I posed, those in my workshops and classes assumed that I was asking questions to lead them to a particular place. The expert mantle encapsulated me all too quickly. The trap of expert status on those of us in supposed expert positions is set both by the constraints of expectations of what a course should be, together with how one should make a presentation at a professional meeting. The function rooms at hotels and convention centers hosting conventions contain a podium, with a microphone and pitcher of water and a drinking glass in the front of rows of chairs facing the podium. In a subway car, unless there is an accident and a doctor is requested, roles are less differentiated. All are fellow passengers—joint travelers.

I sometimes wonder whether conferring so-called expert status is a way for those who do the conferring to absolve themselves from some responsibility. If I make the dentist responsible for my teeth, and at the

same time fail to follow the dentist's suggestions to floss and brush my teeth, I can still blame the dentist for my cavities. As long as I am considered an expert, those I'm working with also have a reason to depend on me rather than on themselves. Even if my intention in modeling a practice is to illustrate possibilities—to free others—rather than to prescribe a practice, the potential exists that stultification will result, rather than freedom, as the meanings of intentions are jointly determined.

We might also confer expert status because of our lack of trust in ourselves. Let's say I brush and floss my teeth with so much vigor that my gums bleed excessively. When I continue in spite of the pain and blood, I might be valuing the words of advice of an expert above the reality I am experiencing. "As a result of vigorous brushing and flossing, my gums are killing me, but the dentist said brush and floss. And the dentist knows and I don't."

Having been reminded of what we do not know on many tests and in many classroom encounters and exchanges, it is easy to see how self-doubt might occur. After all, we are much more likely to have been asked to underline the words we do not know as we read rather than to cross them out and underline the words we do know. The possible reasons we confer expert status, like the reasons we resist learning, and like most explanations, are multiple.

Each time I do a workshop, make a presentation at a professional conference, teach a class of teachers in a graduate program, discuss a lesson I have observed with the teacher of the class and other observers, write an article or book about teaching practices or other ways to observe, the line "Nothing in training could have prepared us for this!" comes to my mind. Although I had read Whitman's "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass* in college, I have reread the following closing lines a number of times since the postcard incident, finding that they continue to express a central dilemma of my entire professional and personal life.

I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!).
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and
The public road.
Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you.
(In spite of a thorough Peace Corps training program at
Harvard University and University College Ibadan.)
You must travel it for yourself.
[Nothing in training could have prepared us for this]
(Whitman, 1950, 46)

Whitman's claim is, of course, paraphrased by me and countless other teachers on a regular basis in questions such as, "What can I do to free rather than constrain those I teach? And in the process, can I or anyone else make a real difference? Or, would those we think we free have been able to free themselves without us? What difference, if any, does any of my teaching make? To what degree can I get another person to don my lenses to see a slice of reality I consider critical? To what degree can my experiences prevent others from falling the ways I have fallen or enable others to ascend in ways I have ascended?"

Again, Whitman (1950) said what I and those I work with must do: "You are also asking me questions and I hear you./I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself" (46).

While during normal waking hours, I am sometimes slowed down by these questions; while experiencing jet lag at 3:00 a.m., the skepticism of these questions has excited me. At 3:00 a.m., I can entertain the assumption that whatever I do is potentially a total waste of time. Accepting this assumption means that any insight I or a person I am working with gains provides evidence to negate the assumption! The questions thus lead me on to continue to play with what I do as I seek to find out for myself.

However, seeking to find out for myself by myself, alone, is like trying to use a pair of scissors with only one blade. Simultaneously asking what difference my work with teachers makes in my own teaching and beliefs about teaching and the way I live provides the other blade of a pair of scissors for me. Scissors, to cut, like the tango, require two: a pair of blades. Without others, neither I nor anyone can find out much,

as learning must be giving up as well as gaining.

The need I have for others to enable me to travel roads on my own at first seems to be paradoxical, if not contradictory. But I feel I need others to have experiences with so I can make choices. The insights, knowledge, and advice of others provides me with choices as well as stimulation. With choices, I can compare. Information and insights from others can also serve as benchmarks to see to what degree the changes I perceive I am making ~ in words I am, in fact, making in actions as well. Finally, I can make discoveries others might have already made my own.

When one of my daughters was around 3, she suddenly put her hand in her pocket and shouted “pocket!” She had used her pockets for a long time; we had used the word *pocket* as in “the candy is in your pocket; I have the key in my pocket; empty your pockets.” Yet for some reason, all of a sudden, she was able to discover on her own the connection between the phenomenon and the word that those she had been around had already made (Bronowski, 1956). “You must travel the road for yourself” would be Whitman’s explanation, with the implicit reminder that there are almost always others on the road to observe and get information from.

Why do people act lines in plays over and over? There are excellent films of the best actors and actresses acting the lines. Does not each want to reinvent the lines just as my daughter reinvented *pocket*? Each of us yearns to create and recreate for ourselves what has already been created by others for themselves. Yet, the frequent remark: There is no point in reinventing the wheel. In fact, each of us has to reinvent the wheel even as we see others using wheels! Why do we even consider preventing people from reinventing wheels? Think of the excitement those who first discovered wheels must have experienced!

Of course, models and prescriptions and advice and information are needed for each of us to experience and recreate our own ways of teaching. But models must be presented and seen as samples of possibilities or prods to question what we do. If they are given as samples of what is true and light, they are more likely to be stultifying rather than liberating. Guidelines from professional organizations, degree requirements, and experiences required for teaching licenses try to ensure quality. But they also limit freedom and stifle change. The lenses from these sources are ground in exceedingly similar ways and the tints vary less than is needed for encouraging freedom.

To help others to see models as samples of possibilities in a teacher education setting rather than as samples of what is right and acceptable, I require constant flip-flops of models rather than mastery of the models. After I see a show-and-tell lesson, I ask that the teacher re-teach the same lesson as a problem-solving lesson. But when I see another teacher provide a problem-solving lesson, I ask that this teacher re-teach the same lesson as a show-and-tell lesson. Require? No matter how much pressure I might bring to bear, in the final analysis, although I can require anything, I cannot guarantee compliance. Resistance is part of learning and teaching. Allowing others to travel their own road can lead to as much resentment as trying to have others conform to a set of steps to follow. But I prescribe flip-flops of various teaching practices—urging us all to try the opposite—as firmly as our mentor and the External Inspector had urged adherence to their realities.

The matching and re-matching of labels such as *show and tell* with practices is my way of trying to enable myself and others to experience traveling the road by ourselves through joint exploration. It represents my attempt to illustrate the negotiation required by Bakhtin’s (1981) assertion that “the word in language is half someone else’s it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (p. 292).

The matching and re-matching of labels requires constant shifting of the lenses we have, the trying on of new ones, and the shattering of some, as well. The matching also forces us to look beyond talk to action. As Portia reminded us at Shylock’s trial. “If to do good were as easy as to say what were good to do, chapels would be churches and poor men’s cottages, rich men’s palaces” (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene ii, lines 13–15). Talk unrelated to actions becomes empty rhetoric, bromides and clichés, eye patches that obscure reality rather than lenses to refocus and multiply our views of reality.

I am afraid that my attempts to explore along with those I work with is my own illusion. Can a person seen at conferences for 25 years be viewed by those new to the field as a fellow explorer? Can teachers at workshops see a person who is affiliated with an old/large/expensive graduate school as a fellow explorer? Can a person whose name appears in a bibliography now and then and has had some journal articles reprinted in anthologies and had books advertised in catalogs be seen as a fellow explorer by those who attend workshops I am invited to give? Thinning and graying hair alone contribute to expert status, even

without these other badges of rank and power and authority.

Can I as a professor enable others with less official status in the club called schooling to jointly create? Can I and those I work with construct meaning together and discover together rather than try to please each other, even when courses are pass/fail and the pass is written on the grade sheet well before the course is over? Can I really try new lenses at the same time that I am engaging those I work with in activities similar to ones I had provided in a previous term? Can I discard, or even hold in abeyance, perceptions I have developed through years of observing and analyzing lessons so that those I am working with can discover the perceptions on their own?

My students pay more for each class session than for a box at the opera or a couple dozen seats at a movie theater or sporting event. With such an investment for each session, how do they feel when I share self-discoveries with them and point out how their comments and questions taught me? Hey, you're the one who is being paid to teach us!" is an unspoken thought of at least some students. Why do I not supplement travels and explorations with some slide shows? Provide more of what many seem to want?

I push others to try alternatives. How can I not try alternatives? I keep asking myself whether I am resisting change as much as those in classes and workshops, and in the same ways. Except I have less pressure on me to decrease my resistance. Concerns, such as getting positive letters of recommendation, provide impetus to some to stop resisting, or at least to pretend to cooperate. But I have no pressure to stop resisting. I am tenured. I have enough requests for consulting to keep me busy. I have enough opportunities to get what I write published. I have been president of TESOL, as well as of one of its largest affiliates.

But to resist simply because one is in a secure position makes no real sense. Do I avoid lecturing and reading papers because I am unable to? Or because I see these modes of delivery as symbols of the expert telling the non expert what is known? I have enjoyed many lectures and papers others have given. I have been stimulated by them. And if I really wanted chapels to be churches, why do I not expand my repertoire and supplement my guerrilla theater/travel routine with lectures in class and the reading of papers at conferences?

I lecture little because of the difficulty of transferring what I know. Some might be impressed by my telling what I know. And I might instill the hope in some that when they get to my state, they might know as much as I do—hopefully more. No, I don't mind telling an apartment guest that the round key is for the front door and the square one for the back door of the apartment. I overlook the fact that trying both would only take a second and that my guest might get the right key in the right door by chance. I feel a bit bad if my guest forgets my instruction, uses the round key for the back door, and then curses himself for being stupid as I told him which key was which. But I can do the usual now and then, for small things. A bit of direct information can decrease tensions and make guests feel that they are not going to be visiting in the apartment of a madman. I even give short lectures now and then in spite of my reflections on why I consider them a very minor part of my practices.

On the other hand, why must we assume both in our professional and personal encounters that the other person does not know what we know or cannot do what we can do? Does not my experience and reading have the potential for limiting my vision as well as expanding it? Too many lenses can slow down our take on a situation, make it more complex than it needs to be for the conversations we are having at the time.

"I don't have any previous experience in the field"—not meaning the place to frolic or play ball—is a frequent plea or admission or statement from some MA candidates in my classes at the beginning of each term. Some seem to be asking for a reading list, others for a few office hours so I can share my great knowledge/experience with them and bring them up to snuff. My comment, ~Lovely, you will be able to provide a perspective I might not have" is variously reacted to. Some no doubt consider requesting a tuition refund, others think I am simply trying to reassure them. The fact that I am genuinely delighted with the possibility of a potentially fresh perspective seems not to be accepted. The idea that I, a professor, can be ignorant, and thus learn requires a change in expectations for some (Ranciere, 1991).

But in the end, I return to Whitman.

YOU must travel it for yourself.

You must travel it for YOURSELF.
YOU MUST TRAVEL IT FOR YOURSELF.
You must travel it for yourself. (46)

And these variously stressed renditions are only a few of the possibilities. Tone of voice, pitch, speed, emotional overtone, accompanying gestures, body movements, and breath stops—provide a wider range of possibilities.

I recently had my first class meeting of the semester in a park, with a group of largely inexperienced teachers. I was bringing up the end of the lines of students so they all had sat down and arranged themselves before I arrived. You guessed it. They formed a large half circle with a large space in the middle so that I could sit in front of them all and expound. Few of them had previous experience in the field. But when allowed to sit in any formation in what was a new field, literally, for none of the students had previously visited the park where we were sitting, they assumed the canonical positions with teacher/expert in front. No directions were given, and none seemed to be needed! The podium, microphone, pitcher of water facing rows of chairs model at professional conferences was recreated in the park.

Some anthropologists urge that when we look at reality, we need to try to discard our previous perceptions of reality. We need to both don new lenses and shatter our present ones. But as 35-year-old postcard messages and recent seating arrangements in the park for a first class remind me, the discarding of previous perceptions of reality—the shattering of old lenses or the donning of new lenses—is not easy. “We don’t have conversations; conversations have us” is a claim that has been intriguing me recently more than almost any other. The variation, “We don’t acquire language; language acquires us” is equally intriguing (Gadamer, 1975, p. 62; Heidegger, 1962, p. 252 and 262, quoted in Arcario, 1994).

When I speak to my children and suddenly realize that I sound like my father, when I pucker my lips and make faces at babies and realize that I am acting like my father, and when my comments to a relative at a funeral sound like comments others have made to me, I begin to wonder again about the degree to which we can move beyond the boundaries that encompass us, to not only try new lenses, but to have them genuinely affect our realities. While we might have to travel the road by ourselves, the road has boundaries and directions and other travelers that might restrict us more than we perceive.

Montessori (1967) told the story of a nanny in the park who told the child she was caring for that it was time to leave. The child was in the midst of filling a small bucket with stones as the announcement was made. As the nanny wanted to arrive with her charge at the appointed time, she started to put some stones in the child’s bucket. The child started crying as soon as the nanny started to help her. The lesson from the encounter to Montessori was, “Let them fill their own buckets.” Ironically, for some, by the time graduate school comes around and professional preparation begins, help in filling buckets is still sought and expected.

My original professional goal in life—after discarding early ideas of being a chef or a dentist—was to be a kindergarten teacher. Working with kids seemed very, very appealing. Observing some using their noses to taste food by inhaling it, observing others making mud pies and realizing that dirt and puddles are things to be relished rather than avoided, wondering about outbursts of anger and crying spells, being amazed that running noses seem not to interfere with anything, and seeing the exhilaration of kids zooming down slides and not caring whether those who come to play have degrees or experiences but hoping that anyone around can join in jumping rope or lying on the grass to be amazed and mystified by the insects crawling around, as well as the grass itself.

Whitman tried to remind us of the mystery of grass in *Leaves of Grass*.

A child said *What is grass?* fetching it to me with full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner’s name some way in the comers, that we may see and
remark, and say *Whose?*
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass.
I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.

(6, 31)

Whitman somehow retained and symbolized the exuberance, freshness, curiosity, and ability to keep wondering about the multiple meanings of experience, the exhilaration that genuine questioning of convention and accepted perceptions can bring. No pat answers or picture postcard realities for him. And, I hope, no pat answers or postcard realities in my work as a teacher/learner, either. What would kindergartners have drawn or written

on a postcard from Nigeria? Would some have drawn flies on the beach or market scenes? Would they have drawn messages unrelated to the pictures? Had I taken them to the park for their first class, would they have sat in a half circle, expecting me to sit in the middle to teach them?

A lot of buckets filled by others to arrange for getting emptied and filled in different ways. A lot of different postcard realities to try to see with new lenses and to write about. A lot more different time zones to induce more dreamlike episodes to help free me from the restraints and doubts of day-to-day postcard realities in the same time zone.

²During the McCarthy Congressional hearings in the 1950s, some individuals, although themselves not members of the Communist Party in the United States, were accused of associating with known members. Such individuals were often called “fellow travelers.”

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POSTCARD REALITIES

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