
VIGNETTES

Editor's Introduction

Vignette: [French, *vigne*, vine]. Originally a running ornament of vine leaves, as used in decoration, vignette now refers to a short descriptive or evocative episode, or a dainty poem or artistic drawing.

– *Oxford English Dictionary* (2008, online)

Evocative episodes describes well the two stories in this section. The OED goes on to state that evoke means “to call forth; *esp.* to summon up (spirits, etc.) by the use of magic charms.” In each of these stories, a certain magic “wafts under the door,” seeps in “through cracks in the window sill,” providing a “whisper of difference,” to use Laura Jewett’s metaphorical language. The point each of these quite different though strikingly similar vignettes makes is that creative thoughts — really creative acts (“knowing-to,” using Maheux and Lajoie’s language) — “waft” and “seep” into a situation, bringing a “whisper of difference.” Hearing, listening for, these whispers, ones that make a difference, is a teacher’s art; an art that unfortunately is not taught in our teacher education programs.

At first glance, the Maheux and Lajoie vignette is quite opposite the Jewett one. Maheux and Lajoie talk of improvisation, or spur of the moment acts; Jewett talks, with science teachers — bred in an analytic tradition — of “tethering or corraling” our ideas, lest they become runaways. Such a reading though is superficial at best. Each vignette deals with the issue of how we bring creativity into play in our teaching and while the approaches are different, they are amazingly similar.

Maheux and Lajoie start with the proposition that teachers are not mere transmitters of knowledge, automatons of delivery. Rather, they are real humans, alive with passions, goals, values, beliefs. In their human acts of teaching, teachers will confront “the unexpected.” How to help them, even to train them, to so deal? Maheux and Lajoie say, through improvisation, and use role-playing as the vehicle for developing an improvisational mode of teaching. Here teachers and students, students and students

exchange roles on ways to present a subject to be studied. Issues of teaching, indeed of the nature of that being taught emerge. While the subject here is mathematics, the method could be used in any subject.

The students in the Maheux and Lajoie story are undergraduate, elementary education students, young teachers-to-be. Those in the Jewett story are seasoned veterans, chosen elite, mostly secondary science teachers, participators in a grant designed to “provide sustained and high intensity professional development.” In Laura Jewett’s insightful phrasing, all were “carefully cultivated purveyors of the empirical, prepared to defend the truth of their discipline with evidence and logic.” Yet these teachers, too, had human attributes: “they had divining visions of a wonderful science curriculum, one ‘designed to excite wonder, awe and appreciation of the world and the place of human beings in it.’” New understandings were developed through a “process of recursive/discursive inquiry,” essentially a story circle. Here a ritual occurred, a hermeneutic ritual, different from the scientific/logical/rational one the teachers had imbibed and transmitted for years. The notion of ritual, though, gave a sense of structure, at the same time it caused disequilibrium, to those in the circle. The ritual began with a student asking a “hermeneutic question based on course readings.” “The student ‘hermeneut’ then assigned the amount of time each participant would get to respond to their interpretation . . . uninterrupted within the established time constraints.” The tightness of this method, the corralling of ideas is obvious. What might not be so obvious is the power of this method for this group, trained in the rigors of logical empiricism. What emerged was a sense of “self-reflectivity,” the constraints providing “sources of coherence that allow a collective to maintain a focus of purpose/identity.” Jewett ends with the comment “paradoxically we had to tether our troubadour in order to set her/his creative powers free.”

What fascinates me in these two vignettes is not just the different approaches used for different situations, but that in each approach creativity was set free — indeed induced —by the adroit use of constraints.

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