Shall We Dance?

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My teaching and my research, particularly with respect to my research on second language acquisition and on the writing of multilingual learners, have been of a piece, with my pedagogy and scholarship informing and contributing to one another. This joint work has generated a number of critical principles about the process of learning and about the process of promoting the acquisition of language and academic literacy. At first glance these principles may appear to be about teaching multilingual learners in courses specifically dedicated to them. But I want to emphasize these principles bear on my teaching of all students, whether they are first year composition students, upper level English majors, honors students, or graduate students. These principles and the research from which they are derived have given me insight into the benefits of viewing each course as an unfamiliar culture and to seeing learners entering a new course as necessarily undergoing a process of acquisition.

With this view of a classroom as an unfamiliar culture in mind, what does this mean for teaching and learning? For me this means that I recognize that the language, discourse practices, and conventions of a course are situated in and specific to that course, and are acquired when students are actively engaged in work that they find meaningful and purposeful, in work that both recognizes and builds on their understanding. In order for learning to be an ongoing process of approximation, whereby students gain greater fluency in a course over time, I try to give students multiple ways into the subject matter, providing opportunities for them to take risks with and share their responses and interpretations, to test out their ideas, to apply new concepts to their observations, and to reconsider and revise their assumptions and interpretations. In these ways students not only to contribute to the work of the course but the
roles and identities of its participants shift from time to time, with students sharing and teaching, and with me discovering and learning. (To draw on the analogy of classroom as culture, I see students not so much in a process of acculturation, with the implication that students alone are undergoing change, but see students and me as engaging in a process of transculturation, with the implication that those entering as well as those who are already inhabitants of a culture are transformed.) Given students’ unfamiliarity with what they are being asked to do, as students grapple with new material, concepts, and terms, I anticipate that their efforts may fall short, that their efforts may reveal their confusions and misreadings. Linguists who study the process of language acquisition have underscored the notion that when studying a language, errors are not only inevitable but beneficial, for such unanticipated linguistic formulations often suggest the logic of a learner’s reasoning, the process of hypothesis testing and creative construction, as a learner attempts to use the target language. This is the kind of perspective that shapes my response to students’ struggles. I anticipate that such struggles are likely to occur. And for the same reason, I refrain from making easy predictions on the basis of a student’s early performance in a course when these struggles, understandably, may be most apparent. I trust that it is in the process of making these attempts that students will develop strategies and insights that will allow them to more easily negotiate the work of the course.

How does this process play out in my own teaching? In an honors course I am currently teaching, a course called Educational Encounters, in which we are examining representations of teaching and learning through film and literature, you might find students engaged by the work of the course in the following ways:
you might see students reading and responding to reproduced excerpts from their writing; or you might see a small group discussing questions I had posed or questions that I had asked them to compose about the interpretation or implication of a text; you might see students writing
briefly in class about an issue raised by a text and then sharing what they had written; you might see a student presenting and analyzing a clip from a selected film; you might see students working in groups and recording themes or concepts on blackboards all around the room, followed by these groups presenting their ideas to the rest of the class; you might see students reading aloud a passage that they found compelling or revealing or one that they found elusive or confusing. And you would see me interacting with these students in any number of ways: I might be providing background context or specialized terms for naming the issues they raise, or acknowledging and building on students’ insights and observations, or asking them to provide evidence from the text in order to back up their assumptions or make their responses to a text more explicit. And I would be trying to demonstrate to them how going back into a text allows readers to reconsider and re-vise their initial readings, a practice most of us engage in, especially if we find a text particularly demanding.

As you may be able to tell from these glimpses into the scenes of this classroom, writing plays a critical role in not only furthering students’ thinking and learning but in making that thinking and learning possible. In my courses, writing is central, for not only does it represent a demonstration of what students have already learned, but comes to serve as the very source for their learning. I want students to have a firsthand understanding of what E.M. Forster meant when he famously said: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” It is in the process of writing that students make sense of and analyze texts, figure out and generate ideas, contribute to the construction of knowledge in a course, and yes, acquire the language and terms of a course as well as a growing confidence with using them. And writing not only contributes to students’ writing facility, but to the ways in which they read, the writing pushing them to read more closely and more deeply. Writing even affects the extent to which students participate in class, for writing becomes a way of rehearsing the ideas that they then share. In this way, students
come to use writing the very ways in which we use writing in our own academic work, as we write our way into understanding and articulating our ideas, into making discoveries, and into generating insights. And importantly, these writing-to-learn possibilities afford me (and student readers when students’ writing is shared) the opportunity to not only discover what students are thinking but that they are thinking, a critical realization that I might otherwise not have had.

While these principles are at work in my courses, I want to emphasize that my pedagogical practices do not represent a fixed set of methods and solutions. I see myself, too, as in the process of approximation as I have developed strategies, reconsidered and built on past attempts, tested out new theories, examined approaches in light of students’ work, looking to this work for clues as to how to proceed—all of this very much a process of learning itself. And, as in the case of all learning, I, too, have experienced those moments of consternation when my own efforts seem to have fallen short, when I am faced with questions or incidents that confound me. But these moments do not call my principles into question. Rather, they confirm how messy, complicated, and irreducible teaching can be. I have come to see that, just as this is the case for students, insight and understanding come not so much from pre-determined and predictable answers but in the struggle of searching for them. Just as this is true for our scholarly work, this notion applies as well to our teaching. And so I, too, along with my students, engage in the process of reading and revising my efforts, trusting that these efforts will contribute to my ongoing acquisition of teaching fluency (with its double meaning—the process of teaching so that students gain greater fluency and my own fluency of teaching).

Given that I view learning and teaching as a two way process that is dynamic, interdependent, and reciprocal, I’d like to make a connection here to what George Hart brought to mind when he reproduced in the invitation for today’s event the title of an essay called “Dancing with Professors.” In this essay, historian Patricia Limerick draws on the metaphor of
dance to analyze and critique the language and practices of academics. But I want to appropriate this metaphor and use it quite differently here, using it for the ways in which it can illuminate teaching and learning and see them in fresh ways. Just as a course can be viewed as a culture in its own right, dance too can be viewed as a culture with its own choreography, rituals, and moves. And so, if we were to use the metaphor of dance or the teaching of dance to think about teaching and learning, what would that suggest? We would envision teachers and learners as engaged partners, with one leading, guiding and signaling the other; there would be ongoing opportunities to try out, practice, and approximate new moves; there would be a cycle of recursiveness as we would be moving back in order to go forward, looking for evidence that certain steps and moves are fluent and fluid before more complicated ones are introduced; we would encourage and congratulate sustained efforts, even when these efforts are somewhat tentative and awkward; and when things go really well, we might observe the learner offering interpretations, improvising, and appropriating the dance in ways that the partner with more expertise could not have anticipated. When things go really well, both partners would feel gratified and take delight and pride in the ways in which the newer dancer takes risks and begins to think outside of the box, or should I say, outside of the box step. To extend the metaphor further, we would need to acknowledge as well, that while learners may have demonstrated their growing facility with one dance, the process begins anew as they encounter a dance that is less familiar, one that requires a new language of moves.

There are probably any number of ways that each of you could apply this metaphor to learning and teaching. But I want to close by sharing what students in the course on Educational Encounters wrote when, in anticipation of my talk today, I asked them to freewrite for a few minutes about dancing as a metaphor for teaching and learning. I gave them the prompt “If dancing were a metaphor for teaching and learning,...” And here is what some of them wrote:
Teaching and learning would not only involve learning the steps but doing them.

You would have to read your partner, gauge their strengths and their weaknesses. It will take practice and understanding. There will be high points and low but both must be equally engaged in realizing and achieving the goals of the dance.

It would involve a lot of leading and a lot of following but I think the positions could change so the students would also teach and the teachers would follow.

It would involve the creative applications of the basics.

It would involve give and take and lots of practice and interaction.

It would involve working together as one to make sure they are in synchrony with one another.

It would involve freedom and fluidity.

It would involve trust in my partner ... As a learner I should not feel rushed, humiliated or judged. When I finally learn the rhythm, then we can move into complicated twists and turns.

It would mean 2 people working together—cooperating—to create something that moves and flows as both work closely together for a common goal.

It would involve passion for what you’re learning and pride in what you know and what you can learn.

It involves the cooperation of two separate souls who combine their efforts as one in order for each step and movement to flow. It is O.K. to fail because that shows that you took a risk, that you are taking chances—you try, you stop, and you try again. There is no real failure unless you and your partner let go of your hope to dance together.

It would be collaborative and negotiated, guided and critiqued. The ultimate product is sculpted, broadened, and transformed by the input of others until the dance becomes something far more profound, complicated, and full of depth than it originally was, and this transformation affects all who are engaged in this process of co-creating.

I love what these students had to say as they reflected on the dance of teaching and learning, inviting us to imagine entering our classrooms, extending our hands, and asking students, “Shall We Dance?”