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## EDITOR'S PAGE

The articles in this issue of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* touch on a wide range of themes. At the same time, they stand on common ground: the understanding that teachers educate for humanity and that educational practice is driven by moral and ethical considerations.

Philip Hall, the author of "Caravaggio's Last Breath," understands teaching as realizing opportunities "to sculpt ideas and help others discover the meaning and the essence of their own humanity." He weaves this understanding into an engaging narrative inhabited by visionaries, non-conformists, scientists, and teachers whose discoveries shaped our modern subjectivity. Philip Hall teaches medicine at the University of Manitoba.

In "Simple Stories," Alfred Wiebe outlines the evolution of his professional subjectivity and value system in his professional autobiography. Out of a mosaic of deceptively simple stories emerges a coherent narrative that describes the moral agency of teachers in the lives of young people. Alfred Wiebe wrote this piece on the eve of his retirement from Seven Oaks School Division.

Jack Whitehead is an internationally recognized and widely published action researcher at the University of Bath (United Kingdom). When *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* went online, our journal widened its readership considerably and began to receive submissions from readers outside Seven Oaks School Division. In his article, Jack Whitehead describes ways of consciously creating living educational theories in action research and explores new ways of using Internet technology to represent these theories. This teacher research is charged with moral and ethical significance because it is rooted in the lived experiences of teachers and students in school and society. Imbedded within this article are links that invite the reader to view groundbreaking action research projects on line.

Diane Peters and Janice Hill, who are teachers in Seven Oaks School Division, graciously accepted our invitation to prepare two academic papers for publication in our journal. In "Teaching is a Moral Activity," Diane Peters places the mission statement of our school division into the context of the wider philosophical conversation about the moral heart of teaching. Janice Hill explores the dynamics of constructivist teaching and learning highlighting how this approach respects students as actively learning human beings.

Our thanks go to the authors who are publishing their writing here and to Judy Carpenter who carefully prepared this issue for publication.

**Matthias Meiers**  
**(on behalf of the editorial committee)**

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**CARAVAGGIO'S LAST BREATH**  
**Keynote Address**  
**Divisional Arts Conference: Creating Possibilities**  
**February 11, 2003**

**Philip F. Hall, MD BSc Med FRCS**  
**(Professor, Faculty of Medicine, University of Manitoba)**

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Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to, as Albert Einstein was fond of saying, "have a little think". It is not that I don't have such opportunities elsewhere, but the challenge to step outside my day to day skin is always welcome and to pun shamelessly on the core message and goal of this presentation, *inspiring*. For inspiration, and the hope that I may provide some to you is what this is all about.

I admit that I have little to do with secondary school education now, or for that matter arts education. In my day to day skin I am a "Fetus Doc", an Obstetrician of the academic medical subspecies. In that skin I teach MD and postgraduate medical students at various levels, often reminding myself of Oscar Wilde's sobering statement that "Nothing worth learning can be taught". That would make an intriguing School Board Mission Statement, as would George Bernard Shaw's remark, "The only possible teacher except torture is fine art."

Given those disclaimers, allow me to step outside my day to day skin, "have a little think", and hope that by telling you about Michelangelo Merisi and his last breath, I may tickle you out of your day to day skin too, and leave you a little thinking, and perhaps a little inspired.

So let us go back almost four centuries to mid-July 1610, at the small harbour of Port' Ercole, a Spanish possession within the Papal States about a day's horseback ride south of Rome. A thirty-nine year old man had arrived there from Palo. He had sailed from Naples hoping to carry on to Rome. However, when his ship stopped at Palo he was arrested and imprisoned in the local citadel even though he claimed to be a Knight of St. John. He had been Knight of the Order of Malta recently, but had been expelled. His few remaining belongings, including one or two of his own paintings, were confiscated. For he was a fugitive under a death sentence.

Somehow he regained freedom, perhaps by paying bail or bribe money with funds from his last commission, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (1610) which he had completed for the Genovese Prince Marcantonio Doria. But his ship had already sailed, taking his possessions and he had to beg a ride on a small sailboat called a felucca. His last commissioned work included some of the strongest images of death of any of his

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paintings, no small irony because very soon thereafter he had disappeared and was most likely dead.

By one account, when last seen he was a mess, exhausted and febrile from infected wounds, and then, died perhaps from pneumonia. Another report suggested that he entrusted himself to bad people who assassinated him on the port's beach, where his body was found later. And other sources indicated that he simply disappeared without a trace, his corpse never found. If anyone knew what happened they did not "spill the beans." If his body was found, what was done with it remains a mystery that will probably never be solved. But the next month Rome's *Avvisi*, unofficial daily news agency and ancestor of modern journalism and the official Vatican rag *l'Osservatore Romano*, reported that our man, who was very well known in Rome and much of the Mediterranean world, was dead. Rome's citizens were stunned at this news. His remaining belongings were offered to the Knights of St. John, who refused them, so they were sent to the Viceroy of Naples and thereafter disappeared. And deepening the mystery, only three days after our man vanished and probably died, full pardon from Pope Paul VI arrived at Port' Ercole from Rome; a delegation of the vanished man's friends had accomplished this somehow by intercession with the holy boss.

Whatever happened, our subject's tempestuous, controversial life had been central to culture in a state of siege. It was the era of the Inquisition and Counter-Reformation, of war between philosophies and beliefs from which brilliant achievements in arts and science erupted. And no one's life better embodied the controversies, spirit and essence of those times than the man who had disappeared and perhaps had been murdered. His name was *Michelangelo Merisi*, but he was also called *Marigi*, *Marisi*, *Marresi*, *Merigi*, *Morisius*, *Moriggia*, *Moriaggia*, *Narisi*, *Amarigi*, and *Amerighi*. In Roman court documents he was referred to as *Merisio* and later *Morigi*. His friends called him *Micelangelo*, *Michelagnolo* or *Michele* and he signed his name *Marisi* or just *M*. But despite all of that, you may know him as *Caravaggio*, which he was calling himself by age twenty-five, after the small town in Bergamo province just east of Milan. M probably was born in Milan but had spent part of his childhood in Caravaggio, home of his parents' families.

Caravaggio was born in 1571 to Lucia Aratori, twenty-one year old wife of *Fermo Merici*, also known as *Morisi* or *Merisi*. He was first of their four children. His father was *magister* which meant household administrator and architect-decorator to the Duke of Milan and Marquis da Caravaggio Francesco Sforza I. In 1576 plague struck Milan. The Duke and his court moved to his Marquisate, the town of Caravaggio. M's father, his uncle, and his maternal grandfather died in the epidemic; so his mother had to raise him and his siblings. When Sforza died his estate was inherited by Prince Colonna, who took M under his protection and helped negotiate a four-year apprenticeship with the famed artist Simone Peterzano, a student of Titian. M began his apprenticeship at the age of twelve. Clearly, there was something very special about this very young boy, and someone took the time to recognize and foster that magic.

Caravaggio's fifteen or so surnames, and the dates, places and circumstances of his death are not the only mysteries of his life. I can tell you only a little about him here, but perhaps enough for you to want to learn more about him and pass some of his story on to your students. For if you can't get a student interested in this dude's life, you had better go into administration (see da Vinci, *Study for a Caricature*).



**Study for a Caricature**

Caravaggio's 39 years were wild, controversial, tempestuous, at times outrageous, and almost every one of his paintings was regarded at the time by those in authority as scandalous (see *Sick Self-Portrait* or *Ill Bacchus* 1593-4, age 22). Some time



**Sick Self-Portrait or Ill Bacchus 1593-4**

Around age 22, Caravaggio began to sell his own work through a dealer named Maestro Valenti, who brought him to the attention of Cardinal Francesco del Monte, an influential member of the papal court (see *The Musicians* 1595-6, age 24). The Cardinal was impressed by this young man who had already produced about 40 works.

between age 15 and 19 he headed for Rome and settled into the seedy neighbourhood of Campo Marzio, essentially without means but already incredibly skilled. M began to work as an assistant to various painters of far lesser talent than his own. At heart rebellious and against tradition, our lad was repeatedly arrested and tossed into the slammer. At age 20 he had a major dustup with the Vatican cops. According to the *Avvisi*, Girolano Spampa complained that when he commented unfavourably about certain of M's paintings, the latter had stuck him in the guts with a dagger.



**The Musicians 1595-6**

Soon M was under the Cardinal's protection, living on his premises and receiving a pension, which used to mean salary. At age 24, he was granted a commission to



**St. Matthew and the Angel 1602**

decorate the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigo di Freancesci. This effort, a trio about St. Matthew, was revolutionary in both manner and content as it was done on huge canvases rather than on the chapel walls themselves. It established M as a *pictor celeberrius*, a renowned painter. But the first version of *St. Matthew and the Angel* (1602, age 31) was so astonishing in its realism and treatment of light that it blew his bewildered patrons out of their canonical socks and they made him do the

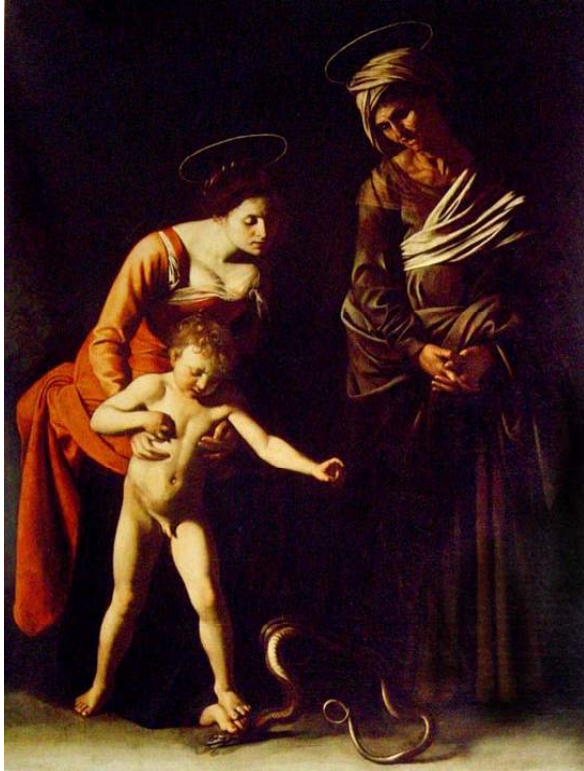
work over again. That first effort survived but was lost in the bombing of Berlin during World War II, and only exists now in photographs.

In 1600, two years before finishing his trio, M was in a dustup with another painter, in 1601 with a soldier and in 1603 with yet another painter. He was tossed again into the clink again for that one. But he carried on and from the *St. Matthew* trio onward almost all of M's works were about religious themes, albeit with revolutionary vision, drama, realism and bathed, even flooded with light. He was soon swamped with orders from private and ecclesiastical patrons.

Commissioned to paint a large *Madonna di Loreto (Madonna of the Pilgrims)* for the Cavaletti Chapel of San Agostino, M typically chose as his model a woman named Lena, known to sell her charms as a member of the world's oldest profession in the Piazza Navona. One of her customers was Mariano Pasqualone, who soon was seeking help for a rather messy wound in his belly, claiming that Caravaggio had stuck him *con porco* in front of the Palazzo of the Spanish Ambassador. This painting created a scandal mainly because the people in the foreground had dirty feet and hats.

During a boozep in 1604 at an inn named Alberto del Moro, Caravaggio complained about the service by tossing a plate of scalding artichokes at a waiter's face, provoking a brawl that spread through the entire establishment. In October the same year he was busted again for tossing stones at the Vatican Guard. Two more arrests followed in 1605.

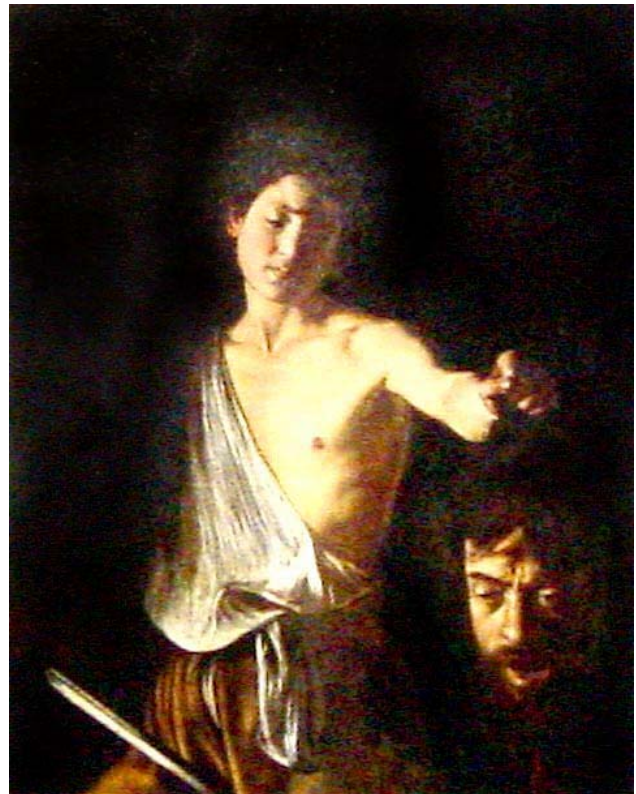
It gets better. Despite all of these shenanigans Pope Paul V's nephew Cardinal Scipio Borghese persuaded *Paulo Cinquo* that Caravaggio was the man to paint the Virgin Mary for St. Peter's Basilica, at that time the largest building in the world and of course the greatest church in Christendom. In only a few days of utter brilliance, as was his habit, our man completed his *Madonna dei Palfreniere* (see *Madonna with Serpent*,



**Madonna dei Palfreniere  
Madonna with Serpent 1605-6**

As if this wasn't enough, around this time Caravaggio was apprehended beside the body of a sargeant whose skull had been staved in. M claimed that a large rock had fallen from the rooftops precisely onto the policeman's head but for some reason the authorities did not believe this, and incarcerated him in Tor di Nona Prison where he was bound and lashed. It is believed that M's *Flagellation of Christ* (1607) reflects the pain he experienced. Guards were bribed and soon he was out on the lam, bombarding his landlady's windows with stones because she had confiscated some of his stuff. Then on May 29, 1606 he accused one of his tennis opponents, Ranuccio Tommasoni de Terni of cheating, a furious brawl broke out, and both players stabbed each other. M's wound was serious but Ranuccio's was fatal. Caravaggio, by then one of Rome's most famous painters, fled the Eternal City banished and condemned to death, never to return. M spent the last four years of his short life in Naples, Malta, Sicily, Messina and Palermo getting into and out of

1605-6). The Cardinals and their boss "went snake" and I leave you to speculate whether that was because M painted Saint Anne as an elderly gypsy, had the Virgin's skirts hiked up on her hip like a common labourer, depicted her stepping on a snake - for very good ecclesiastical reasons that were completely over the heads of the men in the cardinal-red outfits - because her son was completely naked and anatomically correct, or because M chose as his model for Mary, yes you guessed it, the infamous and popular Lena. To the holy poo-bahs, the virgin for the Basilica had become the hooker stomping on a basilisk.



trouble, but still painting brilliantly everywhere he went, now with somewhat more subdued tone and strikingly delicate emotion.

In Malta he somehow managed to be named a Knight of Grace of the Order of Malta, long enough to have signed himself as such in his one autographed work. But this did not last and either because his reputation caught up with him or because of some new chicanery he soon was expelled from the Order as “*putridum et foetidum*,” corrupt and stinking. His powerful patrons found it increasingly difficult to keep or get him out of jail. M risked his life escaping from his final incarceration on Malta and remained a persecuted outlaw.



In late 1609 he left Palermo for Naples where he was almost fatally mugged at a tavern door and left for dead in the street. He depicts himself in his final self-portrait, in *David with the Head of Goliath* (1605-6). Modern accounts that claim this was done in his last months and that David is Caravaggio in youth have stumbled into myth. For this work dates from 1606, not long after M had killed his tennis opponent, and David's is the very realistic and recognizable face of his boy lover Francesco Boneri. Thus Goliath does not represent the forebodings of a man soon to die, but perhaps the agony of confronting oneself as a killer of one's own kind.

Caravaggio is not only the most mysterious, but arguably the most revolutionary painter in the history of visual arts. He was a hell-raising, utterly brilliant genius who painted at stunning speed

directly onto his canvases with no sketching or evident pauses. M was the apotheosis of what was later named the “Baroque,” bridegroom for its debut as an era of ecstasy, fury and excess. Indeed his *Ecstasy of St. Francis* (1595) is said to have begun the period. M was the first master of both light and darkness in visual art, the meaning and essence of *chiaroscuro*. He invented what is now called *tenebrism*, the dramatic, seductive illumination of form out of shadow. M's art was in violent counterpoint to the styles and beliefs of those who preceded and surrounded him, a new visual language of stunning realism, his models vagabonds and prostitutes chosen from the streets and villages, and probably from his bed. Each of his works caused a scandal, and he made many powerful enemies. But in Roberto Longhi's words “Ribera, Vermeer, Georges de la Tour and Rembrandt could never have existed without him. And the art of Delacroix, Courbet and Manet would have been utterly different.”

Yet after he disappeared, Caravaggio was almost completely forgotten for three centuries. He and his name, or rather names, disappeared from just about everything known about art history. Then around 1890, Wolfgang Kallab who was working on a Catalogue of the Imperial Collections of Austria noticed astonishing similarities between



**The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (1608)**

several 17th century paintings of unknown origin, particularly their unprecedented treatment of light and incredible brushwork. None were signed, indeed only one of Caravaggio's known works has a signature, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608). In this work, done for Valletta Cathedral while he was in Malta the artist has written **F Caravaggio** in the blood spurting from John the Baptist's neck. The **F** stood for *Fra*, meaning that by this time he was a Knight of Grace of the Order of Malta

There were only three approximately contemporary accounts of Caravaggio's life. The first was roughly three pages written by Siena medical doctor Giulio Mancini, who had personally known the artist. Giulio Mancini, although an atheist, had been Physician to his friend Pope Urban VIII, formerly Maffeo Barberini, who had commissioned two paintings by Caravaggio, one a personal portrait. Mancini's words were written seven years after M disappeared, but based on what is now known most of his brief and generally supportive details were correct. However, he commented, "M's great understanding of art went with weird behaviour." The second biographer, the mostly forgotten painter Giovanni Baglione, hated Caravaggio and wrote three acidic pages around 1625 in a book he finally published in 1640. Baglione claimed that M was a thief and plagiarist, and that his work was overpriced, unoriginal and indiscriminating. This could have been related to the fact that Caravaggio had described Baglione's *Resurrected Christ* painted for the Church of Chiesa del Gesu as *escremento*. Caravaggio had also written or commissioned some rather nasty sonnets about the man, and put him down in public when Baglione sued him for libel in 1603.

Giovan Pietro Bellori who was born three years after M's disappearance wrote a text published in 1672 which included biographical details about M that are mostly false. Pietro had his own ideas about art that overrode his interest in the facts. Aspects of this inaccurate account of M's life persist in contemporary writing, including material available about him on the web. In his lifetime M had been idolized by most Roman painters. However, by 1672 his works were abandoned, lost, mutilated, destroyed, attributed to rivals, and inferior paintings falsely attributed to him. At the time of Wolfgang Kallab's discoveries in the Imperial Collection of Austria, telling documents were being found in Malta, Naples and Rome. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century became the 20<sup>th</sup>, a

small number of unbiased specialists, culminating in Roberto Longhi in 1920, revealed the truth of Caravaggio's utter genius, all of it crammed into 39 years of life.

Despite all this, my main purpose is not to tell you about Caravaggio's tempestuous life, or why his art is so crucial to the last four centuries, but perhaps I have tempted you enough to want to read about him and perhaps use some of what you discover in your teaching. For M was the first modern painter, the father of visual realism, with no doubt at all. To understand him, study his work while thinking about what was happening while he painted. He was born seven years after Marlowe, who invented modern drama, seven after Shakespeare, who Bloom says "invented the human," and seven after Galileo who confirmed the solar system's truth making the church's view of it irrelevant, at tremendous personal cost. M was four years younger than Monteverdi who invented opera and 24 years younger than Miguel de Cervantes who invented the novel. All of them were part of that brilliant time in history, the birth of the modern mind.

But now I must move on and bring some mathematics, a little more history, and a tincture of physiology and medicine into this *little think*. There is a curious mathematical theorem named *Caesar's Last Breath* which suggests that every breath you and I take contains a molecule of air that Big Julie exhaled as he died. As the classicists and Shakespeare buffs among you will remember, that was on March 15<sup>th</sup> – the Ides, or midpoint of the month – in 44 BCE, the result of Gaius Julius Caesar's assassination in the vicinity of Rome's Forum.



ENRICO FERMI  
1901-1954

This idea about what Julius gasped right after he supposedly said "Et tu, Brute! Then fall, Caesar." was first posed by nuclear physicist Enrico Fermi (1901-1954) to a group of his students to help them understand enormous numbers. Since the theorem is based on averaging and certain assumptions, it is only approximately true. This should not bother those of you who are Fuzzy Thinkers but unfortunately that group is in the minority, for so many of us - in fuzzy terms - are concrete or dichotomous thinkers. But the relationship between fuzzy thinking, education and a whole lot more is for another time, so back to *Caesar's Last Breath*, which I will try to explain in terms that even I can understand.

To understand why Fermi's idea is fuzzily mostly right requires that you understand a little about *Avogadro's number*. Count Lorenzo Romano Amedeo Carlo Avogadro de Quaregna e Cerreto (1776-1856) was a brilliant but modest man, Bachelor of Jurisprudence at age 16 and Doctor of Ecclesiastical Law at 20. He soon found law a drag, understandably from my perspective, and went on to study and make seminal discoveries in mathematics, physics, electricity and chemistry, mostly on his own. This was not just because he was

brilliant. There were no physics and chemistry teachers then because those sciences were barely newborn fraternal twins. In 1821, Dr. Avogadro discovered that equal volumes of all gases at the same temperature and pressure contain the same number of molecules, now called *Avogadro's Law*. He worked on the implications of this but had no idea of what a mole is – the molecular weight in grams of any substance - and calculation of the number of molecules in one mole of anything came much later. But because Avogadro's discoveries enabled the calculation, that number  $6.0221367 \times 10^{23}$  – is now known as *Avogadro's number*. That 602 followed by 21 zeros is a number far beyond any human's ability to comprehend, even the Minister of Education.

If you had *Avogadro's number* of un-popped popcorn kernels and covered Canada with them we would be squashed flat under 15 km of the stuff. If you measured the volume of the atmosphere with a bottle whose capacity was the same as the average adult lung, the total number of bottles would be close to the number of molecules in one breath, and both of these would be roughly one tenth of *Avogadro's number*. Trust me on this, I would never – well, OK, as a fuzzy thinker, almost never – lead you astray intentionally.

Because of averaging (and fuzziness), some breaths you take probably contain none of Caesar's terminally gasped bits whereas some likely contain several. By the way, it is also probable that some molecules in the water you showered under and drank earlier today passed through Caesar's kidneys, as well as Avogadro's, but let us move on again. The theorem assumes that over the last two millennia no air molecules have been removed or added to the atmosphere, which is partly false, but fuzzily, not very, because a very large number have cycled out and back in again, a very large number of times. It also assumes equal mixing of Julius' last exhalation throughout the atmosphere, which is also partly false, although the more time elapses, the more equal the mixing and the less false the assumption.

If you must wade through the mathematics to believe this, or at least a fuzzy part of it, you need to know that one breath has about  $10^{22}$  molecules and the atmosphere has about  $10^{44}$ . Given the assumptions mentioned earlier, each molecule in each breath has about 1 in  $10^{22}$  chances of having been in Caesar's closing croak. Messing more mathematically, the odds that each of your breaths has none of those molecules are only about 0.37 whereas the odds that one is there are about 0.63. That is – fuzziness strikes again – each of our breaths is on fuzzy average about 160 times more likely to have a "Caesarean" molecule than not to have one (no pun intended, even though I am an Obstetrician). The more you breathe, the more likely you are inhaling, and exhaling those recycled molecules, and on average with each breath you inhale and exhale one molecule from the specified terminal batch. And using the same mixture of mathematics, averaging and assumptions you also inhale approximately one molecule from the last breath of everyone who died before not all that long ago, including... Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

So regardless of the date and circumstances on and in which Caravaggio breathed his last, assuming that his last breath's molecules are evenly distributed in the atmosphere

is relatively correct. There's that fuzzy stuff again. And they are significantly more likely to be there than those breathed by anyone who died since, more so again than anyone still alive, and more so with each day that passes.

The late Canadian philosopher and theologian Bernard Logan suggested that "The cumulative process of human understanding evolves on a spiral of heightened consciousness". Our attention was captured February 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 by two catastrophes, one involving a space shuttle and the other a group of Canadian students. Although only 14 people died in them they were dramatic, vivid in their horror, and in typical fashion endlessly revisited by the media, as is still happening. Many of you must have struggled to help your students find meaning, to find it yourselves, and somehow understand and accept the two catastrophes. But think a little for a moment. There are nearly six million people in Baghdad. You may need more than *Avogadro's number* and the theory about *Caesar's Last Breath* to help your students find meaning in that reality. I cannot but wonder whether those who speak about "smart bombs" directed by "intelligence" understand a fragment of what Caravaggio understood about realism, and for that matter humanity.



CHRISTA MCAULIFFE  
1948-1986

Hauntingly, 17 years and four days before the events of February 1<sup>st</sup>, Challenger exploded, killing its seven passengers, one of whom was Christa McAuliffe. You may know the name of another American teacher or even the names of a few, but I do not, and I am willing to bet that you like me would have trouble naming her other six companions, or the names of the seven astronauts and seven students who died so publicly on February 1<sup>st</sup>. Why Christa was on that mission and whether she should have been is still debated, but I believe it was mostly because, to use Tom Wolfe's words, she had "The Right Stuff." Why do I think that? Partly because in her NASA application, Christa McAuliffe wrote "I touch the future. I teach."

What on - or off - earth is this all about? It is all about inspiration, and this time the pun is intended. For in every contact you have with a student, or anyone else, whether it is for a minute, half an hour, or through an

entire term, you have an opportunity to pass on so much more than the molecules in a dying breath. You have the chance to tell stories like Caravaggio's, to paint portraits with your words and with your mind about *Life, the Universe and Everything* (with apologies to the late Douglas Adams). You have the chance to sculpt ideas and help others discover meaning, and the essence of their own humanity. You have the chance to make someone else...*a little think*.

For if you a little think about this, you will realize that almost every word you speak to each of your students carries a tiny fragment of what Caravaggio breathed not just

when he died but throughout his life (see *Lute Player* 1596-7). And every word carries with it similar remnants of Johann Sebastian Bach, George Friedrich Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Peter Paul Rubens, Henri Matisse, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Miguel de Cervantes, Oscar Wilde, Galileo Galilei, Albert Einstein, Christa McAuliffe. Name your own heroes and take a deep breath.



**Lute Player** 1596-7)

A little think about it. If the knowledge that you are breathing a little of what they breathed every time you inhale doesn't give you inspiration, then you may already be dead. I will finish with two breaths from others, passed on to you with mine. Robert Ardrey wrote "...we were born of risen apes, not fallen angels, and the apes were armed killers besides... The miracle of humanity is not how far we have sunk but how magnificently we have risen. We are known among the stars by our poems, not our corpses." And as a closing but not dying

breath, here is how one of my own personal heroes, William Shakespeare reminded us not to "blow it" in his own incredible way of painting with words:

If we do meet again,  
Why, we shall smile;  
If not, why then, this parting was well made.

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, V (I)

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## SIMPLE STORIES

Alfred Wiebe

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In Seven Oaks we have a strong tradition of telling stories. The editors of this journal have given me this opportunity to tell you some of my stories that have helped shape my activities as an educator and have helped to confirm my simple, educational philosophy: “Only the food you eat will nourish you.”

My first year in Seven Oaks, I had a principal who thought that gum chewing was one of the deadly sins. He expected us to be vigilant at all times and prevent any gum chewing in our classes or in the halls. Being new, eager and wishing to please my superiors, I diligently watched the mouths to see if anyone surreptitiously was chewing gum. I caught many a transgressor and had them spit out the gum. Unfortunately I had an hour bus ride to and from school, and what I saw on the bus was not a pretty sight – all those mouths chewing gum. It was enough to spoil my day and my evening. It did not take me long to come to a novel conclusion. I would no longer look for gum chewing as if this were the most important thing in my life. It was amazing how much more pleasant my days and nights became and the learning of the students did not suffer (maybe the janitor had to clean one or two more gum balls).

I must be a slow learner because I just did not learn the lesson that we often see what we expect to see even if it is not there. Conversely, we do not see what is right there before our eyes because we do not expect to see it. In the early '80's MTC produced Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The director had the idea of having two different actors with two different interpretations play the lead character. Not everyone shares my passion for Shakespeare, but fortunately I had a young son willing to go to the theatre with me on a Saturday afternoon and a wife willing to go with me in the evening. After the afternoon production my son asked me, “Dad, why does Macbeth kill himself?” I have read and taught the play many times so I know that Macbeth does not kill himself, but is killed by MacDuff. So I lectured my son on the intricacies of Shakespearian tragedy, which I am sure was of no concern to him and neglected to follow up what was of concern. Worse is to follow. That evening as I saw MacDuff killing Macbeth, I realized that in the afternoon performance Macbeth had indeed killed himself.

But I still had not learned my lesson. Fifteen years later I rode my bicycle down the Henderson Highway bike path as a regular form of exercise. One morning at 6:00 a.m., during the summer holidays, I saw three middle years students walking on the bike path on the other side of the road. Several thoughts raced through my head: “What are these kids doing here this early in the morning? Surely they can be up to no good. Should I turn around before I have to pass them? Will they try to hurt me when I pass them” etc, etc. Well I was/am brave and continued on my way and after a while on my

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way back I met these kids again. As I was passing them, one of the kids kicked some gravel with his shoe. As I looked at him he apologized, "I am sorry, I didn't see you." I was thoroughly ashamed of myself. Here I am working with these kids every day, telling others not to be afraid of them. "The kids aren't as bad as the media tells us." And yet I, too, had been contaminated by the media. I, too, was afraid when I met these kids in an unusual place or at an unusual time.

There are times when I was not quite such a dullard and I learned from others with a little more alacrity. In the early seventies one of my colleagues at West Kildonan was going to take a busload of students to Vancouver, B.C. and he needed someone to accompany him. We were going to camp along the way and do a first hand study of the geography of Canada. But the things that I learned was that I better learn about cooking, setting up tents, etc. before I ventured out with another group; however, the rubbery pasta and the wet tents did not prevent me from going on other adventures.

At West Kildonan Collegiate we had a remarkable collection of teachers, one of whom organized canoe trips. I still remember my first trip as if it were yesterday. We left from Jessica Lake to paddle to Lone Island Lake. Although I had never been in a canoe before, being a male I naturally took the stern position. As long as we were on the lake I managed to steer the canoe quite well, especially since it was a nice calm day, but once we got to the winding, shallow, narrow river, it was a different story. I hit many a bank, got turned around and generally the female student in the bow and I paddled about twice the necessary distance, but eventually I did learn to steer the canoe effectively. All the time I was learning what I should have known, my student companion paddled diligently and without complaining even once. She certainly was a saint, but I did learn and canoeing has provided me with many moments of pure pleasure.

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

During one of these canoe trips, after I had graduated to being a leader of the trip, there was a student who was in my English class. I considered him one of the weakest students I had ever taught. His spelling was impossible, his sentence structure simplistic, his comprehension dismal and his oral reading halting at best. In the evening we gathered around the campfire and told stories, the student who was so incompetent in my English class became a star. He mesmerized the whole group with his stories. He kept their attention for hours with stories that were skilfully constructed and told in the best oral tradition. He is without a doubt the best storyteller I have ever heard, and he couldn't even write a simple sentence.

Maybe one thing that I learned early in my teaching career was not to be afraid to try things that I had never done before and in which I had little or no expertise. See the

previous few paragraphs for examples. In the mid sixties when I was in Teachers' College, students were given an opportunity to direct a play. Since I had been in several high school plays, I felt imminently qualified to direct a play. I was totally wrong, but with the patient guidance of the teacher and the actors, I learned a lot and have been able to direct plays from the classics of Molière to world premiers of local amateur playwrights. This has provided both entertainment and enlightenment to the audience and me.

There are two traditional professional development opportunities that were of great help to me in the classroom. The first was a university course in the Department of Education in the early seventies. (The only course I ever failed.) What I learned from this course about writing can be summed up in one short sentence. When stuck in a writing project just keep on writing even if it is nonsense. It is important to finish the first draft. Correct your tenses, syntax, spelling and provide just the right word when you correct your draft. This advice has been invaluable for me and I believe also very valuable to many a student.

As an English teacher poetry has been important to me, but much of poetry is also difficult to understand, if one does not have the proper tools to make sense of the author's images and allusions. It was traditional for the English teacher to wax eloquent and explain the beauty of the poetry in great detail while the eyes of the students glazed over. Finally I attended a workshop based on Patrick Diaz's work. In a nutshell, the idea is quite simple. The teacher teaches a few basic concepts perhaps an allusion to the Bible or other classical literature, or how images work in poetry. The students are given the poem and asked to discuss the poem. The groups report their findings to the class – other groups and teachers ask questions of explanation. (Under no circumstances does the teacher explain the meaning of the poem.) Each student is then asked to respond in writing to the poem. With adaptation this technique will also work for other assignments, and it is guaranteed to improve the poetry interpretation skills of all students.

Finally, I would like to relate a story that demonstrates the harm the best of intentions can do. When my son was in kindergarten he wrote a story. I was extremely proud of the story, but there were quite a few spelling mistakes, some punctuation errors, some syntax problems (you get the picture). Being an English teacher I needed to correct all these errors and I promptly did. When my son saw the changes to his work, he simply crumpled up the paper and threw it away. When asked why he would do this he simply said, "It's no longer mine."

So, what we as teachers need to do is give students the opportunity to do many new things and we must show patience and encouragement when they are learning to do these new things and finally we must not intrude into their spaces to the extent that they can say, "It's no longer mine." Students must feel a sense of ownership. They will learn most from their own experiences and so as teachers we must provide a variety of nourishment to make them strong, capable and flexible to handle the numerous obstacles life will inevitably provide and thus help our students become contributing members of society.

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**CREATING OUR LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORIES IN TEACHING  
AND LEARNING TO CARE:  
Using Multi-Media To Communicate The Meanings  
And Influence Of Our Embodied  
Educational Values**

**Jack Whitehead,  
Department of Education, University of Bath.**

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I enjoyed Jacqui Vincent's contribution to issue 17 of this journal. She wrote about [Teaching and Learning to Care](#). I particularly identified with her point that 'we certainly know the merits of providing Tender Loving Care to our students' (Vincent, 2002).

The questions I am asking myself are about the development of shared meanings of loving care. They are about the evidence that demonstrates the educational merits of loving care. It isn't that I doubt these merits or my embodied experience of the educational influence of loving care. What I am questioning is whether, as teacher-researchers, we have made public our embodied knowledge of loving care in our educational relationships. I am thinking of 'making public' in a way that can be communicated to others with standards for judging the validity of our claims to know the educational influence of loving care. I am hopeful that you will join in a co-enquiry into these and related questions, as I respond to Jacqui Vincent's article.

The relevance of the questions to the global knowledge-base of professional educators can be judged in relation to the present perceived lack of procedures for systematizing the personal professional knowledge of educators. The relevance can also be seen in the perceived lack of influence of the archived research knowledge on improving educational practice. Hiebert, Gallimore and Stigler (2002) and Snow (2001) have expressed these perceptions well:

In spite of the continuing efforts of researchers, archived research knowledge has had little effect on the improvement of practice in the average classroom. We explore the possibility of building a useful knowledge base for teaching by beginning with practitioners' knowledge (Hiebert, Gallimore and Stigler, 2002).

The challenge is to enhance the value of personal knowledge and personal experience for practice. Good teachers possess a wealth of knowledge about teaching that cannot currently be drawn upon effectively in the preparation of novice teachers or in debates about practice. The challenge here is not to ignore or downplay this personal knowledge, but to elevate it. The knowledge resources of excellent teachers constitute a rich resource, but one that is largely untapped because we have no procedures for systematizing it. Systematizing would require procedures for accumulating such knowledge and making it public, for connecting it to bodies of knowledge established through other methods, and for vetting it for correctness and consistency. If we had

agreed-upon procedures for transforming knowledge based on personal experiences of practice into public knowledge, analogous to the way a researcher's private knowledge is made public through peer-review and publication, the advantages would be great. For one, such knowledge might help us avoid drawing far-reaching conclusions about instructional practices from experimental studies carried out in rarefied settings. Such systematized knowledge would certainly enrich the research-based knowledge being increasingly introduced into teacher preparation programs. And having standards for the systematization of personal knowledge would provide a basis for rejecting personal anecdotes as a basis for either policy or practice (Snow, 2001, p.9).

My only point of disagreement with Snow is with her thinking that having standards for the systematization of personal knowledge will provide a basis for rejecting personal anecdotes as a basis for either policy or practice. In my view the development of such standards will strengthen the quality and validity of the stories we live by, rather than providing a basis for rejecting the narrative base of educational enquiry, policy and practice. Connelly and Clandinin describe stories to live by:

Stories to live by, the phrase used throughout this book to refer to identity, is given meaning by the narrative understandings of knowledge and context. Stories to live by are shared by such matters as secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling, and teachers' cover stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p.4).

One of the most important living educational standards of practice that I can think of loves care. I am suggesting that readers of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* might like to engage in a co-enquiry to see if we can develop some shared understandings of how we are living this value in our educational relationships. I am thinking of how the educational relationships in which we participate influence the learning of others and educate the social formations in which we live and work.

The idea that you could be having an influence in the education of social formations may not be one at the forefront of your thinking. Its importance to me has been highlighted by the recent invasion of Iraq by US and UK forces with the subsequent deaths of thousands of Iraqis and hundreds of coalition forces. The fact that social formations are still engaged in warfare tells me that there is something wrong with the education of our social formations. Hence my emphasis on the educational influence of loving care. A world organised through such a principle would, it seems to me, be less likely to engage in such destructive activity than our present social orders. So I want to stress the importance of bringing loving care more fully into the world as an educational standard that can influence both the lives of individuals and the learning of social formations.

In this attempt to develop a co-enquiry with you, I want to suggest that in order to develop a shared understanding of what we mean by loving care in our educational relationships, then we will need to show each other what we are doing in these relationships (Fletcher & Whitehead, 2003; Whitehead & Delong, 2003). While most of my research publications have been in the form of journal articles of the kind published in *Teaching Today for Tomorrow*, I do see the need to develop multi-media forms of

representation for accounts of my educational influence with my students and within the social formations where I live and work (<http://actionresearch.net/multi.shtml>).

Just to see if there is any interest from readers of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* in developing such a co-enquiry into the development of living educational standards of judgement, such as loving care, I would like to direct your attention to the Brislington Training School web-site. This was developed in partnership with the University of the West of England, where my wife Joan Whitehead is Professor of Education and Dean of the Faculty of Education.

You can access this website at:

<http://pathways2002.uwe.ac.uk/trainingschool>

I am suggesting that we develop a conversation that is focused on the possibility of developing shared meanings of loving care by linking video-clips of our practice to our living standards of educational practice and judgement. Having expressed a concern about the damage to education that can be done by imposing externally defined 'targets' (DeLong & Whitehead, 1998) I do think that the way the Brislington Training School has shown how video-clips being integrated with literacy targets in English, Art and Design and Design and Technology, may spark off our imaginations and take our co-enquiry forward. You can go see how the video-clips are integrated with targets at:

<http://pathways2002.uwe.ac.uk/trainingschool/English/LitAct2001/overview/overview.htm>

Some readers might like to see if the action research methodology used at Brislington Training School is useful in their own schools. It was most heartening to see the approach to action research developed at the University of Bath and advocated by Moira Laidlaw in her 2002/3 pre-service guide at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/preserve.shtml>

being used as the methodology for the development of the Brislington Training School at:

<http://pathways2002.uwe.ac.uk/trainingschool/methodology/action-research.htm>

I imagine that you will be interested in these URLs not only because of the imaginative use of educational technology but because of the stimulus they could provide for the compilation of e-portfolios of your professional learning. I have also been heartened by the interest being shown by other educators and educational researchers in the creation and testing of their living educational theories (Whitehead, 1989; Smith, 2002; Levy, 2003) in their explanations of their own professional learning. You might like to access some of the accounts of teacher-researchers who are creating their own living educational theories in their continuing professional development for their masters and doctoral degrees at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/masters.shtml>

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living.shtml>

<http://www.jeanmcniff.com>

I do hope that you will visit Jean's website and download the booklet on Action Research in Professional Practice (McNiff, 2002). Jean has made this booklet freely available to celebrate our 21 years of working together. I think you will find it helpful in constructing your own living educational theory in your work in education as you seek to enhance the learning of others, your own learning and the education of the social formations in which we are working and living. You might also like to help to develop the interconnecting branching networks of communication of professional educators on the web by sharing your own accounts with the teacher-researcher network at <http://www.teacherresearch.net> supported by Sarah Fletcher (2003) at the University of Bath. You can see some of this work in the sections for the John Bentley School and the Westwood St. Thomas School at <http://www.actionresearch.net>. I also hope that this paper serves to enhance the values we can find in each other's lives and work.

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# TEACHING IS A MORAL ACTIVITY

Diane J. Peters

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I hope to show why and how teaching is an inherently moral activity that must be guided by an ethic of care. I strongly identify with our mission statement:

The Seven Oaks School Division is a community of learners, every one of whom shares the responsibility to assist children in acquiring an education which will enable them to lead fulfilling lives within the world as moral people and contributing members of society.

These words deserve interpretation and clarification, if they are to be more than a mere expression of sentiment. Specifically, I hope to explore the meaning of the term “moral” in my description of teaching as a moral activity.

As caring adults, we act with moral intentions and make conscious choices in our teaching practice. Hansen (2001) contends that moral sensibility includes the ability to stand back, observe and understand the dynamics of a social situation. What makes teaching a moral endeavour is that it is human action undertaken in regards to other human beings. Therefore, considerations of what is fair, right, just and virtuous are always present.

Levin and Young (1994) argue that teaching is incomprehensible when disconnected from its fundamental moral purposes, perhaps because a moral sensibility embodies a person’s disposition toward life and the people and events he or she encounters. It describes how someone weaves humanity and thought into the way he or she regards others.

This raises the question, how do we guide moral action? Noddings (1992) theorizes that we, as teachers, must be guided by an ethic of care. A caring relation, a connection or encounter between two human beings is the ultimate reality of life. She further writes that unless the feeling of being cared for is felt by the student something is very wrong in the relationship and learning will not be as meaningful. Noddings (1984) describes “the state of consciousness of the carer as one characterized by engrossment” (p.15). Engrossment means an open and non-selective receptivity for the student. This kind of engrossment is essential in moral life. To care means to hear, see or feel what the other is trying to convey. The caring relationship is completed when the student receives the teacher’s efforts at caring. When students feel recognized and responded to and we, as teachers, are motivated by their needs, our caring is authentic.

The desire to be cared for is a universal one. Everyone wants to be received, to be understood and accepted as they are. Caring is a way of being in a relationship, not a

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set of behaviours, or a lack of boundaries. Caring teachers listen and respond differentially to their students as distinct human beings. Dewey (1963) argues that teachers had to begin with the experience and interests of students and forge connections between that experience and the subject matter in order for students to become engaged. Without a caring relation in place how would you attend to individual differences, recognize diversity and work towards the inclusion of all learners.

Gilligan (1982) describes an alternate approach to moral problems. This approach resonates with many female teachers. She describes a morality based on the recognition of needs, relation and response. Many women recognize themselves in this book. They, too, refuse to “leave themselves”, their loved ones, and connections out of their moral reasoning. They speak from and to a situation, and their reasoning is contextual. Their morality has its emphasis on living together, on creating, maintaining and enhancing positive relationships. The ethic of caring is based on an ethic of the relational.

Noddings (1984) suggests, “Moral education from the perspective of an ethic of caring has four major components: modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation” (p. 22). I will briefly outline these four components. First, as teachers, we must model how to care through caring relations with students. The human capacity to care may depend on adequate experience in being cared for. Therefore our moral orientation requires that we care about our students’ needs.

Second, dialogue, as a component of moral education, is open-ended. It exists to create trust and respect for one another. “It is a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation” (Noddings, 1984, p. 23). Students feel listened to through dialogue which properly is a genuine search for answers undetermined at the beginning. Dialogue helps both parties arrive at well-informed decisions. Some moral errors are merely poor decisions. Students need to develop the skills to enter into dialogue with others to make moral decisions. Dialogue connects us to each other and helps to maintain respectful, caring relations. Dialogue is similar to engrossment in that it helps the carer gather historical information that allows him or her to attend fully and honestly. Teachers construct their understanding of students through dialogue, and then become more able to respond appropriately to their need to be cared for.

Practice is the third component of moral education. Attitudes are shaped by experiences, for the most part. Schools certainly try to induce certain attitudes and ways of looking at the world. A good example of this is teaching elementary students that you have to be a friend to make a friend. If students are to be morally caring, teachers must provide opportunities for them to develop this quality, rather than just present moral sentiments as fact. Caring in some schools takes the form of community service or peer mentoring. One dilemma that we face as educators is the realization that the student must first have the characteristic attitude of caring before we can teach them specific skills. Not everyone will make a good peer mentor, even after months of training.

The fourth component of moral education from the ethic of care is confirmation. Buber (1965) describes confirmation as an act of affirming and encouraging the best in others. When we confirm a student, we notice a better self and encourage its development. We identify something admirable, or at least acceptable, struggling to emerge in each person we encounter. The student must see the attribute or goal as worthy and attainable and teachers must see it as morally acceptable. We never confirm people in ways we judge to be wrong. Confirmation connects us to students in a caring relationship. While it will be clear to them that we disapprove of morally problematic acts, we validate that we see a self that is better than these acts. The student feels in wonder: "Here is this significant and percipient other who sees through the smallness or meanness of my present behaviour a self that is better and a real possibility!" (Noddings, 1992, p. 25). Confirmation is a loving, moral act founded on a caring relationship. Love, caring and relation play central roles in both ethics and moral teachings.

Buber (1965) writes of similar relationships between teachers and students. He states that teachers must practice inclusion, that is take on a dual perspective, meaning their own and the student's perspective. They must try and see the world as their students see it in order to help them evolve morally. To do this effectively, the teacher must have created a trusting, caring relationship with the student.

It is vital that teachers can see students and see with them but students need not see in the same way as teachers. They need to be freed by their teacher's efforts at inclusion to evolve and grow. Providing this type of unequal relation is a moral obligation of the teacher. At the same time, students have a large responsibility as recipients of care. As teachers, we expect them to respond to our efforts. Unfortunately, responding to the teacher's effort often requires that the student has felt this level of care at home. Otherwise, they are at first confused and distrustful that someone could care about them. In such cases, teachers continue nonetheless to listen, to receive, and to respond. One of the greatest moral tasks of teachers is to help students learn how to be recipients of care.

Noddings (1992) contends that teachers will know if they have succeeded in developing moral people. She suggests that we will see cooperative and considerate behaviour, competence in life, intellectual curiosity, openness and willingness to share, an interest in spiritual questions and the ability to have healthy relationships with self and others. The purpose of developing moral people involves individual teachers, students, and the larger community of adults. Dewey (1902) suggests, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children" (p.3).

If we conceive of teaching as a moral activity, how do we learn about teaching? Why do we call teaching a moral practice, a moral endeavour? Hansen (1993) thinks about these questions and formulates the following insights. First, teaching is permeated with moral significance. Teachers may have beneficial or harmful influence on their students. Second, teachers' intellectual and moral influences are not independent of each other. Third, familiar and routine aspects of teachers' work all have moral meaning. Some

examples of this might be whom the teachers pays attention to, where they stand, the tone of voice they use or the expression on their face, and what they choose to teach. Hansen sees moral judgement, moral perception, and moral knowledge at the heart of teaching.

Moral considerations envelop the work of teaching and are often unwilled and unintentional. Some are built into the work while others are consequences of what teachers do and say in a classroom. We see the place of the moral in human interactions in day to day situations in the classroom.

Defining the term moral can be difficult because moral is a name we give to things we value, personal preferences, and cultural differences. It helps to think of moral as a duty-based concept or the outcome of actions through practice. I believe that the moral is that which yields the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Hansen (2001) contends that it is almost impossible, to capture the moral dimensions of teaching in abstract terms. He speaks of the moral as it relates to teachers and their work. It is a practice-centred view of the moral, an orientation toward practice. The presumption is that students' lives will be better as the result of teaching. Teaching comprises acts related to desirable qualities of human relationships: being patient, attentive, respectful, open-minded, and caring. Teaching is a moral activity that calls attention to teachers' conduct, character, judgement, perception, and understanding. Moral considerations are part of the everyday, every moment practice of teaching.

Many thinkers have argued that teaching is an inherently moral activity. For many educators and parents, teaching is a merely a means to an end such as academics, socializing, a preparation for work, promoting democratic life, or cultural awareness. But each of these ends is rooted in moral assumptions that these are valuable lessons to learn. Moral assumptions mean a conception of who and what people ought to become. Therefore, all these ends have moral meaning. It seems obvious that teaching is a social endeavour intended to bring about positive changes in people.

Socrates believed that teaching was inherently moral. He believed that people should be humble and willing to listen to others and then hold their own beliefs up to scrutiny. He pursued goodness and truth and believed that conversation was a tool to get closest to the truth. He believed that teaching had to do with what and who we were becoming.

Kant (1990) argues against means and ends thinking emphasizing that teaching was therefore not a moral endeavour solely with respect to its consequences. He writes of human dignity and urges a focus on what human beings can become because of their capacity to conceive and realize moral conduct. Proper human growth is in part a process of realizing moral capability. Teaching is more than a means because it is a moral practice that values dignity.

Dewey (1989) views teaching as a form of service and teachers as moral agents, people who influence students. He contends that teachers stand on the side of truth and justice and value growth and development for each individual rather than the notion of

developing students to predetermined places in life. Dewey, also like Kant, argues that teaching should not be seen as an end that is separate and outside of the work of teaching. Teaching is a moral endeavour because its acts have moral meaning in their own right; they do not take their meaning from what they supposedly lead to. Seeing education as a means to an end prevents us from learning in the present moment, if what we are learning only has value in the future. Teaching is a moral endeavour because it influences directly the quality of the present educational moment, a moment in which we are becoming the person we are meant to be. Knowing things, realizing one's self, becoming a good moral person are all processes, not products of teaching. Peters (1964) even asserts that teachers need not have an aim, but they must have a moral orientation that guides their work in the classroom.

To summarize, if educators think in terms of means and ends, such thinking can undermine moral dimensions of educational practice. The search for knowledge and truth should be understood as a moral journey, as an attempt to better ourselves as human beings.

Some educators believe that open-minded inquiry and humility will lead to moral improvement. This type of inquiry makes us better, more courageous, more active, and more willing to understand and improve matters.

Dewey (1989) agrees with this point of view and argues that to learn to think independently and critically in a classroom means learning to feel and think. It includes regarding one's own and others' ideas and hopes. When teachers develop genuine thought and reflective practices in their classrooms teaching is a moral endeavour. The qualities that we hope to encourage are moral qualities such as open-mindedness, single-mindedness, sincerity, thoroughness, and responsibility. Teaching embodies the emergence and formation of these moral qualities. Recent research suggests that classrooms remain one of the best places in society for building moral comprehension, that is an understanding of how what is taught is significant and fits into human life.

Tom's (1984) analysis of teaching as a moral craft explains that teaching involves a moral relationship between teacher and student. He believes that teaching is a moral endeavour because it brings important content to the awareness of the student. Some educators focus on the moral aspects of subjects, but Tom states that teaching is moral because teachers select pieces of content to focus on, therefore these pieces take on moral meaning.

In addition to teacher-student relationships and selection of content, teaching is moral because it involves the ability to analyze situations and to use instructional skills appropriate to these situations. This ability has moral overtones because it directly affects the kind of influences a teacher might have on students. Consider the following: a teacher wants to modify student behaviour in the area of increasing respectful responses. Certain actions the teacher takes may produce an authoritarian classroom atmosphere which would interfere with teacher student relationships. What is the moral choice to make? It is important to become aware of both the significance and the

obligations built into your teaching practice. Green (1984) calls it cultivating a professional and moral self.

There is great promise in teaching. The character of the teaching life is inherently moral guided by an ethic of care. A very important factor in the practice of teaching is the person who occupies the role of teacher. They must bring to the role great humility and grace. This is the moral heart of teaching.

Hansen (2001) speaks of articulating a mission statement or creed as “a clarifying act, helping to dispel mist and fog surrounding self-understanding and providing a view of where one stands in the world” (p. x). Dewey (1997) also discusses the importance of having a creed or a moral compass and contends that “... a teacher’s creed becomes a banner to be unfurled in the face of an uncertain but promising world” (p. xi).

Examining teaching as a moral activity guided by an ethic of care brings me to the following questions for reflection and action research: How do I live a mission statement that I identify with? How can I examine it in the context of my practice, the lived experience of my students, and my interactions with my colleagues? Dialogue with colleagues, students and parents, journaling and reflective writing come to mind as means of further examining these questions.

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## EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING

Janice Hill

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Today's teachers spend a great deal of time and energy contemplating and addressing the learning styles and needs of their individual students. When Wells (1996) began to see effective research as a collaborative process with teachers, he found that they assessed the needs of individual students and modified programs for them using their knowledge and experience to help make decisions about their teaching. Growing awareness of the diverse ways in which our students learn and perceive information is causing teachers to look for alternative methods to the traditional transmission model that was used to educate most of us. In the past, teaching generally meant that the teacher stood at the front of the class and provided the students with the information they were to learn. It was then expected that they, in turn, would know and be able to give the same information back. Auditory or visual learners who were able to memorize and rewrite what the teacher had transmitted would tend to be more successful in school. Kinesthetic learners were not often given the opportunity to interact with objects related to the subject matter and would therefore have difficulty grasping the concepts being taught. The ability to regurgitate what the teacher had transmitted was mistakenly thought to show true understanding when in fact most of us forgot what we had memorized shortly after the test and were rarely asked to apply what we had learned.

The theory of constructivist learning offers a different view of how we come to learn. Piaget believed that knowledge must be individually constructed, as we make sense of new information and relate it to what we already know. This is a life long process, as we continually learn and expand our understandings. Children continuously test out a series of hypotheses or ideas about the world. In response to feedback, they refine and adjust their thinking and understanding (Fogarty 1999, Owocki 1999, Wells 1996). As a result of the individualized way in which we learn, none of us understands the world in exactly the same way.

Recent investigations into how the human mind learns support the theory of constructivist learning. Fischer and Rose (2001) suggest that we view learning as a "dynamic construction of webs" rather than a ladder-like progression of skills. There is not one universal, predetermined web (p.6). A skill such as reading involves connections between multiple webs. Students' integration of the various skills needed to become a proficient reader happen at different rates and follow different pathways for individual readers. This view of how children learn is compatible with the theory of Constructivist learning in that learning is an individual meaning making process dependent on the child's prior experiences.

Vygotsky contributes an important dimension to the idea of constructivist learning by suggesting that social and cultural interactions play a key role in the process of meaning making (Fogarty, 1999). Vygotsky refers to the *zone of proximal development* as the span between what a student currently understands and what he or she is beginning to understand (Owociki, 1999; Wells, 1996). When working within this zone the learner is only able to accomplish certain tasks with assistance from the teacher or the learner's peers. Talk helps learners make sense of their experiences by sharing with others. By observing and listening to what students say, teachers can respond in a way that helps students to problem solve. Teachers can support deeper understanding through conferencing with students using responsive rather than directive talk and providing opportunities for them to work collaboratively with peers. Cooperative learning activities provide them with the chance to hear the opinions and thoughts of others, as well as, explain their own ideas.

Fischer and Rose (2001) noted that students are able to work with some concepts when they are supported by the teacher or a peer but are unable to do so independently. The supporter assists by prompting key concepts thereby providing a scaffold, or temporary framework for the learner (Gould, 1996). However, it will take time before the new knowledge is integrated into the learner's web or pathway. This is often perceived as inconsistency in performance when in fact the student will continue to need the support for a longer period of time before being able to work with the new concept independently.

While studying children's early language development, Wells (1994) observed that those children more readily learning to talk were generally those whose adult conversation partners "led from behind" (p.7). The children were allowed to choose the direction they wanted to go. The adult conversation partner accepted, valued and sustained the child's efforts at meaning making. Hyerle (1996) compares the role of the teacher to that of a sidelines coach, providing the support and direction needed, as they observe the student's progress.

Having students lead the direction their learning takes makes constructivist teaching an intriguing way to teach but it is surprisingly complex. It is, in fact, a demanding practice that takes keen observation skills, flexibility, a clear understanding of the curriculum, access to stimulating materials and effective questioning techniques. Teachers need to understand the curriculum and be proficient in the subject matter so they can be spontaneous in introducing new information and concepts to support or scaffold the students' inquiries (Caine, Caine & McClintic, 2002). Most of us were educated through the traditional model of transmission and therefore do not naturally practice constructivist teaching. We unconsciously fall back on the teaching methods we experienced as students. Students will also initially want to be told the right answer and will be frustrated by the process of inquiry (Duckworth & Julyan, 1996). They will pressure the teacher to provide them with the right answer.

Constructivist teaching is guided by principles. It does not provide simplistic recipes or easily implemented techniques. The constructivist teacher takes her lead from her

students' expressed interests and the questions they pose. Guiding questions help students stay focused on their inquiry, reflect on what they have done and move towards understanding new concepts and ideas. The teacher needs a clear understanding about what she wants to see happen in her classroom and what she wants students to learn (Schifter, 1996).

Just like all learners, teachers need professional dialogue to deepen their understanding and to urge each other to question current beliefs and practices (Gespass & Paris, 2001). Teachers working as a community of learners to inform and improve their practice is also in keeping with the idea of constructivist learning.

Within each classroom community there is a different combination of past experiences, personalities, interests, strengths and limitations. This holds true for the teachers as well as the students. Therefore, every classroom's learning experiences will look different. However, certain ideas and principles will be evident. Students will trust enough to feel comfortable asking questions. Respect is shown for all points of view keeping in mind that the students will not nor should have an adult point of view. They express themselves from where they are or how they perceive and understand things at that point in time. Their ideas and questions are taken seriously. Students are taught how to be listeners and sensitive responders to other learners they interact with so everyone will feel comfortable in expressing their views and understandings.

Noddings (1991) warns that while small group work can be a promising possibility for students to show care for each other the process must be monitored by the teacher. Students can at times behave negatively towards each other and need to be told that the goals of the group are to help one another intellectually and interpersonally.

Constructivist teachers listen to their students' wonderings and frustrations as a means of understanding how they are thinking and what misconceptions they may have. In the process of observing and interpreting their students' learning, constructivist teachers adapt materials and revise plans and expectations. Students' suppositions do not always allow them to solve problems posed by the teacher. Mismatches between their understandings and the concepts needed in order to work through a given problem means that the teacher will revise her plans and address the perceived gap in understanding. Questioning students to find out where they are and then challenging their current thinking through questioning and further experiences can help them grasp the concepts needed to address problems posed by their activities (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Classrooms should be organized so students can easily interact and collaborate with their peers. They need mobility and easy access to materials (Gould, 1996). Classrooms need to have areas for groups to gather, work and interact. Teachers need to constantly provide and help students access information. Access to the library, Internet, and materials for carrying out experiments and investigations would all help the process of inquiry move more smoothly.

Delpit (1988) stresses the importance of writing for real audiences and for real purposes to help students understand that they have a voice in their own learning process. Writing letters that are sent and that receive a response are much more meaningful than writing to imaginary people. Making activities relevant to the students will result in a higher quality final product because they will have a genuine audience.

When planning for inquiry or problem-based teaching the inquiry should be interesting and engaging to the students (Fosnot, 1999). Learners have an active role in selecting activities with the teacher's support and knowledge of how to connect it to the curriculum. The problems being used come from the learner's own realm of experience so they will be able to connect with the concept being taught. *When I think back on my own attempts to teach problem solving in math I can see that I missed out on doing just that. Rather than using problems that came from the students and may have motivated them to construct solutions, I used ready-made questions from a teacher reference book. In many instances these problems were not realistic or relevant to the students. As I reflect, I can think of many ways I could have generated problems that would have been more student-centred. A colleague and I made a similar observation about the Grade 3 standardized math exams in 1999. We discussed a particular problem on the exam and how the students could not relate to it or understand it. We knew they were capable of solving that type of problem but they had not found it relevant and had therefore not been able to solve it. By way of experiment she had rephrased the same problem in terms of the students lining up for tickets to the hottest movie release. The students solved the problem in record time once they could relate it to their own life experience.*

Having students write about their experiences and ideas provide teachers with insight into their students' points of view, experiences and conceptions about the world. These insights can then help in deciding what might be a starting place for their inquiry.

Teachers using constructivist teaching approaches often practice and develop their questioning skills. Student inquiry can be encouraged by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions involving inferences, prediction, analysis, classification, and comparison. Constructivist teachers tend to respond to students' questions with further questioning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). In the process of asking students to explain their thinking they often identify their errors and misconceptions. Errors stemming from the learner's misconceptions need to be seen as a valuable teaching tool. They give us a picture of where they are in their thinking. The student's own reflections are essential to construct new understanding.

*Wait time allows students to process the question or problem and formulate their ideas. I find this particularly true in my work with special needs students. Even when giving them direction we tend to keep repeating what we want them to do rather than giving them the time needed to respond. The mere act of counting to ten before repeating ourselves can be very effective. The students will inevitably respond within the first ten second wait when given time to think. I find myself needing to be reminded to give wait time. Practice and patience are needed to adjust ourselves to waiting for responses as*

*we are constantly worried about how much we need to cover and how little time there is to do so.*

As soon as a teacher provides the right answer, students stop thinking (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Too often we either answer our own questions or only choose those who put their hands up in the first few seconds. Those needing time to think seldom get the opportunity and are in danger of becoming disengaged learners who see no point in trying to compete.

In conjunction with relevance to students, valuing their point of view, skillful questioning and ongoing assessment constructivist teachers begin with the whole picture before breaking a concept down into its parts (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Students can more easily make sense of the parts, if they can first see where they came from. When we attempt to assemble a toy or a piece of furniture we want and need to see the picture of what it should look like before we begin to look at the parts and how they fit together. Beginning with the whole provides the possibility of diverse types of inquiry for students.

Many teachers already use teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, conflict resolution, student conferencing, interdisciplinary teaching, book club meetings, portfolios and performance based assessment that are conducive to constructivist teaching. Some of the concerns teachers have about implementing totally constructivist classrooms are related to loss of classroom control, an inability to cover the curriculum, questions about how to effectively assess student growth and not having a clear understanding of how to get started.

Teachers require support while exploring constructivist teaching practices. Finding a critical friend to reflect and talk with can be a path towards deeper understandings and improved practice. Planning inquiry-based lessons together will help generate ideas and promote sharing materials. Finding the time to collaborate can be a barrier. By enlisting the support of the administrator, time may be given on professional development days or common preparation periods to meet with a critical friend.

If students have an active role in directing their learning, they will be more engaged in the classroom. While constructivist classrooms would be noisier, the talk needs to be thought of as constructive rather than disruptive. The teacher as facilitator or sidelines coach is still directing what happens in the classroom through skillful questioning and setting the stage for curriculum based learning to happen. In the role of facilitator, teachers need to have a firm understanding of where they want to go and create situations that involve inquiry into curriculum areas. Delpit (1988) believes that teachers should not be afraid to be a presence in the classroom. She found that students felt the teachers had denied them access to themselves as a source of knowledge when they became too reluctant to do any direct instruction. She states “they must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge while being helped to acknowledge their own ‘expertness’ as well” (p. 341). As students feel what they are doing has relevance, they become more focused and take responsibility for their own learning.

Student assessment is an ongoing process of observation. Keeping anecdotal notes gives a clear picture of a student's progress over a period of time. Asking students to explain their thinking gives the teacher a window into the student's thought process and gives them the opportunity to reflect on their own errors, thereby increasing understanding of the concepts they are exploring.

Asking students to reflect on their learning through the use of self assessment tools and portfolios helps them to understand themselves as learners. Through the process of preparing and presenting their work students learn to take ownership for their learning. Presenting their work to their parents frequently provides them with a sense of pride in their accomplishments and a view of what they want to work towards. By explaining the pieces they selected for their portfolio they clarify for themselves, their parents and their teachers what their personal strengths and weaknesses are.

*Constructivist teaching presents a very respectful approach to working with students. Allowing students to delve into topics that truly interest them is invigorating. Teaching in a constructivist fashion leaves the doors open to a diverse group of learners making for a more inclusive environment. I use a variety of practices that fit into the principles of constructivist teaching but would like to see myself move further along the continuum. In the process of researching constructivist teaching I have found myself beginning to look for ways to utilize the students' interests to help direct my teaching. My special needs students surprised me with the depth of their questions, as they prepared to investigate the respiratory system. They asked questions like, "What makes some people's voices deeper than others?" and "What happens in your lungs when you smoke?" They are now in the process of finding information and are motivated to read more difficult materials than they normally would have. I'm looking forward to seeing the results of their inquiries and so are they. I don't know that I will be able to apply constructivist teaching to all the areas of my special education/life skills program but out of respect for my students I will make the effort to incorporate what I have learned where possible.*

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## **A MESSAGE FROM SEVEN OAKS TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION**

This issue of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* is decidedly "Seven Oaks" in its content. The Seven Oaks School Division has developed a reputation as a community where we attend to the general well being of people. We support this philosophy with resources that indicate education has an important moral and aesthetic component. This year in particular we have enjoyed and been enlightened by the Arts Conference in February. It was at this conference that Phillip Hall gave a very well received presentation, reproduced here. As well, this issue of *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* will be coming out on the heels of an ambitious project called "Arts in the Park" This is a full day celebration of the arts held in Kildonan Park with participation from all the schools in the division. In their articles, Diane Peters and Jack Whitehead contribute to the notion that teaching and learning have an inherent moral component. The division further supported this philosophy by bringing in David Hansen and Cedric Cullingford earlier this year.

Finally an article by Janice Hill draws all of these threads together and asks us to think about our students as individuals who all learn differently. Her ideas about constructivism inform the discussion about the needs of the individual and the importance of personal relevance in the teaching and learning process. As with arts and morality, the eye of the beholder is the lens of meaning.

On behalf of the members of the Seven Oaks Teachers' Association I would like to congratulate all the *Teaching Today for Tomorrow* contributors this year and our thanks goes out to the Journal Publication Committee for their efforts towards the professional development needs of their teaching colleagues.

**Kirsten Aitken**  
**SOTA President**