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Feature Article

Teaching with the Grain: A Situationally Grounded Approach to Teacher Training

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Abstract

This paper offers teachers a situationally grounded framework for examining and improving their practice. It critiques some of the mainstream literature related to teacher training and proposes a three-phase model, *Teaching with the Grain* (TWG), that is rooted in a constructivist worldview. In Phase I the teacher describes succinctly a specific teaching situation. In Phase II she analyzes that situation by examining six relationships over which she exerts some control. They are her relationship to herself, her culture, her students, her curriculum, her sponsors, and her colleagues. In Phase III she generates and addresses systemic issues arising from her Phase II analysis. The author illustrates the framework, drawing upon examples from his own teaching practice. This paper is a result of critical reflection by the author on his 11-year teaching experience in higher education.

Effective teachers improvise. They hone a rich repertoire of knowledge and skills, but they also know that their knowledge and skills cannot be applied formulaically. They know that, in order to be effective, they must tailor their expertise to particular situations. A major premise of this paper is that context matters deeply in the attainment and assessment of effective teaching; that is why I believe that teachers' effectiveness depends not on their judicious application of universal principles and strategies, but on their ability to optimize their expertise, resources, and influence *in particular situations*. Teachers' expertise, resources, and influence change over time and place. For instance, teachers' command of their subject matter varies from subject area to subject area, the nature and

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composition of their students vary from class to class, and teachers enjoy varying collegial and institutional support in different situations. Accordingly, the prudent teacher will attempt to analyze each situation to ascertain what is her best course of action *in that situation.*

Teaching with the Grain (TWG) is an analytic tool. It is not a blueprint for designing and implementing specific courses. Teachers should treat it as a tool to help them practice. When we practice (a sport or a musical instrument, for instance), we repeatedly and intensely perform a set of routines that allow us to build upon our strengths and to work on our areas of weakness. However, when we go out to play in an actual game (or performance), we cease the routines and just play with all that we have, hoping that our practice sessions pay off. Teachers should consider their use of TWG as practice sessions. They should use it to help them build on their strengths and to work on their areas of weakness. As they "practice," teachers should *not* rely on themselves only; they should draw upon whatever help is available (students, friends, colleagues, literature, etc.).

For novice teachers or for those who are unfamiliar with TWG, initial "practice sessions" would be formal and deliberate. However, as teachers gain experience and familiarity with the framework, their "practice sessions" will become more informal and intuitive.

Sources of Influence

Before launching into a discussion of the framework, let me provide a general sense of the literature, people, and circumstances that have influenced my writing of this paper. I also provide here a brief critique of some of the mainstream literature related to teacher training.

Positive Influences

I have been teaching about the subject of teaching (at the college level) for the past 11 years. My students' feedback has been the greatest impetus for this paper. In fact, the idea of examining teaching in relational terms came from one of my doctoral students, Judy Higgins.

Two of my mentors, graduate studies professors James Plueddemann and Phyllis Cunningham, have modeled critical pedagogy for me. Afrocentrists (Asante, 1991; West, 1993), feminists (Hart, 1992; hooks, 2000a), and critical pedagogists (Apple, 1985; Freire, 1970, 1973, 1998;

Giroux, 1983; hooks, 2000b; Shor, 1992) have turned my gaze toward the cultural and institutional forces shaping my classroom practices. Brookfield (1995) has heightened my awareness of the role that my biography plays in my teaching practice. hooks' (1994) notion of *engaged pedagogy* has been forcing me to pay more attention to how my physical presence (my body) affects my teaching practice. The analytic philosophy of William Frankena (1965) and the curriculum theory of Elliot Eisner (1985) have aided my understanding of broad curricular issues. In hindsight, it was Dewey's (1938) *Experience and Education* that sparked my interest in social constructivism. That interest was then fueled by another mentor–professor of phenomenology, Sherman Stanage–and by the writings of Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Vygotsky (1978).

Cause for Concern

This paper is also a reaction to teacher training models, such as Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2000) and Schwarz (1994), that focus primarily on teaching techniques—with little attention to the context of application. The techniques suggested by these authors may be useable. For instance, I have adapted some of the group facilitation and advance organizing techniques advocated by Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2000). However, by their inattention to context these technique-driven models tend to overly simplify the teaching process. Teachers who attempt to apply techniques without consideration of context often find their efforts stymied and ineffective—because they lack the expertise, resources, time, or power to apply the techniques adequately.

Literature that groups teaching practices into ideal philosophical types is another cause for concern. Two such texts come to mind: Elias and Merriam (1995) and Zinn (1999). I take issue with ideal philosophical types for many reasons. First, the categories used to build the classifications are often incomparable. For instance, Elias and Merriam (1995) build their classification on six categories: liberals, progressives, radicals, behaviorists, humanists, and philosophical analysts. The first three categories point to people's political orientation to their society. Applied to teaching, these three categories suggest where teachers stand, politically, in relation to other members of their society. The next two categories, "behaviorist" and "humanist," on the other hand, point to people's metaphysical and epistemological orientation to the world—how we understand our realities and how we come to know and engage with those

realities. A person's political orientation is, no doubt, shaped by her metaphysics and epistemology, and vice versa. However, notwithstanding their relatedness, I believe that the distinction—between political orientation and metaphysics/epistemology—is warranted. Teachers who subscribe to behaviorist metaphysics and epistemology may be liberal, progressive, or radical in their political orientation. B. F. Skinner, for instance, has been called a radical behaviorist—suggesting that his ideas about behaviorism set him apart from most of his contemporaries. What I have just said about behaviorism is also true of humanism. Teachers who subscribe to humanistic metaphysics and epistemology may be liberal, progressive, or radical in their political orientation. A case can be made that Malcolm Knowles, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers all espouse liberal humanist ideas, whereas the writings of bell hooks, Ira Shor, Ivan Illich, and Paulo Freire exhibit a more radical humanism. Elias and Merriam's treatment of the subject glosses over these important subtleties.

Elias and Merriam's sixth category, analytic philosophy, does not compare at all with the other five. Analytic philosophy is (in part) a reaction to ideal philosophical types. Analytic philosophers such as Furrow (1995) and Wheeler (2000) eschew ideal types because, among other things, they believe that people are not consistent in their metaphysics, epistemology, or axiology—that indeed our values and actions are conditioned by contexts—hence Wheeler's implication that analytic philosophy is tantamount to deconstructionism. I find it meaningless, therefore, to compare analytic philosophy, which denies ideal philosophical types, with other ideal types, as Elias and Merriam (1995) have done.

My second concern with ideal philosophical types is the risk of stereotyping. I know of no one who fits well into any of the six categories created by Elias and Merriam, for instance. Accordingly, when my students employ Elias and Merriam's classification scheme, they tend to force-fit people into categories—a form of stereotyping—or they place the same individual into several categories. This practice, in my opinion, reduces significantly the utility of the classification instrument.

Thirdly, there is an implicit assumption among proponents of ideal philosophical types that a person's values and beliefs are always compatible. Liberals, for instance, are presumed to have a consistent, noncompeting set of core values that remain doggedly stable over time or space. The same is presumed to be the case for the other five categories discussed by Elias and Merriam. Most of us, however, have encountered

situations (as teachers) in which our personal interests and values compete. For instance, I often have found myself in situations in which my concern for some students' personal freedom competes with my concern for other students' personal safety. In a course I once taught in Chicago, I wanted to honor a Latina's right to voice her opinions about the white racism she believed that she had been subjected to from her classmates. Simultaneously, however, I also wanted to shield my white students from the obvious pain and embarrassment resulting from the Latina's exercise of her right to speak out against racism. Classifications, such as Elias and Merriam's, offer me little guidance in navigating such competing values.

My fourth and final concern with the literature that advocates ideal philosophical types is the assumption that people's values always drive their actions, and never the other way around. This approach assumes, among other things, that when teachers are exposed to different philosophical schools, they incorporate into their repertoire of beliefs those values and principles deemed most suitable for guiding their practice. Presumably, teachers then use their modified repertoire of beliefs to guide their practices. Beder (1989) takes issue with this privileging of beliefs over actions. He writes: "After reviewing the general professional books of the field from the 1920s to the present, I have concluded that the reverse [that actions guide beliefs rather than the other way around] may be a more accurate description of the field's development in North America" (pp. 37-38). A moment's reflection would reveal that Beder is correct—that many of our beliefs flow from our actions. In fact, the notion of dialectical materialism popularized by Engel and Marx suggests that the material world (which includes our actions) shapes our consciousness as much as our consciousness shapes our material existence. Vygotsky (1978), applying dialectical materialism to human development and learning, argues that our minds are a product of society as much as society is a product of our minds. The literature purporting ideal philosophical types ignores this dialectic relationship between beliefs and actions and as such is, for me, not a very useful guide to practice.

In her *Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory*, Lorraine Zinn (1999) epitomizes the problems with ideal philosophical types. Her *Inventory* allows a teacher to map her teaching practice into one of five of Elias and Merriam's philosophical categories. Using a seven-point Likert scale, Zinn (1999) asks teachers to respond to 15 items, each item having five options. For instance, item No. 2 of the *Inventory* reads:

PEOPLE LEARN BEST:

When new knowledge is presented from a problem-solving approach.
When the learning activity is clearly structured and provides for practice and repetition.
Through open discussion and critical reflection with others, both inside and outside of a structured learning environment.
When they can make self-directed choices about learning methods and outcomes.
From an "expert" who thoroughly knows the subject matter. (p. 7)

Teachers are then asked to rank order their position on each of these five options on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

With this decontextualized, Procrustean bed Zinn hopes to help teachers "better understand the diversity of the adult education field; see how closely they are aligned with specific adult education purposes, roles, and concepts; and further their professional development" (p. 4). I tried filling out Zinn's *Inventory* just for the fun of it, but I could not finish the charade because, item after item, I kept asking myself, "What is the context?" I found that when I varied my teaching context, my response to almost every item in the *Inventory* changed significantly. I concluded that Zinn's *Inventory* might be a neat way to simplify the world of teaching, but, as a guide to what I might do as a teacher in a specific context, it is virtually useless.

Some have charged that TWG is just another ideal philosophical type—Baptistian Constructivism. It is true that TWG constitutes an ideal way to examine and assess one's teaching practice. Indeed, my constructivist philosophical persuasion permeates the framework. However, TWG is a tool for generating philosophies. It is not itself an ideal philosophical type. Behaviorists, humanists, constructivists, idealists, realists, etc., can all use the framework. Clearly, some (based on their own philosophical stance) would find the framework more useful than others. But it is a tool (good or bad) for generating and assessing philosophies–not a philosophy itself.

There are two basic distinctions between ideal philosophical classifications (types) and TWG. First, in every ideal philosophical classification, there are a *finite* number of pregiven philosophical types, such as liberal, progressive, humanist, constructivist, behaviorist, and so on, and the definition of each type (within the classification) is predetermined by

the theorist(s) who construct the classification. This predetermination usually leads to "forcing square pegs into round holes."

In TWG there are no pregiven philosophical types and no predetermined conceptualization of any philosophy. The number of philosophical types that could be generated from using TWG is theoretically infinite, and so are their definitions. This absence of predetermination reduces the risk of "forcing square pegs into round holes."

Second, with ideal philosophical types such as Zinn (1999) or Elias and Merriam (1995) a person's philosophy is considered fairly fixed. Elias and Merriam's classification does not leave much room for changes in one's philosophical stance from one context to another. However, TWG *allows for* variations in a person's philosophy from one context to another (even within the same time period). Note that I said, "allows for," not "requires." Whether a person's philosophy varies from context to context is an empirical determination, not a speculative deduction. As the saying goes, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

The Framework: A Brief Overview

Every teaching situation consists of at least four elements: a teacher, a student, a curriculum, and a larger societal and cultural milieu that envelops that situation. In addition, some teaching situations include two more elements–colleagues and sponsoring institutions. TWG focuses not so much on the six elements themselves, but rather on the influence teachers exert over them. Influence is always relational—that is to say, I exert influence over an entity by the ways I relate to it. I exert influence over my students by the ways I relate to them. I exert influence over myself by the ways I relate to myself. The same is true of my influence over my curriculum, my colleagues, my sponsors, and my culture. Given the foregoing, it seems useful to me to analyze my teaching in relational terms. Framed this way, the overarching question driving the framework is this: *As a teacher, how do I relate to myself, my culture, my students, my curriculum, my sponsors, and my colleagues <u>in this particular teaching situation</u>?*

I have divided the framework into three phases. In Phase I (the descriptive phase) the teacher describes succinctly an actual teaching situation. This description furnishes the kinds of information about the situation that would later help to ground the analysis–protecting it from ivory tower abstractions and flights of fantasy. In Phase II (the analytic phase)

the teacher analyzes the situation by examining closely the six relationships mentioned earlier. This analysis allows the teacher to identify personal concerns she needs to address to facilitate effectiveness in that situation. In this second phase the teacher also begins to generate larger systemic issues arising from her personal concerns. In Phase III (generating and addressing systemic issues) the teacher pulls together the personal concerns identified in Phase II and frames them in terms of larger systemic issues. This framing is crucial. It forces the teacher to examine and address her concerns, not only in terms of her own personal expertise, behavior, and attitudes, but also in relation to the larger transactional, institutional, and cultural forces impacting her behavior. I shall now provide a more detailed description of each phase.

Phase I: Describing an Actual Teaching Situation

In this phase the teacher identifies an actual teaching situation in which she has assumed some educative role–teacher, facilitator, curriculum developer, program coordinator, etc. That situation may be a formal classroom setting or less formal teaching settings such as customer relations, admissions offices, travel agencies, community-based organizations, medical establishments and hospitals, places of worship, at home, in the public sector, the armed forces, and so on. The teacher then describes that teaching situation, detailing the educative roles that she and others play in it. I offer the following prompts to help you describe your teaching situation:

1. Choose a situation in which you have had some formal affiliation with an organization or company. In other words, don't choose a situation in which you work alone—without any institutional affiliation.
2. Describe the context in which you work. Tell us whom you work for—whether self-employed, an employee, an independent contractor, etc. Tell us a bit about the company or organization, your position or title, and other colleagues whose work affects what you do.
3. Within the context of the organization you have selected, briefly describe a current or past teaching experience you have had and state your educative roles in it.
4. Tell us who else is or was associated with producing and implementing the project or course and what their roles are or were.

5. Provide a succinct description of the course or project—including its learning objectives, broad instructional strategies, and evaluation methods.

Phase II: Analysis of the Teaching Situation

In this phase, the teacher analyzes the situation she described in Phase I by scrutinizing how she engages in the six relationships mentioned earlier. For the sake of clarity, I discuss each relationship separately. However, in practice they are inextricable. For instance, I, as a teacher cannot completely separate a relationship with myself from a relationship with my culture. Most of what I have come to know and believe about myself are gifts or hindrances bestowed upon me by my culture. Similarly, a major part of how I relate to Stable University (my sponsor) involves how I relate to my colleagues. Consequently, there are necessary and unavoidable overlaps between and among the relationships presented below. Please bear this in mind as you work with the framework.

After explaining briefly each relationship, I provide a list of questions to guide the analysis of that relationship. The questions do not exhaust all the things one might consider when examining that relationship; they are merely samples of possible lines of inquiry. I advise my readers to use them to get a general sense of what each relationship entails. Once you've grasped the idea, feel free to expand, modify, and delete items. Treat the questions as guides rather than blueprints. Think of them as a heuristic device–a checklist of ideas to consider and reflect upon as you conduct your analysis.

You should not conduct this analysis in splendid isolation. It is imperative that you consult with friends, colleagues, and literature as you conduct your analysis. These other sources offer valuable perspectives on your teaching practice.

Relationship #1: Relating to Myself

As teachers, we are not the same persons in every situation. We think differently about ourselves in different situations; we rank our values and priorities differently in different situations; we exhibit different attitudes and dispositions in different situations; and we bring different aptitudes, expertise, and resources to different situations. For instance, a teacher might approach one teaching situation with vitality and confidence even though she realizes that she has limited command of the subject area. She is confident and energetic because she and her students

have great interest in the topic; they know, trust, and respect each other; and she knows that her students possess a wealth of knowledge and experience about the topic. That teacher might approach a different teaching situation halfheartedly and timidly even though she has great interest, knowledge, and expertise regarding the topic. Her lukewarmness and timidity stem from the fact that she and her students do not know each other well, she suspects that her students have little interest in the topic, and she knows that some of her students wield considerably more power within the institution than she does. So although her title remains the same in both situations (e.g., assistant professor), she relates to herself quite differently in each of these two situations. How a teacher relates to herself in particular teaching situations—the attitudes and dispositions she exhibits, the resources and baggage she brings—greatly influences what she does in those situations. Consequently, analyzing how she relates to herself in a particular teaching situation could prove to be a valuable training tool. The following is a set of guiding questions a teacher might use to analyze her relationship with herself:

1. What attitudes and dispositions regarding myself do I exhibit in this teaching situation?
2. What are my beliefs, hopes, expectations, aspirations, fears, etc., about myself?
3. What relevant expertise, resources, and influence do I bring to this situation?
4. What pertinent expertise, resources, and influence do I lack in this situation?
5. In this particular situation, what do I regard as educational malpractice–in other words, what are my ethical commitments and boundaries?
6. How are my views about myself affecting my teaching (positively or negatively)?
7. What positive changes in the ways I relate to myself can I make in this situation?

Relationship #2: Relating to My Culture

By culture I mean shared identities: those social structures, locations, and corresponding experiences and values a teacher holds in common with members of the larger society. Those experiences and values are shaped by gender, sexual orientation, race, class, domicile and geo-

graphic location, family and educational backgrounds, religion, physical appearance and stature, physical abilities and disabilities, and so on. What a teacher is able to do and say in a particular teaching situation depends a great deal on what her social locations allow. Moreover, the potency of particular social locations varies from situation to situation. In one situation a teacher's educational background takes precedence over her gender; in another, the situation is reversed. In one situation her race is an asset; in another it is a liability. In short, culture is always dynamic, and it is precisely because of this dynamism that it is such a powerful and ubiquitous force. It is, therefore, instructive that, in every teaching situation, teachers analyze how they relate to this pervasive, dynamic force. As a teacher I have found the following questions helpful in analyzing my relationship to my culture:

1. In this teaching situation, what are my salient social locations, and how do they affect what I say and do?
2. In what ways are my social locations assets, and how can I exploit those assets?
3. In what ways are they liabilities, and how can I overcome those liabilities?

Relationship #3: Relating to My Students

A teacher's effectiveness also depends on the types of students with whom she engages. No two students are alike, and, hence, no two students are affected in the same way by what they experience. More importantly, the impact that a teacher and her students have on each other depends a great deal on the relationships they develop. Accordingly, the assumptions a teacher makes about her students and, consequently, how she relates to them are crucial factors in determining her effectiveness as a teacher. Below are samples of the types of questions a teacher might ask as she analyzes her relationship with her students. Note: The focus of the analysis is not on the objective characteristics of students, but rather on the *relationship* the teacher has with them.

1. In this teaching situation, what is my target audience–what do I know or assume about its composition, size, diversity, potential for conflict, etc.?
2. What do I know and/or assume about my students' aptitude, knowledge, and skills?

3. What do I know and/or assume about their motivation, disposition, readiness, and orientation to learn?
4. What roles and responsibilities do I take toward my students?
5. What roles and responsibilities do I expect of my students?
6. How do I deal with conflict of interests and power differentials between and among my students and me?
7. In this teaching situation, which students do I privilege? What aspects of their identities do I honor and celebrate–their gender, sexual orientation, race, class, domicile and geographic location, family and educational backgrounds, religion, physical appearance and stature, physical abilities and disabilities, and so on?
8. In this teaching situation, which students do I marginalize? What aspects of their identities do I trivialize or discount?
9. How do I explain the achievement and underachievement of certain students?
10. In this teaching situation, what attitudes and behaviors toward students do I need to change in order to promote a more conducive learning environment?

Relationship #4: Relating to the Curriculum

A teacher's effectiveness also depends on how she relates to her curriculum. The curriculum includes the subject matter, learning objectives, instructional activities and resources, and methods of evaluation. The curriculum is not a static document. It is shaped significantly by how the teacher (and students) relate to it. A teacher who considers math to be a highly intellectual task that only few could master is going to produce a math curriculum that is vastly different from the teacher who construes math as everyday human activities that most people could accomplish successfully, even though both teachers are using identical *written* syllabi. Below I provide a set of questions to help teachers analyze their relationship with their curriculum. First, I address subject matter and then learning objectives; last, I tackle instruction and evaluation.

On subject matter:

1. In this teaching situation, how do I regard my subject matter? Do I construe it as highly abstract concepts only the very intellectually gifted could grasp? Do I regard it as day-to-day human activities that most people could accomplish successfully?

2. Do I treat my subject matter as a *fait accompli*–a finished product to be transmitted faithfully to students?
3. On the other hand, do I treat my subject matter as a work in progress–open to change and growth?
4. Do I take my subject matter seriously–i.e., do I consider it crucial to my students' lives and well being? Do I consider it somewhat important, or do I consider it trivial and dispensable?
5. What aspects of the subject matter do I control? What aspects don't I control?

On learning objectives:

1. What are the stated and unstated learning objectives of this teaching situation?
2. How are the objectives developed, who makes those decisions, and what role do I play in this process?
3. Do I consider the learning objectives to be predetermined and fixed, or do I think of them as fluid and subject to change as the course proceeds?
4. How do I construe learning objectives–in behavioral, quantifiable, and measurable terms, or in more qualitative, less measurable terms?
5. What pertinent learning objectives are being ignored in this situation? Why?

On instruction and evaluation:

1. What instructional and evaluation activities do I employ in this teaching situation?
2. What assumptions about learning (behaviorist, cognitivist, constructivist, etc.) and the learning environment (formal, informal, controlled, chaotic, safe, comfortable, etc.) are implied by these activities?
3. What assumptions about evaluation (summative, formative, objective, subjective, etc.) are implied by these activities?
4. Who determines and implements the instructional and evaluation activities used in this teaching situation? What part do I play in this process?
5. Do I assume that the learning objectives could be achieved only via a single, ideal set of activities and resources, or do I believe that there are multiple ways to achieve the same learning objectives?

6. What are my available resources in terms of expertise, time, materials, equipment, facilities, etc.?
7. What additional expertise and resources do I need in order to implement adequately the instructional and evaluation activities?
8. In this teaching situation, how can I augment the expertise and resources that are in short supply or procure the expertise and resources that are lacking?

Relationship #5: Relating to My Sponsors

Most educational programs are sponsored by persons and organizations other than the teachers or administrators who run them. Sponsors provide resources for teachers; they also constrain what teachers can do. Consequently, teachers' effectiveness often depends on the policies, practices, resources, and reputation of their sponsors. Here are some questions you might use to analyze your relationship with your sponsors:

1. Who sponsors this educational endeavor, and what are their interests?
2. What interests do we have in common?
3. What conflicts of interest exist between and among my sponsors and me?
4. Which conflicts are reconcilable and which ones are not? How do I deal with irreconcilable conflicts?
5. How do my sponsors' policies, practices, and reputation support and/or hinder my activities and goals?
6. What resources (equipment, materials, literature, time, money, incentives, etc.) do my sponsors provide?
7. What resources do my sponsors not provide that I believe they should provide?
8. How can I get my sponsors to provide more adequate resources?

Relationship #6: Relating to My Colleagues

Teachers do not always work in isolation. Sometimes their work involves colleagues. Our colleagues may enhance or impede our effectiveness as teachers. In analyzing a teaching situation it is, therefore, prudent that teachers address their relationship with their colleagues. Here is a set of questions you might use to analyze your relationship with your colleagues:

1. In this teaching situation, who are my colleagues, and how do they engage with my work?

2. How does their engagement affect my effectiveness (positively and negatively)?
3. How do I build alliances and foster collaboration with colleagues?
4. How do I minimize the negative effects of my colleagues' engagement?

Summary of Phase II

The foregoing is but a sample of the possible lines of inquiry a teacher might pursue as she analyzes her teaching practice. As pointed out at the beginning of this section, the framework is intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive. Hopefully, with practice, teachers will use TWG as a heuristic device rather than a blueprint—adding and examining more contextually relevant questions as the need arises and as teachers' proficiency with the tool improves. The point to note is this: By addressing questions similar to the ones provided in the framework, the teacher generates personal concerns that would otherwise have been hidden from view. Also, by grounding her analysis in her context, the teacher protects herself from ivory tower abstractions and flights of fantasy. The concerns she generates from this situationally grounded analysis are then concerted into systemic issues in Phase III.

Phase III: Generating and Addressing Systemic Issues

Before providing suggestions on how to generate and address systemic issues, let me differentiate between four interrelated terms that are employed extensively throughout the rest of paper: contexts, system, personal concerns, and systemic issues. *Contexts* refer to concrete locales, locations, and conditions in and under which people live and work. Contexts include the immediate physical and social environment in which we conduct our activities. For instance, I am a faculty member in the adult education program at a Research One institution (Stable University—a pseudonym) located in the northeastern United States. My predominant teaching context is, therefore, the physical and social environments that constitute and envelope the adult education program of Stable University. However, I move in and out of different contexts. For instance, from time to time I have been a visiting instructor at a university in Chicago, and I also have taught at a private college in Trinidad. Each of these three situations is a different context, with different resources and challenges.

The term *system* has its roots in biology. Bertalanffy (1928/1962, 1968), a biologist, is credited as being an "early architect of general sys-

tems theory" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 143). An articulation and critique of systems theory is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I should point out that theorists disagree on the etiology, definition, and boundaries of systems. In general, however, a biological system is regarded as a set of elements that work in concert to regulate a biological function. The digestive system, for instance, is made up of a set of elements that work together to regulate digestive function(s). So, too, are the reproductive and nervous systems. The systems referred to in this paper are social, not biological. A social system is a set of social elements (people, programs, institutions, etc.) that work in concert to produce and regulate (i.e., establish, maintain, resolve, alleviate, inhibit, exacerbate, etc.) specific social concerns or purposes, such as education and training, employment, crime, parenting, spirituality, entertainment, recreation, and so on.

My *personal concerns* are the things I wish to preserve, improve, or change about my colleagues, myself, and the broader contexts in which I live and work. These concerns vary with context. Some of my personal concerns are focused very inwardly, attending only to aspects of *my* behavior and attitudes. Two examples of inwardly focused personal concerns (that emerged when I conducted an analysis of my relationship with a particular course curriculum—see Relationship #4 above) are (1) What can I do to improve my time-management skills? and (2) What behaviors and attitudes should I alter to minimize my tendency to adjust my syllabus as the course proceeds?

My personal concerns may also focus on changing the behavior of others. This, for instance, is the case with the following two concerns that emerged when I analyzed my relationship with my culture (see Relationship #2 above): (1) In terms of their political orientation, I assume that most of my students and colleagues are right of center while I am clearly left of center. How are our differences in political orientation affecting our relationships? (2) How do I get my students to realize that their rhetoric of individualism sometimes masks their privileges? Addressing these two concerns requires attention not only to my behavior, but also to that of my students.

Every personal concern is a potential issue. Personal concerns become *issues* when they are stated in ways that invite disagreements. For instance, consider the personal concern: Should I improve my time-management skills? As currently stated, this is not an issue because there is very little on which to disagree. Most people would agree that it is desirable to improve one's time-management skills. I could convert this particular personal concern into an issue by asking: How should I improve

my time-management skills? This second construction of my personal concern is an issue because opinions on it are likely to vary significantly.

Although this second construction is likely to invite a variety of viewpoints, in its current form there is no guarantee that it will elicit system-wide perspectives. Personal concerns become *systemic issues* when they are stated in such a way that they elicit system-wide perspectives. Recall that a social system is an interlocking set of social elements that, together, produce and regulate a particular concern. In order to convert my personal concern, then, into a systemic issue, I must know the specific concern and the specific system (that interlocking set of people, programs, institutions, etc.) that produces and regulates that concern.

Generating Grounded, Systemic Issues

My readers are reminded that the goal of this analytic framework is to help them (1) generate personal concerns confronting their teaching practice, (2) convert those concerns into systemic issues, and (3) frame and address those systemic issues so that context-specific solutions are attained. A major assumption of the framework is that context matters deeply in the attainment and assessment of effective teaching. Another key assumption is that our personal concerns are best addressed by considering the larger social systems that produce and regulate them (our concerns). Accordingly, from a training standpoint, optimal benefit is derived from addressing *grounded, systemic issues*. A grounded, systemic issue is one that has the potential to elicit system-wide perspectives on the issue, incorporates the personal context(s) and concern(s) of the investigators, and invites context-specific solutions. Below I discuss five elements I consider crucial in generating grounded, systemic issues. They are (1) articulate your beef, (2) state your issue in exploratory as opposed to evaluative terms, (3) avoid burdening the issue statement with heavy presuppositions and predeterminations, (4) situate the issue within its particular regulatory system, and (5) ground the issue statement in your specific context. Note that, in order to consider these five elements properly, the teacher already must have conducted Phases I and II of the framework.

1. Articulate Your Beef. I suggested that, while analyzing your teaching situation in Phase II, you identify and record personal concerns–things you would like to improve about yourself, your colleagues, and your teaching situation. A beef is something that's really bugging you

about your teaching situation–a pressing personal concern or interrelated set of personal concerns emanating from your teaching situation. In a couple of paragraphs articulate each beef. To articulate each beef, you must say *what* is bugging you and *why* it is bugging you–why you care. It is important to address both the *whats* and *whys* of your beef. For instance, two faculty members may be concerned with low or negative student evaluations (the what of their beefs) for very different reasons. One faculty may be concerned because he fears reprisal and even dismissal (his why). The other faculty may be concerned because she doesn't want to fail her students in any way; she wants to provide the best learning environment and experience for all of her students all of the time (her why). Conversely, two teachers may have different *whats* but identical *whys*. For instance, fearing that she might be denied tenure (her why), one faculty member may be concerned primarily with the number of articles she has published. For the same reason, another faculty member may be concerned primarily with her student ratings (same why but different whats). It is imperative, therefore, that when you articulate your beef, you discuss both its whats and whys. A word of caution: In discussing your beef, please attend to the personal impact the situation is having on you. In discussing problems and their solutions, it is always easier to focus on how the problem affects other people—your students, colleagues, bosses, etc. Please remember to speak also of how you are personally affected (positively or negatively) by it.

Here is an example of a well-articulated beef. It comes from one of my students who works for an investment company in the northeastern United States. She is a program manager/lead instructional designer, and in that capacity she has chosen to focus on her role in designing and developing a training program for new employees. These new employees would eventually provide information and advice over the phone to customers regarding 401K and other investments opportunities. The student's beef (as articulated below) has the added benefit of leading to a grounded systemic issue. Concerning this particular beef she writes:

> My first "beef" relates to a conflict of interest between my sponsors [the investment company] and myself [sic]. I believe that this conflict stems from the fact that the underlying purpose of my sponsors is not to educate employees but to make money. When phone volumes get high, management pulls new hires out of class to help, usually just for a day or two, before they have completed the program. The major

> effect this has is that new hires are expected to take calls before they have completed the training program. Although this rarely happens, when it does, new hires are out on the phones speaking with customers before they've learned all the knowledge they need.
>
> The "beef" outlined above specifically relates to [my work site]. However, the same situation occurs in many of the new hire classes taught [throughout my company]. Therefore, my concern relates not only to [my work site], but also to all training programs for phone representatives at [my investment company]. My concern is that customers are making decisions about their accounts and benefits based on incorrect or incomplete information provided by new hires. . . . This can cause serious, long-term effects on customers. The result of this is a negative perception of [my company] by external customers [current and prospective] and also a negative perception of our training program by internal customers. My concerns cause me to ask, *How can [my company] manage periods of high call volumes without taking new hires out of class and, possibly, compromising the quality of information provided to customers?*

The passage in italics is a grounded systemic issue. Articulating her beef has allowed the student to convert her personal concern—her frustration with her learners being removed prematurely from her training program—to a grounded, systemic issue—what the company can do to alleviate the problem.

2. Explore the issue; don't just evaluate it. One way to increase the likelihood that an issue will elicit system-wide perspectives is to state it as an exploration instead of an evaluation. From my experience, students tend to be more concerned with evaluating a situation than in exploring it. Assuming a priori a particular stance on an issue, students then state and frame it in ways that rule out alternatives. These issues often take the form of yes/no or either/or questions. Here are a few examples of evaluative-type issues that I have encountered. *YES/NO*: (1) Can academic privileges and protections be extended to adjunct instructors who work from contract to contract? (2) Does an out-sourced course differ qualitatively from the same course delivered at and by the parent college? (3) Should an adult educator use her role to facilitate better understanding and communication among entities within her college? *EITHER/OR*: (1) Which pro-

duces a better paramedic: hospital-based or station-based (housed in stations away from the hospital) units? (2) Which has more of a positive impact on the residential students: better training in crisis identification or better referral skills training? (3) Why do organizations utilize dialogue in governance but still adhere to the primacy of the banking approach in formal education?

Some evaluative-type issues are also stated as questions that (tacitly or overtly) hypothesize cause/effect relationships. These questions take the following form: *What effect does "A" have on "B"?* For example: What are the effects of teaching styles on learning outcomes?

If you take a closer look at the evaluative-type issues listed above, you will notice that they all hypothesize (however vaguely) unconditional relationships between two or more variables. Such hypothesized, unconditional relationships rule out alternatives. To avoid this pitfall, state the issue in such a way that it generates different hypotheses and scenarios rather than in a way that simply tests predetermined ones. Consider, for instance, the question: "What are the effects of teaching styles on learning outcomes?" A single, unconditional relationship is hypothesized here: that teaching styles affect learning outcomes unconditionally. As currently stated, no other relationships are permitted. However, whether and how teaching styles affect learning outcomes depends on other mediating variables such as subject matter, teacher competence, students abilities and interests, class size, student composition, and so on. By asking the rather narrow evaluative question, these more complex relationships (among learning outcomes, teaching styles, teacher competence, student ability and interest, class size, student composition, etc.) are not likely to be considered when the issues are framed and addressed.

Now consider this question: "How do teaching styles contribute to learning outcomes?" On the face of it this question seems quite similar to the previous one, but it is not. This second question is far more exploratory. It does not hypothesize an unconditional relationship between teaching styles and learning outcomes. It allows that the relationship between the two might be mediated by other variables. In this second formulation those mediating variables are much more likely to be considered when framing and addressing the issue.

One of the reasons that the second formulation is likely to elicit a wider perspective than the first is that it seeks to *investigate a process*. The first formulation (what are the effects of teaching styles on learning outcomes) is primarily concerned with *describing an outcome*. The term

how in the second formulation connotes a process; it could be translated variously as "What is the process by which . . . ?" or "Under what conditions . . . ?" or "In what ways . . . ?" Each of these translations forces us to investigate a process. It is my contention that teachers are far more likely to find ways to improve their practices by investigating processes instead of merely describing outcomes.

Notwithstanding what was just said, it is possible to state an issue as a yes/no or an either/or question and still be exploratory. This is true, for instance, when the issue really has only two options. Consider, for example, this issue: "Which is more desirable: a fluid or a static syllabus?" Although only two options are provided here, they exhaust the range of possibilities. A syllabus is either fluid or static—there are no other options. However, the danger, because of the way in which this issue is stated, is still to focus on outcomes rather than process. The investigator must bear in mind that the desirability of a particular syllabus (static or fluid) might depend on certain conditions. In other words, while it might be desirable to employ a static syllabus under one set of conditions, it might be undesirable (or less desirable) to do so under a different set of conditions. These conditions must be considered when addressing the issue.

An exploratory issue may also be stated as a polemic to provoke argument. One of my students provided an excellent example of a polemically stated, yet exploratory, issue: "Are my alliances with my colleagues necessary evils or clever strategies?" Clearly, my student's intention is not to rule out options but, rather, to set up a polemic. My student must make sure, however, that when he frames and addresses the issue, he explores not only those two extremes but also the ones in between.

3. Avoid burdening the issue statement with heavy presuppositions and predeterminations. Another way to encourage diversity of perspectives in generating and addressing issues is to avoid burdening the issue statement with heavy presuppositions or predetermined answers. In other words, in stating the issue, do not privilege a particular direction or perspective, and try *not* to rule out any plausible perspective. For instance, the following is an example of an issue statement that makes heavy presuppositions and predeterminations and that privileges a particular direction or perspective: "Respect is important. What training programs can be developed to improve respect between students and teachers?" Later on I will be making references to this and other issue statements. For ease

of reference, therefore, let's refer to this as *Issue #1*. Before we even begin to explore Issue #1, it is already presumed that respect is important and that training would solve the problem of lack of respect. With such heavy presuppositions and predetermination packed into the issue statement, there is not much left to debate or discuss. A better way to state the issue to evoke diverse perspectives might be: "What is respect and how is it manifested, enhanced, and inhibited in a nursing education program such as mine?" (One of my students, a nursing educator, developed this issue.) For future reference, let's refer to this as *Issue #2*.

4. *Situate the issue within its particular regulatory system.* The scope of an issue depends on the nature of that issue. As such, there can be no hard and fast rules governing how broadly to cast an issue. In general, however, the issue should be cast broadly enough to elicit system-wide perspectives. In order to do so, we must ascertain the elements of the particular social system that regulate the particular issue. In doing so, teachers should consider two factors: (1) the specific concern that is being addressed and (2) the context in which that concern has arisen. For instance, the social system that regulates parking availability (a concern) at Stable University (one context) is quite different from the social system that regulates financial aid (another concern) at that same university (the same context). Likewise, the social system that regulates grading practices (a concern) at Stable University (one context) is likely to be different from the social system that regulates grading practices (the same concern) at another university (a different context).

To illustrate: My program offers an online master's degree. I teach in that program. Consider, therefore, the matter of how much time I should spend in online classroom interaction with students. What are the elements of the social system that would regulate my time availability? My time availability would depend, among other things, on my workload and class size. My workload and class size are affected not only by the personnel, resources, and policies of my program, department, college, and university, but also by state and federal educational policies, all of which are affected by the state of the economy in the United States. That's not all. My family, friends, and other significant acquaintances also affect my availability of time. Therefore, if I wish to address this issue adequately, I must state it broadly enough to solicit the views and reactions of these social actors. I might ask: "What constitutes optimal online classroom interaction at Stable University, and what factors govern this determination?" For future reference, let's refer to this as *Issue #3*.

5. Ground the issue statement in your specific context. It is possible to state an issue in such away that it elicits system-wide perspectives and still ground the issue in a specific context. Conversely, narrowing the range of perspectives on an issue does not guarantee that context-specificity will be achieved. For instance, Issue #1 (Respect is important. What training programs can be developed to improve respect between students and teachers?) elicits a relatively narrow range of perspectives, yet the issue is not tied to any specific context(s). As such, an exploration of Issue #1 is likely to yield abstract (non-usable) solutions. On the other hand, Issues #2 and #3 (What is respect and how is it manifested, enhanced, and inhibited in a nursing education program such as mine? and What constitutes optimal online classroom interaction at Stable University, and what factors govern this determination?) elicit much wider perspectives, yet they are grounded in specific contexts (a specific type of nursing education program and a specific program within Stable University, respectively). Their investigations are, therefore, likely to yield solutions that are usable in those specific contexts. As pointed out earlier, it is my contention that optimal training benefit is derived when issues are stated and framed in such a way that they elicit, simultaneously, system-wide perspectives and context-specific solutions. Using the five elements, I now provide an illustration of how to generate a grounded, systemic issue.

Generating a Grounded, Systemic Issue: An Illustration

For this illustration I return to the personal concern I mentioned earlier that pertains to alteration of my course syllabus. The context in which this concern arose is a course I teach that is offered every spring semester by the adult education program of Stable University. I chose Stable University as my context because I seek solutions that are primarily applicable in that context. If I were working on this issue with a team of faculty from four other universities, then our contexts would be those five universities. Notice, also, that I identified my context as the entire university rather than just the adult education program. I did that because (1) I now teach (and anticipate that I will continue to teach) inside and outside of the adult education program at Stable University and (2) I assume that the circumstances surrounding, and reasons for, this particular concern (alteration of course syllabi) are quite similar across courses and programs at Stable University. (My reason for this assumption is given below.)

What is my beef? What exactly is my concern, and why do I have this

concern? My concern is not the repeated alteration of the syllabus per se. Rather, it is the fact that my repeated alterations seem to frustrate some of my students. I assume that the reasons for students' frustration—over altered syllabi—are quite similar across courses and programs at Stable University. That's why I chose the entire university, and not just my program, as my context. However, not all of my students are frustrated by my repeated syllabus alterations. In fact some students are quite happy with the repeated changes I make. They take it as evidence that I am being responsive to their needs. Why, then, am I concerned? I am concerned because I am a perfectionist and because I care deeply about all my students. Doing a good job for some students is not good enough for me. I want to do an excellent job for all students all the time. However, I am not so naïve as to believe that I have complete control over the situation. Other factors, besides my own behavior, are also contributing to my students' frustration.

Who or what, then, is contributing to the frustration some students feel about my repeated syllabus alterations? Put differently, what system is producing and regulating my students' frustration? The contributors to my students' frustration include my behavior and the behavior of the students themselves, and our behaviors are, in turn, shaped by our socialization—especially as it relates to the values we hold about education. We cull these values from our experiences in our families, communities, schools, places of worship, and so on. This network of social actors constitutes the social system that produces and regulates my students' frustration over my repeated syllabus alterations. Notice that the system that produces and regulates my concern is much wider than the context from which my concern has arisen. That system includes the entire higher education establishment in the United States, the broader community and society of which Stable University is a part, and so on. I must keep this broader systems perspective in mind as I state, frame, and address the issue.

My task now is to restate my personal concern as a grounded, systemic issue. To do so I might ask: "What accounts for graduate students' frustration over my repeated syllabus alterations, and how might I best address their frustration?" As stated, this is a grounded, systemic issue. It has the potential to draw out system-wide perspectives on the issue; that is, it has the potential to elicit and scrutinize the values, actions, and perspectives of the social actors that have contributed to my personal concern. It also incorporates my personal context and concern, and it invites context-specific solutions.

Framing Grounded, Systemic Issues

Framing an issue means defining it—that is, placing boundaries around, and giving direction to, the inquiry. In other words, the *frame* is the road map that guides the investigation. In order to address an issue adequately, I must ask of it a set of specific questions that would draw out all of its important dimensions. There is no one right set of framing questions that would constitute an adequate exploration of an issue. The questions we ask will depend (inexorably) on our interests, expertise, and background. As a general guide, however, it makes sense to me to begin with definitional questions because many disagreements over issues are definitional—arguments over proverbial apples and oranges. It seems appropriate, therefore, first to sort out definitional discord before launching into other substantive areas of disagreement. In general, I frame an issue by attending to some replica of the following elements.

Elements to consider when framing a grounded, systemic issue:

1. Follow the suggestions given above for generating grounded, systemic issues.
2. In a few paragraphs describe your specific context, your teaching situation, and your and your colleague's role in it (see Phase I).
3. Succinctly articulate your beef.
4. Succinctly state your grounded, systemic issue.
5. Identify the key constructs within the issue.
6. Raise questions that would allow you to define each construct.
7. Identify the social actors (stakeholders) that regulate your concern.
8. Raise questions that would allow you to compare and contrast how different stakeholders define the key constructs.
9. Raise questions that would elicit different stakeholders' substantive stances (perspectives) on the issue.
10. Raise questions that would elicit your stance on the issue.
11. Raise questions that would compare and contrast the different stances on the issue.
12. Raise questions that would assess (evaluate) the different stances on the issue.
13. Raise questions that would invite your specific response to the issue.

Developing Framing Questions: An Illustration

To illustrate how to develop framing questions, let's return to my previous grounded, systemic issue: What explains graduate students' frustration over my repeated syllabus alterations, and how might I best address their frustration? I have already addressed elements 1 through 4 under the section titled, "Generating a Grounded, Systemic Issue: An Illustration," and in my earlier discussions in Phases I and II. I, therefore, shall tackle procedures 5 through 13. There are four key constructs in this issue: explanations, graduate students, syllabus alterations, and graduate students' frustration. Tailored to fit this specific issue, I, therefore, might ask:

1. Regarding this issue, what do I include in the term "explanations?"
2. How is students' frustration observed and/or measured in this teaching situation?
3. What constitutes a syllabus alteration, and how are alterations observed?
4. How do stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators, etc., at Stable University) differ in their responses to questions 2 and 3?
5. What explanations do different stakeholders give for students' frustration, and how do their explanations compare?
6. How do I assess the various explanations, and where do I stand on the issue?
7. Given my assessment of and stance on the issue, what will I do the next time I teach this course?

Addressing Grounded, Systemic Issues

Once the framing questions are developed, all that's left is for me to address each question. To do so, I would make use of whatever resources are available: my own knowledge and experiences, relevant literature, friends, colleagues, institutional resources, and so on. I would begin, as I said before, by comparing and contrasting the definitions that different groups of stakeholders employ. First, I would find out how each camp is employing the four key constructs. By clearing up definitional matters, I would ascertain whether the camps are arguing over the same thing or merely squabbling over proverbial apples and oranges. In conducting this definitional inquiry, I will not rely solely on dictionary meanings. I will go beyond dictionary definitions to what philosophers call *discourse*

or trans-dictionary meanings. For one thing, people do not necessarily operate under dictionary meanings. Second, constructs are usually imbued with meanings before they are recorded in dictionaries. Third, dictionaries may have more than one meaning for a construct. Fourth, the meanings of a particular construct may change over time and space. Consequently, when examining and conceptualizing a construct, it may be good politics, but poor scholarship, merely to present my pet dictionary definition.

In examining the constructs, I must also pay attention to their logical priority. For instance, I must first know what "graduate students" means before I could inquire into the meaning of "graduate students' frustration." Likewise, before I could assess adequately the various explanations stakeholders give for students' frustration, I must know what I mean by "explanations," and I must have a clear sense of various stakeholders' definitions of "altered syllabus." In short, in investigating an issue, some aspects of the inquiry are logically prior. It would behoove us, therefore, to order our investigation in accordance with this logical priority.

Once I have clarified how definitional differences are contributing to stakeholders' positions on the issue, I can then proceed to examining other reasons for their disagreements. Here I would conduct an analysis of the six relationships discussed in Phase II. How, for instance, are my and other stakeholders' expertise, resources, personal circumstances, and personality traits contributing to our stance on the issue (Relationship #1)? How are our relationships with students (Relationship #3) affecting our stance? How are our views about the particular subject matter and curriculum affecting our stance on the issue (Relationship #4)? What about our cultural identities (Relationship #2) and our institutional and collegial ties (Relationships #5 and #6)? This process, hopefully, would lead me to clarify my own stance on the issue. Having done so, I can then restate and readdress my personal concern.

Conclusion

In this paper I have provided a situationally grounded, three-phase framework that could be used to assist teachers in examining and improving their practice. Context, I have argued, matters deeply in the assessment and attainment of effective teaching. The notion of the universally effective teacher, who, with a well-honed repertoire of skills, is able to adapt adeptly to every situation, seems suspect to me. Either a teacher has no standards at all, or she will sooner or later encounter situations in

which her standards run counter to what is expected of her by other stakeholders–students, colleagues, administrators, funding agencies, etc. Furthermore, the contexts in which we teach are seldom ideal. As teachers, we often encounter personal, interactional (classroom), institutional, and even societal constraints. For these and other reasons, I do not construe effective teaching as the judicious application of universal principles and strategies. Instead, I think of effective teaching as doing the best I can with what I have and with what I can control. Metaphorically, to be an effective teacher means figuring out the grain and teaching along it. The framework presented here requests three things of teachers in an effort to help them improve their practice: (1) that they focus their attention on specific teaching situations (Phase I), recognizing that what is effective in one situation is not in another; (2) that they analyze their situations as thoroughly as they can (Phase II); and (3) that they, with the resources available to them, generate and address grounded, systemic issues arising from the analysis of specific situations (Phase III).

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