



## Commentary

# The Question of Teacher Education

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### ABSTRACT

Addressing Hannah Arendt's call to prepare the next generation to "renew our common world," this essay questions how we can simultaneously share our world with students and encourage them to question it. Because teacher education is suffocating in the stipulations of "best practices" that blanket the ambiguity that makes it interesting, this essay explores the questions that make this work compelling. It considers the inhibitions that constrain agency and imagination in teaching, the narratives that collapse experience into predictable accounts delivered to satisfy rubrics and protocols, and turns to the work of poet and classicist, Anne Carson, for a sense of story that opens up experience instead of closing it down.

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

—Hannah Arendt (1954, p. 14)

*F*or many years I have wondered why there aren't more novels about teaching. In *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* (1988) I suggested that curriculum means pointing to a world that matters, and it is the construction of just such a world that makes a novel worth reading. Teaching, simultaneously a project of

consciousness and a public performance, must have stories to spin in such a world. It takes place in time and politics. It encompasses the culture of schools and universities, the disciplines of knowledge, relationships of power and authority, and excruciating vulnerability. And yet even when I find a novel about teaching, all too soon teaching slides out of it, and all that is left is the sediment of domestic drama or romance. Such was the case with Claire Massud's (2013) novel, *The Woman Upstairs*: "The person I am in my head is so far from the person I am in the world" (p. 19), Nora Eldridge, her third grade art teacher tells us as she struggles with her own creativity. But all too soon her fascination with a little boy in her class collapses into her soul-destroying romance with his parents.

The scholarship and performance of teaching stays a bit longer in the novel, *Stoner*, John Williams' (1965) depiction of a college teacher's love of his discipline and his struggles to extend it into the work he does with his students:

What he wanted to do in this new book was not yet precisely clear to him; in general, he wished to extend himself beyond his first study, in both time and scope. He wanted to work in the period of the English renaissance and to extend his study of classicism and medieval Latin influences into that area. He was in the stage of planning his study, and it was that stage which gave him the most pleasure—the selection among alternative approaches, the rejection of certain strategies, the mysteries and uncertainties that lay in unexplored possibilities, the consequences of choice...The possibilities he could see so exhilarated him that he could not keep still. (p. 121)

In another moment, Williams provides glimpses of teaching, the effort to make thought present:

As he continued, elaborating upon the categories of grammar he had named, Stoner's eyes flitted over the class; he realized that he had lost them during Walker's entrance and knew that it would be some time before he could once more persuade them out of themselves. (p. 135)

But again the complexity of this project surrenders to a sulky tale of a loveless marriage to a mean woman. Why does teaching always tiptoe out of the text somewhere in the sixth chapter?

Perhaps it is its segmentation that disqualifies teaching's characters from enjoying a long run. We preserve the freedom of students—and of teachers—from an interminable subordination to each other by creating strong boundaries of separation. The year,

the term ends, and they move on. (Only our devoted graduate students, anxious and beholden, are kept close over the years.) Perhaps it is the pattern of repetition, just a few changes to the syllabus, which interrupts the flow that a good story needs. Or maybe it is the ideology of self-abnegation that demands that it is all about the children, inhibiting our action and obscuring our own interests and motives—even from us.<sup>1</sup> This conjecture seems more plausible as it echoes the dilemma in the epigraph from Arendt’s *The Crisis in Education* that introduces this commentary. Arendt (1954) says that it is our students who will save our world, but then quickly cautions us not to abandon them to their own devices even as she requires us to welcome their “undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us” (p. 14). Does our ideology of care require that we defer to those we teach, relinquishing what is compelling about character as we disclaim our own agency in favor of the students’ action? And in this modesty (true or false) have we surrendered the momentum that would carry us and our readers through the text, eager to find out what happens?

Despite the general unpopularity of hesitant heroes, Alan Block welcomes the protagonist he finds in John Updike’s novel, *The Centaur* (1963). In *The Classroom: Encounter and Engagement*, Block (2014) tells us that, “teachers must be brave because the work is so exhaustingly difficult and that the rewards ...remain sometimes intangible, often rare, and always uncertain” (p. 54). He argues that the success of George Caldwell, Updike’s hero, “remains finally and wholly outside his comprehension, even his awareness” (p. 54). As Block reads *The Centaur* with his preservice college students, he finds them bewildered by Caldwell’s dark musings. They want to know what the point is, and Block recognizes that naming the point is how they have been taught to read, a reliance on ready answers that he finds in the instrumentalism of the “best practices” that blanket teaching.

Ready answers will not provide the renewal that Arendt (1954) sought so fervently. Her hope that our students will “undertake something new, something unforeseen by us” challenges us to consider what kind of teacher education will “prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world” (p. 14).

What would it mean to share our world with future teachers and at the same time prepare them to change it? I recognize that this question runs through all our human relationships. We lure our children into our world with love, with nurture and music, with language and laughter. We form families and communities longing for affiliation, linked in relationships that anchor our identities with legacies and customs that mark time with ceremony. And then we struggle to find our freedom, to “speak new words in a language already spoken” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 184)

I ask this question—what would it mean to share our world with future teachers and at the same time prepare them to change it?—at a moment when the national and international politics of teaching conspire to thoroughly predict and control the action of teachers. Anxiety about achievement—whatever that is—stimulated by a hostile economy and the demands of underprivileged and underrepresented groups, has generated a panoply of solutions: standards, value added assessments, accountability, standardized curriculum, scripted curriculum, to name a few. Nevertheless, I ask it anyway.

We bring our students into the world of education with stories about teaching. We tell them about the legacies of Socrates, of Erasmus, of Horace Mann, of Jane Adams, Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Rugg, Maria Montessori, Sylvia Ashton Warner, Ella Baker, and Paulo Freire. And then we tell them other stories that connect teaching to politics: stories of industrialization, of progressivism, of centralization, desegregation, feminism, and neoliberalism. While these histories offer explanations for our current situation, they provide little hope. The biographies of our great mentors rarely reveal their dilemmas; often they are finished accounts of lives already lived. Our narratives of social and political ideologies and processes suffocate imagination under the weight of their apparent ubiquity and determinism.

In contrast, I am drawn to the history that Anne Carson (2010) pursues in *Nox*, her poetic elegy to her deceased brother. Carson, a poet and classics scholar, wonders how to tell the life of a mysterious brother who lived and died abroad. *Nox* is a codex, an accordion folded collage of memories, images, etymology, poetry, and musings about how to do this history:

Herodotus is an historian who trains you as you read. It is a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do. Now by far the strangest thing that humans do – he is firm on this – is history. This asking. For often it produces no clear or helpful account. (section 1.3)

In this paragraph Carson tell us that, like Updike's story of teaching, history has no point: "no clear or helpful account." This should be no surprise to teacher educators, we whose students so often complain that our stories do not provide a clear or helpful account of how to teach. But in another entry Carson suggests another project for history, at once more ambiguous and more responsible:

...History and elegy are akin. The word 'history' come from an ancient Greek verb... meaning "to ask." One who asks about things – about their dimensions, weight,

location, moods, names, holiness, smell – is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (section, 1.1)

She says that to ask about something is to realize that “you yourself have survived it,” that you are both connected to it and separated from it enough to ask about it. In Alan Block’s chapter, “The Asking of Questions” (2014), he studies Giambattista Vico’s celebration of knowledge that arises from imagination rather than deductive reasoning, and quotes Isaiah Berlin’s account of it when he writes that human beings have the capacity “to reconstruct imaginatively...what they did and what they suffered, for what they hoped, wished and feared, what efforts were made and what works in which they engaged” (Berlin, 2013, p. 147, cited in Block, 2014, p. 59). Herodotus, Vico, Berlin, and Block help me to imagine what Carson (2010) might mean when she says, “It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it.” I believe that it is this asking about what we have undergone that draws us to teaching. In *Bitter Milk* I proposed that we are come to teaching because it offers us a second opportunity to educate ourselves. As we point to a world that matters, we are drawn to wonder about the history of our own attention and interests, and, as we teach to explore other relationships and possibilities. Note that Carson doesn’t leave this inquiry in a narcissistic cul de sac, but suggests that we make something new of it; we “fashion it into a thing that carries itself,” a presence that lives in the world like her book, like curriculum, the lesson, the reading, the school.

We renew the world when we question our experience of the world we have.

For over 30 years I asked students in teacher education courses to write narratives of their educational experiences. They were literally and figuratively pretexts, for we read them to find questions about what they had undergone. I recently found cartons of these essays as I was attempting to clean out some file drawers. I have no desire to publish them, but I cannot throw them out. As I look at their texts and my questions, I remember these students keenly, what they looked like, the sound of their voices, the feel of the rooms where we met. Their essays were intended to be, and remain for me, records of subjectivity, precious, unrepeatable, unforeseen. I hope they fashioned them “into a thing that carries itself.”

## Note

1. See Peter Taubman's essay, "The Seduction of a Profession." He explores concern for the student and explores it as a fetish that substitutes a generous preoccupation with another's welfare for acknowledging one's own motives and interests.

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