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# COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, BUTLER UNIVERSITY

Trespassing and Transgressing:

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Opening the Door and Outing My Practice

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## **Trespassing and Transgressing: Opening the Door and Outing My Practice**

*“When one door closes another door opens; but we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us.” Alexander Graham Bell*

When I was launched as a young teacher in 1985, my fledgling wings were barely strong enough to keep me aloft as I competed for scarce jobs, resorting to substitute teaching and maternity leave positions while I waited for someone to die or to retire. When I finally got my first “real” teaching position two years later, my first task as a professional teacher was to scrape the spit wads off the walls and pitch out 25 year old textbooks left behind in the filthy classroom I inherited from its previous occupant. It was nothing fancy: 4 cinderblock walls, the few posters I owned, a battle scarred desk, a teacher chair that snagged all my nylons, a bank of windows that leaked and a door, but it was mine, all mine. Nothing gave me more pleasure than unlocking the door to my classroom and surveying my little kingdom every morning.

Much has been made of teachers closing their classroom doors and basically doing whatever they like, regardless of what other teachers were doing. I must confess that closing my door was what I had been trained implicitly and explicitly to do by my mentors and my teacher education program. The door marked the edge of my kingdom, the limit of my authority, and the barrier which shielded my kingdom from outside invaders and witnesses. I controlled who entered and who exited at all times. It is amazing to me now that I was trusted to know what to do, what to teach, how to teach it and how to handle the 155 hormone-riddled adolescents I saw each day. I was determined to demonstrate my ability to maintain and strengthen my little kingdom and thus I hoped to earn the respect of my colleagues and administrators.

So each period, I closed the door and did the best I could to enlighten, entertain and educate my students as they struggled to learn to speak Spanish. Except for my students, no one

really knew what I was doing from day to day. As long as I turned in grades and attendance on time, kept the noise down, and didn't fail too many star athletes, no one challenged my curriculum or my methods. And frankly, I was relieved that no one asked because I would have been hard pressed to explain or justify my curricular decisions beyond blindly following a textbook and occasionally breaking the monotony of the textbook by memorizing poems, attempting a bit of journal writing, and writing dialogs in Spanish. Basically I was replicating what I had experienced myself as a student, but in ways I hoped were more innovative and fresh than what my teachers had done.

I continued in this way for several years, but over time a creeping paranoia began to whisper in my mind. *Was I an effective teacher? Were my students really learning?* World language standards emerged on the scene, but thankfully they only seemed to confirm what I was already doing, rather than challenge my thinking. I began to notice now that I closed the door as a way of protecting myself and my curriculum from scrutiny.

Rather abruptly, I shifted from teaching Spanish to teaching English as Second Language (ESL) at a new school. Suddenly none of my old methods, standbys and habits seemed to work at all. I floundered my way through those first days and hoped that no one in this new school would notice that I was ingloriously starting from scratch after 15 years of teaching Spanish. Hiding my uncertainty would have been much easier if I could have just shut the door as usual, but this classroom had multiple entrances; teachers, librarians and administrators routinely cut through my classroom space located in an annex behind the library. Two paraprofessionals used space in the corners to work with students. Meetings, videotaping and events were held on the other side of a heavy accordion curtain. Suddenly I felt like my practice was on public display, my teaching a performance for anyone and everyone to see. Vainly I repeatedly and firmly shut

the door, but still the traffic in and out continued unabated. I finally had to relinquish control and get comfortable with adults observing my every move.

Gradually I learned to relax and to not only tolerate the traffic, but use the interruptions as opportunities to showcase the work of my students and to build strong working relationships with my colleagues. Teachers were intrigued by what we were doing in this ESL classroom, noticing that my ESL students were visibly more at ease here than they were in mainstream classrooms. Conversations bubbled up and my colleagues began seeking my advice and insights into helping my ESL students navigate high school. I shared project ideas and approaches and in return got helpful feedback and encouragement from other teachers. Administrators began asking me to take the lead on reform efforts and to represent the building at district meetings.

As my practice became more visible, I began to realize how restrictive privacy had been to my own learning and how liberating it was to publicize my work. I felt more confident of my skills and abilities than ever before and I began to truly enjoy working with my colleagues. Instead of fearing discovery, now I was free to laugh, shake my head wonderingly, and say, “Wow, this idea just did not work!” and invite teachers and even students to help me rethink my approach.

Now my work is teaching graduate courses for practicing teachers and there is simply no way for me to close the door. Every instructional decision I make is noticed, challenged, questioned and critiqued by 65 professional teachers every week. It is tempting to revert to my old default position and close the door. This level of scrutiny is exhausting, but transparency in my practice is how I earn the right to push each of them to open their doors and share their practice with their colleagues. I am encouraged and strengthened by the words of bell hooks:

Educators are compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge... [to] celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries.” (1994, p. 12)

Opening the door is a transgressive act, a sort of trespassing into space that was previously private property, but we deny ourselves the opportunity to enrich our practice and to reignite our own passion for learning when we remain safely behind closed doors. What have I missed while my door was closed? What did my students lose because I was too fearful to learn from them and from my colleagues? Now not only is my door open, but my heart and mind are open to the new possibilities teachers create when we bring our practice into the light.

#### Works Cited

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