Letter to Denise, A First-Year Teacher

by E. Lisbeth Donaldson

L'auteure écrit une lettre à une enseignante de première année et discute avec elle des défis, des responsabilités, des récompenses inhérentes à la profession et de la poursuite de l'excellence.

Striving to communicate with students is the essence of teaching and learning.

Dear Denise:

You've asked that I think about teaching "excellence" and write an essay.[1] What a nice request! In responding, I've selected a letter format because it's a style that focuses upon my audience: you who inherit the future. It's your first year of teaching; I hope this early experience doesn't drive you out of the profession. I, a tenured professor, per-haps represent the past in that it was my responsibility to help prepare you for the challenges of being a teacher. If, in passage, we create a teaching and learning moment, that is "excellence."

There are other reasons the letter format is important. During the last century, to be a "man of letters" (more rarely a "woman of letters") meant one was literate in the ways of one's culture. The letter-writing genre has a long history, one aspect being educational, in which the letter itself is the curriculum message. In the educator category, the letter writer is teacher, guide, or mentor; the letter itself is primer, travelogue essay, and influencer, and the reader, of course, is learner (Altman). Originally, letters were essays, a form of manuscript that was carefully preserved: think of St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians. University students still write essay assignments for professors because the genre remains an excellent strategy for preparing a precise statement about an important topic. In writing such essays, students become more reflective, more certain about their perspectives about critical issues, more "thought-full."

Thus, in this paper, I return to a form developed most fully during the 1500s because I'd like our conversation to extend over time, beyond periodic face-to-face meetings, and I offer our dialogue as a general contribution to the topic of excellence in teaching. As educators, it is important to know one's stance about important issues and to reflect upon basic assumptions.

In the past, literacy also meant learned (emphasize the last syllable). A learned person had respect for other opinions. If not in agreement with others, at least one was grounded in a set of personal and social values so that one knew "where one stood" with regard to important differences and values. Perhaps a request to discuss teaching excellence is less a discourse about excellent teaching than it is about the spirited teaching of values. That challenge is a lifelong journey, represented as much, I think, by staffroom assertions as by exhortations within the classroom.

Gradually, the female life cycle is being interpreted and understood from a women-centred perspective. Female and male perspectives overlap in many profound aspects: a curiosity about the unknown, an interest in students, a commitment to our subject areas, a well-developed sense of professionalism. But feminist research underlines the different tradition you and I as women educators have from men. For you and I, where past and future meet is the inescapable fact that we are the first generations of women to assume that we will live a normal human life span. Also, we *presume* our middle years will not be consumed by (m)othering, although we are maternal. As educators, we touch the lives of other women and girls. What are we teaching them about this great gift of life? How do we, and they, reach for the fullest possible existence without collapsing the structures of society? How do we teach men to respect us? Women have always been good at salvaging, at recycling, taking the best from worn clothes to make quilts. But, what is the societal pattern we want to weave? What is our vision now? What does it mean to be a literate woman? This unknown is the new women's work. More than men, our lives have been changed by twentieth-century technology, and neither women nor men are very certain about how these changes affect the fabric of our society. What is becoming clear is that women's and men's lives will always differ from one another, intersecting at important life cycle points so that each is nurtured and sustained, generating the continuance of the species in ways that are increasingly recognized as interdependent but not identical.

To be literate women, we must *essai* (French for attempt) to articulate our stance about important issues, using genres that are respected. And so we write essays and letters. But, that's enough about formats and contexts, let's turn to the substance of your request. For me, teaching is communicating. Communication derives from the Latin root word *communis*: to commune, to share that which is common, to build community, to contribute to the commonwealth, to share the Eucharist (the spiritual) (*Cassell's Latin Dictionary*). Each definition is an excellent goal, and teaching each is excellence. To communicate is to connect, and I think that striving to communicate with students is the essence of teaching and learning. It encompasses both the traditional approach of the teacher who symbolized cultural knowledge and a progressive orientation toward

learning as student interests evolve.

In modern parlance, communication is based upon a model of sender and receiver within intra- and interpersonal environments that contribute to facilitating or inhibiting messages. Somehow, this vocabulary lacks a resonance that develops vision and values that inspire. Does it sufficiently develop what Northrop Frye called "the educated imagination?" He thought that students' minds needed to be cultivated, shaped, led out of their darknesses and that, while scientific knowledge begins with a dispassionate observation of the external world, artistic wisdom evolves from dispassionate construction of the internal. Must we also re-educate the imagination as Deanne Bogdan suggests? She argues that the struggle to integrate formative personal experiences that may be outside the mandated curricula is not an easy task.[2] It may, in fact, be more difficult for adult students than youngsters because previous assumptions do not need so much revision. Those who are older have already formed complex mental images of how the world and society functions and it's difficult to re-image them.

Personal discipline in teaching is like fishing: if one enjoys it, one appreciates the casts as much as the catch.

While I subscribe to and teach from a progressive model of human development, I cannot ignore how thirsty my students are for pithy quotations that sparkle, for stories that elevate, for examples of heroism. I worry that the wisdom of centuries is embalmed in print while students sensitive to audio-visual materials graduate from my courses, semi-literate in both media. I strive to teach something that transmits heritage and something that stimulates individuation. I am never confident that my students learn what I teach, but I hope they learn some things that enrich their life journey.

To return to the communication model, a teacher may do much to prepare to become a good sender of messages: formal and informal education develop style; experience melds with theory in professional practice. However, with regard to the receptor of the message, that is, the student, the teacher is a learner. First, the teacher must know the student's background; then, the teacher must study the individual. Second, the teacher must observe the student in action; then, the teacher must actively listen to the student. Third, the teacher must check her or his perceptions; then, the teacher must seize the moment and alchemize knowledge into wisdom. Finally, the teacher must persist because a nugget of information that catalyzes into gold for one student is brass for another. Perhaps personal discipline in teaching is somewhat like fishing: if one enjoys it, one appreciates the casts as much as the catch.

How does one develop such self-control, that "which is never to be lost in a classroom?" I think through intrapersonal reflection. I believe that "self" is best observed through interaction with others, best developed through intrapersonal reflection. Schön claims that good teachers have reflection-in-action; their "sixth sense" is alert to classroom nuances that become pedagogic opportunities. Dewey argued that ethical behaviour results when reflective teachers continually critique societal values (for a good synthesis of his thinking see Perkinson). Like any innate talent, an ability to reflect dispassionately about the practice of teaching is developed through practise. An experienced principal I once interviewed, an exemplar of his trade, told me that he habitually spent an hour Sunday morning reviewing the past week and planning for the forthcoming week. Others prefer to jog; still others meditate. Whatever the strategy, the habit of reflection is essential to good teaching. Lesson plans are like musical scales because they encourage precision and dexterity but they are not the lesson itself.

I know teachers who walk into classrooms so well prepared they don't permit students to contribute. Their classrooms are bounded, windowless, walled by formatted lessons, mandated curricula, and prescriptive ideologies. In contrast, it is possible to build structures that play with light—architects know how and so do archangels. The many Gothic cathedrals of Europe testify to the dedication and devotion of entire communities who sought to illustrate their ideals using stone and glass as their mental as well as physical tools. In our times, good teachers have lesson plans that play with light, that open windows in the imagination, and thus illumine students' minds. Excellent teaching moments are enlightening; like stained glass windows, the ideas reflect new understanding of old problems.

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I also like the metaphor of a conductor and orchestra that bring a symphony to life spotlighting solos, quartets, string crescendos, and grand closures. The lesson plan of a curriculum is a score that good teachers interpret so well students cannot help but respond to the harmony. Any familiar melody, beloved because it is well-known, can astonish through

variations on the theme. Perhaps what motivates good teachers is a love for variations on the theme. In other words, a love of learning, a curiosity about the world and life that cannot be extinguished and must be expressed is characteristic of a good teacher. If a teacher does not feel an anticipatory tingle walking toward the classroom, she or he should pause, reflect, and not enter until ready to be a conductor of excellence.

It is easier to write "a good teacher" rather than "an excellent teacher" because I don't think the human condition permits excellence as a daily routine. Neither are excellence and perfection synonymous qualities although many people substitute one word for the other. Like excellence, perfection is not possible to sustain; idealism is, provided one is realistic. Ideals, the best part of ideas, are illumining visions, motivating imagery, and they generate moments of excellence, inspire the quest for perfection. Too often teachers become cynical, and one definition of a cynic is "disillusioned idealist." Teachers without visionary "illusions" are tarnished lamps of learning and need rust jobs to restore their brilliance. I have little patience for those who are permanently tarnished, but everyone becomes dented and time-worn. Unlike metal, human beings have great restorative powers, and we all know people who glow, sometimes more brightly as a result of suffering. Like other teachers, I can't be perfect, but I can review my day, reflecting about moments of excellence, mediocrity, or tension. And, I can think about tomorrow, imaging a variation on my theme. I don't aspire to be perfect, nor am I a *naif* idealist, but I do strive for moment of excellence.

When I reflect about teaching moments in my own career, I don't remember a linear progression of activities. Visual snapshots appear in my mind: each symbolizing moments of excellence important to my personal and professional development. As an adult re-entry student, teaching in a Simon Fraser communications course, I realized that I was supremely happy, that I was doing what I wanted most to do. I could conduct seminars; I could interest students in new material; I could grade fairly. Nevertheless, backbiting juntas among warring professors, all male, drove me out of academia for nearly a decade. I knew I wanted to learn and to teach, but I wasn't certain I could survive in such an environment because I had begun to suspect that graduate degrees didn't result in cultured people or civilized interactions. When I did return for my doctorate, I was fortunate. The Department of Educational Administration at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education was also a male environ, but it was one in which the very ideologically diverse faculty had committed to a pedagogical environment of excellence, a situation in which I thrived. When I defended my dissertation in a shadowy room, built during the Victorian era, furnished with fragrant flowers and Royal Doulton china, the chair complimented my examining team upon our "civilized discourse." Afterward, when I approached the secretary to obtain the final documents, she called me "Dr.": it was the first time anyone had done so, and I'll never forget my pride, fear, and determination to be representative of the tradition.

I remember working in an alternative evening program in Surrey, British Columbia, notorious for its youth crime, racial intolerance, and ratio of RCMP officers to population. Pasty, blank, 15-year-old faces masked stories of drug sales, prostitution, beatings, and abortions that sometimes spilled awkwardly into poorly scripted paragraphs. The provincial curriculum and the personal life curriculum seemed like the sound of two hands flapping although I tried to get them clapping. Will I ever forget the fire alarm that blared during an ESL adult class; hearing noise, I calmly turned from the blackboard to discover many students, mostly Vietnamese, crouching under their desks, fearful of air raid. One year, a ferry strike prevented my crossing the Fraser River near Fort Langley to teach a college composition class. By bridge, it was a 45-mile one-way drive in heavy traffic. So, for two weeks I paddled my canoe across the river to the other side where a student drove me to and from the little white wooden building that an administrator said looked like a "Mexican jail." Neither my students nor I missed a session, and we published a collection of their writings. When I moved to the university, the profile of my students changed. Now my students are aspiring to become professional teachers. It hurts, however, when I think that their considerable talents may not be developed and challenged because of career dislocations. Unless people such as you, Denise, are appropriately inducted into adulthood, our society will become static. You know how fortunate you are to be employed as a teacher, but with current restructuring, you are vulnerable.

Most of all, I remember students facing me, like musical notes waiting to be played so their melody could be heard. Yours is one such face: you are challenged by new knowledge, you are refining your talents, you are excited about your future. I remember so clearly the day you came to talk about your options. We discussed the possibility of academia, of school administration, of primary classroom teaching. I urged you to speak with mentors in a variety of settings, to reflect upon your many options. You've decided to be an elementary teacher. And, your reasons for selecting education as a career seem to be much the same as mine had been in that you desire a balanced personal and professional life, an opportunity to work with people from varying backgrounds, the intellectual pleasure of shaping content so that novices recognize and experts appreciate the craft of research. I hope you realize many of your ideals, and I hope your vision will sustain you during visits to the dark side of experience.

We are not only on the cusp of a new century but appear to be at a critical period in human history with regard to how we educate young people. The educational system that

evolved during the industrial revolution no longer functions well. It's not because teachers aren't trained well, although a few require retraining, or because students aren't interested, although some are bored. It's because public education derived partly from religious and apprenticeship roots that were embedded in the community, and in a global village those roots have been truncated. When the process of disseminating information changes as it did with the inventions of papyrus, printing press, and computer, then the groups of people who control access to that knowledge also change. The teacher is no longer the major source of information in a community. As the teacher's role changes, so too will the teacher's workplace. I suspect that your career will be housed in different environments from mine. In the early twenty-first century, classrooms are going to be located in libraries, in homes, possibly even in businesses. If teachers are not prepared to instruct in such environments, other adults will. Once again, the teacher must be integrated within the community at the local level, but communication will be at the global level. "Act locally; think globally" is a phrase easily transposed: think about how local action influences the planet, the universe as we experience it. Professional educators without that vision lack both spirit and excellence. After working for so many years with fine professionals, I'm certain we will respond to the challenge, but the responses will be conflicted and based upon values, both professional and personal.

In Canada, the relationship of church and state has always been a handholding connection, not as separated as in some other countries. As a student in public schools, I knew I was expected to treat my neighbours, my peers, my teachers with the respect I sought from them. All great religions subscribe to the Golden Rule, and I wish the greatnesses of the great religions was taught more in schools. The entire profession of education originated because of a desire to know more about the ideals of society, often expressed in religious language. Secular teachers do not need to be monks, but they do have a sacred trust. To their hands and hearts our society entrusts the young. I think we need more discussion about the genesis of our profession. We need to seed ideas, to cultivate the tree of knowledge, to light the lamp of learning, and to find appropriate metaphors for our time. Without them, our harvest of youthful talent will be poor, their souls darkened and polluted.

Therefore, I am pleased by your request for a dialogue about excellence. By your willingness to learn, to try variations on the theme, by your quest for excellence, you exemplify the best qualities in our graduates. I will observe the development of your career with great interest. Teaching is a profession that humbles, because occasional glimpses of the mysteries of life as they are revealed by students' minds teach one about infinite possibilities. To really live a life is a long journey, and I wish you an excellent trip, filled with spirit. Begin with your own soul. Occasionally, forward a letter.

Sincerely,

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[1]Denise is a recent graduate from the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary. In fall 1995, she was offered a contract from the Drumheller Prairie Land Regional Division and was assigned to a special needs class. During her final year at university, she asked me to respond to a survey on teaching excellence that she was doing for a course. This article evolved from her request. I think Denise will be a wonderful teacher, a representative of the best students whom I have taught. Permission has been granted to use her name here.

[2]Deanne Bogdan writes of her pedagogical struggles to integrate autobiography and curricula as a "re-education" of mature, experienced teachers in "When is a Singing School (Not) a Chorus? The Emancipatory Agenda in Feminist Pedagogy and Literature Education," a title derived in part from Northrop Frye's book.

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