

Confusion, Clarity, and Conceptual Foundations

Christy Folsom

Like most people in education, when it is time for school to start I need to be in a classroom—either as a student or a teacher. The draw may be intellectual, emotional, or purely physical, such as the smell of fresh wax or the look of newly washed chalkboards. Unfortunately, as a last-stage doctoral candidate I have no classroom nor must I any longer attend classes. So on those last hot days before school started, I unchained myself from the computer and went to a fourth grade classroom in a New York City Public School to get my fall fix.

A classroom before school starts is the very definition of confusion. The teacher's mind is filled with a million questions. How shall I arrange the desks? Which books should I put out for the classroom library? What shall I put on the bulletin boards? Why doesn't the clock work? Who can help me reconstruct the computer? How will I organize the students' portfolios? Who are the students I will have? What will be their strengths? What will be their weaknesses? What will be some good activities to start the first day?

For first-year teachers the anxiety increases exponentially as they enter the chaotic world of teaching. Searching for dust cloths and paper towels, I went to the classroom of a new teacher. I greeted her and complimented her on her well-coordinated lavender bulletin boards. Displaying belief in full disclosure, she quietly said, "I hope I won't be found out." Next followed her confession that she had worked for several days on the physical design of the classroom but hadn't yet spent a minute thinking about *what* she would teach. In two more days she would greet thirty students who would bring their own confusions about ordering the world around them. Yet, the physical concerns of arranging the furniture, organizing the portfolio files, and creating attractive bulletin boards came more naturally to her than contemplating the deep and invisible factors of intellect and emotion that lie at the foundation of teaching and learning.

A lack of understanding of the deep structures of teaching and learning can result in impaired educational vision. Education should not unwittingly deactivate the equipment of questioning, wondering, and curiosity the child brings to the task of structuring harmony in a disordered world. For want of knowledge, partially-sighted teachers can do just that. A teacher or administrator able to broadly question, wonder, and be curious will better support children as they order their worlds.

Before the desks are settled, teachers need help in forming questions that require deeply rooted answers. How can I better understand the intellectual and emotional make-up of the children who enter the classroom? What do I want them to learn? What do I want them to be? How can I help them understand their thinking and feelings? How do I teach them the importance of considering others as they make decisions? How do I help them broaden their thinking? How do I make decisions concerning the myriad programs and materials available? In what ways can I organize my curriculum so students utilize their individual talents while developing talents yet undiscovered?

How do I construct learning experiences in which students discover and gather their own information in a variety of ways? How do I help them make connections between new concepts and their past experiences? How do I help them organize their own learning? How do I teach in a way that will make students aware of problems for which we seek one answer and problems in which a variety of solutions and approaches are possible? How do I do my part to prepare them for the world ahead?

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Elmore (1990) talks of “reforming the core technology of school.” This includes “higher-order knowledge” or “teaching for understanding” (p. 9). Questions that require these “core technologies” of teaching and learning for answers should come as easily to teachers and administrators as do the questions of physical design.

The work of the Conceptual Foundations Division is about the core of teaching and learning. Our work is about the fundamental supports that lie subtly at the base of education. Knowledge and understanding of these fundamentals can bring clarity of purpose to teachers and to the students for whom they are responsible.

Those in this division have a great deal of theoretical knowledge that can help teachers broaden and deepen classroom learning. However, our theoretical pieces need to be stitched together and made accessible to all educators. As this foundational work seeps into the corners of teachers’ consciousness and spills into the minds of children, education will change in profound ways.

Armed with knowledge our division can provide, teachers will enter classrooms on those chaotic days before school empowered with the knowledge to better discern children’s intellectual and emotional needs. Teachers will have expertise in the invisibles of teaching and learning needed to design experiences that will take advantage of, and enlarge upon the natural intellectual and emotional learning equipment of children.

Confusion can become clarity. Questions may be reprioritized. And the outward aspects of the classroom will reflect the depth of a teacher’s understanding. As we spin theory, let’s remember the classrooms of children and their teachers for whom all educational theory should be designed to serve.

References

Elmore, R. F. (1990). *Restructuring schools: The next generation of educational reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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