Deep and lifelong learning: When theory and SoTL intersect

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Abstract: In this reflective essay, a teacher educator describes her own transformation that occurred as a result of studying adult learning theory along with a group of doctoral students. In examining her habits of course design, she realized that her practices had departed from her ideals and that her course planning was guided as much by pragmatic schedule demands as by the conceptual development of her students. As a result, she redesigned her course in language and literacy for preservice teachers. After describing the existing course, the author relates how her thinking—and the course—were transformed by the intersection of three influences: her encounter with Ramsden's (2003) androgogical theory of teaching and learning, her familiarity with a discipline-specific pedagogical theory, and her SoTL research on students' needs as learners. Guided by these influences, she reconceptualized the language and literacy course with a renewed focus on the social constructivist goals of facilitating conceptual change through meaning-oriented approaches. The author attempts to make visible to the reader exactly how she made this transition to address both the theoretical and the practical dimensions of the course, rediscovering in the process the transformation that is possible when teacher education focuses as on the why as well as the how of teaching.

Keywords: transformation, constructivism, conceptual change, theoretical teaching

Teaching about teaching is always perilous. Like it or not, those of us who are teacher educators serve as exemplars, as models of practice—good practice, we hope. As we try to help new teachers learn the ropes, or experienced ones hone their craft, our practice is always under the scrutiny of our students and ourselves. Recently, two of my courses about teaching intersected in an unexpected way, resulting in a significant shift in my practice. In a discussion with students in my doctoral course on teaching in higher education, I had a moment of realization that made me flush with embarrassment. As a teacher educator of more than twenty years, I discovered that I had stopped practicing what I preached, at least in one important respect. In the press of daily professional demands, the theoretical, conceptual aspects of my teaching had somehow moved to the backseat, while I had allowed pragmatic considerations to take precedence in my course design. In my planning, I was organizing content not so much to support students' conceptual growth as to cover topics, stagger assignment deadlines among courses, and work around conference trips. A renewed mindfulness about theory, combined with my practice of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, enabled me to recapture an approach that is consistent with my long-held beliefs about teaching and learning.

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I. Going Astray: The Course in Question.

The course at the center of my *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 1991) was a course known at my institution as Language and Literacy II, the course in which pre-service teachers learn to teach literacy to children in upper elementary grades. For more than twenty years I have taught courses similar to this one. Each semester, I have revised some aspect of my approach, based on feedback from students, ever-changing external teacher certification standards, and my own professional judgment. Course texts, assignments, topic sequencing, learning tools, and content evolve a little every time I teach the course. Through the variation, a basic pattern in the structure of class meetings has persisted: A portion of each class meeting is devoted to writing workshop in the tradition of great teachers like Calkins (1994), Fletcher and Portalupi (2001), Graves (1983), and Harwayne (2001). My intent in using this process is that we all become engaged as adult writers and learners; we research and write about topics we care about, experience the joy of self-directed learning, develop awareness of our own literacy practices, and grow as readers and writers. We also develop first-hand understanding of writing workshop as an instructional practice—much as it might be executed with children. The remainder of each class meeting we spend thinking and talking about assignments and course texts, and engaging in a variety of literacy learning experiences similar to the ones in which children might be engaged in a language arts classroom. The course might be seen as the teacher education corollary to courses in other professional preparation programs that occur prior to clinical work, like a course on family therapy in which students engage in therapy themselves, or a marketing course in which students actively examine their own consumer behavior as the basis for their study. This course is the one that came to mind that day in class, as the group of doctoral students and I discussed theories of teaching and learning in higher education.

What I realized was that in recent years, as my class sizes had grown along with other professional responsibilities, I had fallen into the habit of constructing my course outline according to what was logistically easier to manage. I planned "backwards," but not in the theoretically sound way that Wiggins and McTighe (2005) set forth, thinking first about learners' understandings, and designing assessments around those in order for students to develop and then demonstrate the desired learning. My version of backwards design started with more practical concerns; learners' conceptual development had almost become an afterthought.

Without intention, I had developed this routine for course planning: First, I determined the due dates for projects, tests, and other assessments, usually working backward from the end of the semester. Holidays, school breaks, and travel to conferences played a role in determining when my students would turn in their projects or take their exams. I also tried to coordinate across courses so that I did not have two classes submitting big projects in the same week. Then, I would consider what reading assignments and class experiences would help students develop the requisite knowledge and skills needed to complete their assignments and meet those deadlines successfully. I plugged those assignments into the class schedule, and voilà, my course plan was complete. The planning was nice and tidy.

On the pedagogical side, my process was anything but tidy. Assignment deadlines, rather than concepts and understandings, dictated the shape of the course. Never mind that the arc of the course may not have supported deep conceptual learning. Never mind that students might not have been able to synthesize the disjointed pieces of curriculum to form a cohesive, conceptually grounded whole.

II. Meeting Ramsden: A Theory of Teaching and Learning.

Then our university began offering a doctoral program in curriculum and instruction, and I agreed to teach a new course on issues in higher education. I selected two texts: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (n.d.) and *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (Ramsden, 2003). Reading Ramsden's book put me squarely in the hot seat. There I was, ostensibly teaching doctoral candidates how to teach college students, realizing all the while that my practice in the literacy course had strayed pretty far afield from what I knew about teaching and learning. As a card-carrying social constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), I view teaching and learning as essentially collaborative enterprises. Human beings construct knowledge for themselves, in the context of their interactions with others and their membership within particular cultures and societies. We learn by doing, by trial and error, by watching what goes on in the world around us, by attending to models, by interacting with other human beings, and by actively seeking to make sense of all these experiences. My overarching goal as a teacher educator is to facilitate students' conceptual change, their ever-deepening understanding of teaching and learning. In my efforts to make my work load manageable, I had lost sight of that goal.

Ramsden, and my conversations with the doctoral students, reminded me of my core beliefs about teaching and learning and, specifically, about preparing new teachers to enter the profession. Among those core beliefs is the conviction that my job as a teacher educator is much more than providing my students with a toolbox of instructional strategies. My goal is to help them develop a deep conceptual understanding of how children learn and a firm theoretical foundation on which to build their teaching practice. An observer looking over my shoulder as I planned my literacy course would have been hard pressed to see evidence of that core belief. I felt like a big fake.

A. Ramsden's Theory.

In Ramsden's (2003) view, each of us has a tendency to take a particular approach to learning. That approach falls on a continuum from meaning-oriented to reproduction-oriented. Meaning-oriented learners have an internal focus; their intention is to gain deep understanding and to organizing the content of their learning into an integrated, coherent whole. Learners who are reproduction-oriented have a more external focus; their intention is to complete surface-level tasks (Ramsden, 2003, p. 47). Although the approach is in the hands of the learner, Ramsden posits a relation between instructors' theories of teaching and the likelihood that learners will take approaches that are either more deep or more superficial in nature. He outlines three general types of teaching theories. The first is a view of teaching as "the transmission of authoritative content," (p. 108) with its primary focus on the activity of the teacher. Teachers who hold the second theory view teaching as organizing student activity, "a supervision process involving the articulation of techniques designed to ensure that students learn" (p. 109). Teachers who operate in this theoretical realm are strongly student focused and are likely to include motivating students (through grades, for instance) and promoting student activity (employing experiential learning, or utilizing techniques that promote discussion) as central to their roles as teachers. Ramsden does not claim that those kinds of student activities are undesirable; rather, his point is that these teachers see it as their responsibility to orchestrate students' learning. Such a teacher might think, "If I lead students through these experiences, they'll learn."

Reading the description of this theory, which Ramsden calls "a transitional stage between theories 1 and 3" (2003, p. 110), I squirmed a bit, seeing myself on the page. As a teacher educator, I had become an adept organizer of student activity, a master orchestrator, busily guiding students through a series of experiences that should have resulted in their ability to be effective teachers of children and, more immediately, to demonstrate that learning through course assignments. I had become so convinced of the value of the activity itself that I began to lose sight of the conceptual underpinnings the activity was designed to develop.

Then along came Ramsden, with his ideas about students' orientations toward learning and teachers' stances on teaching, and I felt like the overweight doctor admonishing patients to watch their diets. I wanted to move out of this "transition stage" and live again in the world of Theory 3 teachers, whose goal is not to transmit information (Theory 1) or to organize activity so students learn something in spite of themselves (Theory 2), but instead "to make student learning possible" (2003, p. 110). Teachers operating according to this theory view teaching as

> A process of working cooperatively with students to help them change their understanding. . .finding out about students' misunderstandings, intervening to change them, and creating a context of learning which encourages students actively to engage with the subject matter. (Ramsden, 2003, p. 110)

The focus on what students are doing is still present, as in Theory 2, and there is a clear concern with content, as in Theory 1. The difference here is the simultaneous focus on teaching, students, *and* content, with a view of learning as "a change in understanding" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 6) rather than the completion of tasks or the reproduction of information.

This view of learning as changed understanding resonated with my social constructivist roots. From a social constructivist standpoint, learning is an internal act of meaning making (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). This "meaning-forming" takes place within layers of social contexts and becomes transformative as we "reform our meaning-forming" (Kegan, 2009, p. 44). According to Kegan,

> When a way of knowing moves from a place where we are 'had by it' (captive of it) to a place where we 'have it,' and can be in relationship to it, the form of our knowing has become more complex, more expansive. (Kegan, 2009, p. 45)

An example of this reformed meaning-forming occurred when I recently embarked on a quest to learn to make biscuits—the big, fluffy, golden ones I have eaten at many Southern tables throughout my life. My many attempts to make them had all resulted in failure of one kind or another. I sought the help of a chemist friend. Sitting at her kitchen table, we drank coffee as she taught me about acids and bases, gluten and protein, fats and leavening agents, ratios and mixtures. We consulted recipes and websites and charts. And then we designed an experiment to test our hypotheses about how to make the best biscuits ever. With her help and the guidance of a good cookbook, I made batches of biscuits, experimenting with fats and liquids, with pan types and dough handling techniques. Now I understand biscuits in a way that is quite different from my previous thinking. I know what each ingredient is contributes, I understand how the type of pan affects the way the biscuit cooks, I know why the butter should be kept chilled and the dough should not be over-handled, and I now know what the dough should feel like when it is mixed properly. My change in understanding—my transformation—has moved me from being *had by* a superficial knowing about baking to *having* more elaborated knowledge about how biscuits work. I still follow a recipe, but I'm in charge of my biscuits now, and am able to modify them to suit my taste at the moment. And my biscuits now are fluffy and golden, not dense and pale. This fundamental shift in thinking is much more than a change in behavior or an increase in

knowledge; it is epistemological change, a change in the way I understand (Kegan, 2009). Such transformations are supported when students who take meaning-oriented approaches meet teachers who focus on learners' understandings.

III. (Re)Conceptualizing the Course: Discipline-Specific Theory.

I began to think about what I could do to bring about that change in understanding for my students; this was my Theory 2 mindset refusing to shift, still focusing on orchestrating activity. So I went back to first principles. If I were to organize the language and literacy course conceptually, rather than for logistical convenience or task completion, how might that look? Coincidentally, the answer was waiting for me in my inbox. As part of my ongoing SoTL research, several times a semester I solicit feedback from students through an online survey, a modification of Brookfield's (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ). In Brookfield's CIQ, students have frequent opportunities to respond anonymously to questions about their learning: the moments when they feel most engaged or distanced in class, what teacher or peers do that help or hinder learning, what they find surprising. My variation takes Brookfield's idea of eliciting regular feedback, but I tailor the questions to suit each particular course, and I usually pose the questions three or four times in a semester rather than after each class meeting. The questions change, but in general, I ask students what their learning goals are, what's been helpful for them, what their plans are for meeting their learning goals, and how our work together in the course might help them meet those goals.

In studying this feedback from students over several semesters, I'd been struck by the similarities between what my graduate students identify as helpful for their learning, and what Cambourne (1988, 1995) identified as optimal conditions for young children's literacy learning. [See Table 1 for an overview of Cambourne's Conditions of Learning, along with examples of the ways these conditions surfaced in my students' thinking.] I was familiar with Cambourne's theory and always introduced it to my students as part of our course content on children's literacy learning. The parallels to my own students' needs, and to the conditions I tried to create in my classes through our literacy workshops, were intentional insofar as I sought to emulate good practices teachers might employ with children. However, the confluence of Cambourne's Conditions of Learning, my students' observations about their own learning needs, and my immersion in Ramsden's ideas generated new insight. The connection of a pedagogical theory within an androgogical context came as a surprise as I analyzed my students' reflections on their learning.

This serendipitous emergence of Cambourne's conditions in my students' written reflections provided the structure I needed for revising my course. Reorganizing the course conceptually, around Cambourne's seven conditions, provided an additional benefit. Like the dual purposes of conducting an authentic writing workshop, a focus on these conditions of learning would work on two levels: providing a rich learning context for us as adults to develop as writers, and serving as a model for creating fruitful learning contexts for children. Theoretically, Cambourne's work on children's learning is in sync with Ramsden's work on adult learning. Either explicitly or implicitly, both hold a view of learners as active constructors of meaning and of teachers whose role is to create opportunities for learning to occur.

One paradox is noteworthy: I had always maintained that I wanted my students to see the value of understanding theories of teaching and learning rather than to settle for the cute classroom activities they often sought. Yet I had moved further and further away from *teaching*

in a way that was theoretical. My teaching approach had been working against my goals. My own conceptual shift promised to help me realign my practice with my theory.

Table 1. Cambourne's (1995) Conditions of Learning as Evident in the SoTL Data

Examples of the Conditions in My Students' Responses	Examples of the Conditions as Enacted in Our Course
Immersion: Being "constantly bathed in that which is to be learned" (1995, p. 185)	
"I also benefitted tremendously from our extended in-class writing sessions. There is something powerful and inspirational about being in a room of writers. I enjoyed transferring that energy into my writing."	In our weekly writing workshop we all read, wrote, talked about, and reflected on our writing, both individually and collaboratively.
Demonstration: "The ability to observe. . .actions and artifacts" (1995, p. 185)	
"I loved how you (Dr. XXXX) did every step along with us so that we had an example every step of the way." "I also enjoyed the article you read [to us] about the bus ride to New York. That really helped me see the importance of looking at all kinds of writing examples for inspiration. The descriptions the author used made me take a second look at all my writing and made me want to concentrate more on painting the perfect picture for my readers. I still have a lot of work to do on that."	I made my own work as a writer public. We used mentor texts for learning about good writing.
Expectations: "Messages that significant others communicate to learners" (1995, p. 185)	
"I think this was my only experience since grade school to really focus on HOW to write. Throughout my academic career I feel like I remember writing papers without anyone really telling me what elements to use, other than the stereotypical five paragraph essay. Maybe professors just assume that students learned these skills in grade school, but I in fact did not." "Getting feedback and clarification on assignments helps me move in the right direction. I really like to know what I need to work on and how I can make my paper better, so teacher feedback is important to me."	We studied the processes and strategies writers used and made them explicit. We worked on learning to provide concrete, specific feedback; students received specific feedback from peers and from me.
Responsibility: Learners' decision about "what they'll engage with and what they'll ignore" (1995, p. 185)	
"Choice and creativity were the most valuable to me. I liked that I go to choose my topic. I liked that I thought about my connection to it. It made me want to learn about it and therefore inspired me to do a good job and take it to a higher level." "I appreciated the time and choice to research what I was interested in. I had to self-regulate on time-management and with my writing if I were to hand in publications I'd be proud of."	Students had wide latitude for choosing topics for research and writing. Students had freedom to decide how to use their workshop time in class.
Approximations: Learners "attempt to emulate what is being demonstrated" (1995, p. 185), without waiting until they have fully grasped it	
"I feel I learn better when the environment does not feel very stressful. This helps because I can focus on learning and not feel that mistakes are not allowed." "I feel that what we've done in this course so far has definitely given me new ideas about types of writing to try, and a great refresher on writing mechanics, and has reminded me not to be so	We set a tone of "we are all learning"; I share my first-draft attempts; we engage in exercises in which we play around with sentences from mentor texts and attempt to use similar structures in short writing experiments.

critical of myself as I write, to give myself leeway & allow myself to make mistakes. I think the biggest challenge is often just writing something down, or typing onto the page."

Employment: "Opportunities for use and practice" (1995, p. 186)	
"I realize through this process that practice is important. In order to become better readers, writers and researchers, we must read, write and research. I understand that adequate time must be dedicated for this purpose during class." "The constant writing was most valuable to me because I never write for fun anymore. I write purely for class and work. But this process helped me get reacquainted with my [inner] writer."	We spend about an hour (1/3 of the class) each week actually writing. Outside of class, we are all accountable for keeping writers' notebooks, in which we keep our writing muscles warmed up several times a week.

Response: "Feedback or information that [learners] receive from the world" (1995, p. 1868)	
"As a writer this semester, I have tried to push beyond my comfort zone. The personal narrative and even the [second paper] were hard for me to let go. I knew they would be critiqued and writing is so personal to me. Yet I grew in this writing process with the understanding that all reviews were to help me. I was able to risk trying new ideas and share my writing with others. I even let others read my drafts and accepted their comments without feeling strangled by harsh comments."	We all share our writing, both in-progress and completed, with each other, and provide formal and informal response

Engagement: The learner's active attention and participation (1995, p. 185)	
"I'm more conscious of my writing. I think about what I'm trying to say, and what I want for my reader to know. I reread what I've written over and over again, and out loud! I attempt different ways to write something, I used to settle for the first or second version, and then ask a writing tutor if she/he could review my paper with me. I was listening to a review about Jodi Picoult's new novel on NPR, they were talking about the research that she does for each of her novels. I thought, "that's what I'm learning about!" Now I understand how important it is to research about the topic you want to know more about, and eventually write about. It seems obvious, but it wasn't for me. I'm changing as I writer because I'm thinking more about HOW I write."	We emphasize thoughtfulness about craft, audience awareness, and choice of topics we're passionate about.

In restructuring the literacy course, I employed Cambourne's theory to create "a context of learning which encourage[d] students actively to engage with the subject matter" (Ramsden, 2003, p. 110) rather than to focus primarily on completing tasks. Instead of working backward from assignments, my planning now proceeded from broad concepts—Cambourne's conditions of learning—to particulars of language and literacy instruction, with assignments arising more organically from concepts.

This is how the revised course went: We began the semester by reading and discussing Cambourne's (1995) *Reading Teacher* article, in which he lays out his theory, how he developed it, and its implications for teaching. I shared with students the parallels between Cambourne's conditions and my previous students' reflections about helpful conditions for their learning. Every aspect of the course now built explicitly on Cambourne's model: On the new course outline, each of the weekly class meetings contained an integral focus on one or more of the conditions of learning; texts, discussions, our work together in class all emphasized those conditions, and course assignments incorporated students' explicit application of the theory.

As we moved through the semester and built our understandings of the conditions of learning, we examined the ways in which the conditions were present in our own classroom context. For instance, the condition of literacy *demonstrations* refers to all the ways learners observe written language in use; through these demonstrations, children learn not only about particular texts, but also about how people use literacy (Cambourne, 1995). In our class focus on demonstrations, we read about the instructional value of reading to children and engaging them in rich discussions of those shared texts; we discussed sharing our work as writers with the children in our classrooms so that they may see our processes and struggles; and we practiced thinking aloud about our own reading in order to let children in on the strategies that successful readers use. In previous semesters, each of these practices would have been considered a separate topic, apart from the common theoretical underpinnings the practices share. Organizing the course by concepts rather than practices allowed us to see the practices differently, within the broader framework of which they are a part.

Soon, the walls of our classroom were lined with large posters on which students and I listed instructional practices that supported each of the conditions of learning. The lists grew along with our understanding of the concepts, as we made more and more connections among theory and practice each week. Our discussion of course texts always included our thinking about the conditions, and the workshops and other learning activities in which we engaged gave us yet another avenue for deepening our conceptual understanding. We viewed video clips of classrooms in which careful teachers worked to create the desired conditions. In previous semesters, students viewed many of those first-hand experiences and videos through the lens of How to Do It. Now, I am seeing more evidence that they also look through a lens of Why It Matters.

IV. Learning Through SoTL: Students' Transformations—and Mine.

On the surface, the shift in the course was subtle; in my thinking, however, it was monumental. By constantly bringing our focus back to the theoretical, even as we were becoming skilled at the how-tos of teaching children to read and write, I attempted to support students' deep engagement with big ideas. Exploring the use of a workshop approach to teach writing, for instance, took on a very different feel in the context of thinking through Cambourne's conditions. The explicit, intensive focus seemed to help students understand, for instance, why children's freedom to choose their own writing topics is so critical (the condition of *responsibility* for learning), and why children's writing must find its way to real audiences beyond the classroom walls (the condition of authentic *response*).

So there *was* activity that I orchestrated (Theory 2), and there *was* content that I made available (Theory 1). Additionally, I attempted to promote a culture of collaborative thinking, of tackling big ideas, and of valuing understanding over task completion as Ramsden whispered in my ear. Students' work at the end of the semester had not suddenly become ingenious, but it did, in general, reflect a better understanding, as compared to students' work in previous semesters, of how children learn and what teachers can do to make that learning possible. Additionally, the anonymous survey students completed at the conclusion of the course revealed some awareness of conceptual change. The final survey question was, "What else would you like me to know about your experience of this course?" In response, one student wrote,

> This was an excellent model of how we should implement literacy time in our classrooms. All the steps it takes to organize a classroom library, construct a writer's

workshop and teach about research can be overwhelming, however the way you set the evenings up all *made sense. Looking at the greater picture* [emphasis added] we are walking away with so much knowledge, tools and resources that our heads could explode. I thoroughly enjoyed the class and will always go back to Cambourne and the reading selections you chose.

The following response from another student reveals a very different experience of the course from those reported by students in previous semesters:

It's a great method that you have come up with for this class...it is interesting, allows for personal freedom and growth, and with the group work and literature circle sharing, it makes me feel like *I am a part of something bigger* [emphasis added].

The reference to "something bigger" suggests an awareness that what we accomplished together was somehow unique in its impact on learners. Another student took a conceptual stance when she wrote,

The most valuable aspects of this workshop and research process were the conditions of learning. Using Cambourne's model, I am better able to see how teaching should be presented to create deep and lifelong learning. This model really brings home the strategies and techniques used in this workshop.

Her reference to "deep and lifelong learning" is very much aligned with our semester-long focus on conditions of learning, and with my focus on making just that kind of learning possible for my students.

Finally, and perhaps the most compelling statement from a student, was this:

This process has *changed the way I think* [emphasis added] about teaching young students to read, write, and do research. Using Cambourne's Model of learning, I feel that I am better capable of teaching students to read, write, and do research. I have a better grasp on how teaching should involve immersion in the content, demonstration of real-world situations, engagement with the material, high expectations, responsibility for one's own learning, approximations of goals, and constant employment of strategies. If these things are present, students will be better able to learn in a meaningful and lasting way. As a teacher, I plan on incorporating all of these conditions in my classroom, not only in reading, writing, and research, but in all of the curricula.

Here was an explicit recognition of the change in understanding—the transformation—that was my goal. This kind of transformation most certainly did not happen for every student in the course, but it did happen for some, and I now have a path to follow with the students who come through my door the next time. And I can look at the way I am planning, structuring, and implementing course design and know that my work as a teacher has theoretical and conceptual integrity. Being mindful of a discipline-specific theoretical framework will continue to aid my transformation to a Theory 3 teacher who focuses first and foremost on students' conceptual understanding.

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