

**Conversations on Research:
6th annual School of Education Conference**

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**Towards a pedagogy of teacher education:
characteristics of the inquiring teacher from the 60's
counter-culture and a spiritual practice perspective**

You must Awaken to a fundamental emotional sense of Inhering in Indivisible Reality Itself – Which does not kill you, does not separate from you. Such is the fundamental nature of Spiritual awareness.

Adi Da Samraj

There is no “objective world” separate from Consciousness. You have no such “experience”. You have never had any such “experience”. All your “experiences” are in the medium of Consciousness. The proper investigation of Reality Itself, then, is a process in Consciousness.

Adi Da Samraj

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

William Shakespeare

My first approach to considering teaching in the mode of inquiry was very much influenced by a text published in 1969 and which I first encountered as a student secondary teacher in 1976. It seemed to me that Postman and Weingartner's *Teaching As A Subversive Activity* was a most radical piece of writing. While today the late-'60's revolutionary tone might date it for some, I still find their vision inspiring and provocative.

The authors posited that the *inquiry-based pedagogy* would have a unique and revolutionary impact on teaching. A small sample of their useful challenges (Postman and Weingartner (1969) italics theirs):

“The inquiry method is not designed to do better what older environments try to do. It works you over in entirely different ways. It activates different senses, attitudes, and perceptions; it generates a different, bolder, and more potent kind of intelligence...It will cause everything about education to change... (p.27)

“The inquiry method is very much a product of our electric age. It makes the syllabus obsolete; students generate their own stories by becoming involved in the methods of learning... The older school environments stressed that learning is being told what happened. The inquiry environment stresses that learning is a happening in itself...(p.29)

“From all of this, you must not conclude that there is no logic to the learning process. There is. But it is best described as a “psycho-logic”, whose rules, sequences, spirals, and splotches are established by living, squirming, questioning, perceiving, fearing, loving, above all, languaging nervous systems. Bear in mind that the purpose of the inquiry method is to help learners increase their competence *as learners*. It hopes to accomplish this by having students *do* what effective learners do.” (p. 31)

“Knowledge is produced in response to questions. And new knowledge results from the asking of new questions; quite often new questions about old questions. Here is the point: *Once you have learned to ask questions – relevant and appropriate and substantial questions – you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.*” (p 23)

“*There can be no significant innovation in education that does not have at its centre the attitudes of teachers, and it is an illusion to think otherwise. The beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of teachers are the air of a learning environment; they determine the quality of the life within it.*” (p. 33)

“We have a possibility for you to consider: suppose that you decide to have the entire “curriculum” consist of questions. These questions would have to be worth seeking answers to not only from your point of view but, more importantly, from the point of view of the students. In order to get still closer to reality, add the requirements that the questions must help the students to develop and internalize concepts that will help them to survive in the rapidly changing world of the present and the future.” (p. 59)

The book was written at the time of the “opening of the window” that occurred in the late ‘60’s and early ‘70’s – when a great questioning of the socio-political as well as of the religio-spiritual was occurring, especially in the West. I was entering into early adulthood and was profoundly influenced by that spirit of the times.

Over the years I have come to understand that there is a seemingly unlimited number of elements interacting in complex ways in any “meeting” between teacher and students. I was blind to most of these elements and so my first faltering steps working in an inquiry mode were doomed to be difficult. Especially, as Postman and Weingartner suggested, it “activates different senses, attitudes, and perceptions”. Indeed, I would describe my beginning years as a teacher as a time of painful crises as I struggled to find my bearings.

In the first years of my teaching practice I had also begun to notice that difficult situations with students could suddenly escalate and I could feel how my own reactions were majorly contributing to the situations. I began to move from generally conceiving of students’ *being* “the problem” (whether it be relative to their learning or to their behaviour) to suspecting, rather, that *I* was “the problem”. A subjective turn was occurring and the questions I was asking began to focus more on *my* disposition, *my* emotional states, *my* communication, *my* intentions. And how these could be affecting the learning circumstance for my students.

And it was by no means easy to answer these questions. How can we know what is *happening* in the formal learning circumstance? The classroom has a complexity of points of view and perceptions. Each conceiving, perceiving and emoting human entity is creating a version of the “reality” of the situation and each is interacting in an elaborate cause and effect manner with others. What do we really “know” about what is going on? We are only ever having a very partial experience of reality.

Years passed as I painstakingly learnt to be open to observing and considering more and more of the elements of the pedagogical “situation” and to notice some of my unexamined presumptions.

When I took up my first formal position as a teacher educator in 1985 I had the good fortune to be associated with a team of teacher educators who were prepared to investigate their own motivations and practices as teacher educators in a context of on-going dialogue which included the participants on their courses as well as with each other. Until then, although I had valued relationships with many teacher-friends, my exploration of teaching had seemed in some ways to be a solo journey. By the time I took up the practice of a teacher educator I observed that I was maturing in a personal capacity to *be* with companions in a more relational and interdependent way.

At the same time, my own *inquiry* into the relationship between subjective and objective realities led me to consider what was being explored in the discipline of transpersonal psychology and before long, at the age of 36 years, I found myself at the feet of a Spiritual Master (Adi Da Samraj) and experiencing his “Radical” Reality-Way of Adidam. This was revelatory and opened a completely new view of reality and I knew that I would be guided by the relationship with him for the rest of my life. It was clear to me, indeed, that my eyes are covered over by images of a separate “self” and my mind held captive by visions of “the world”. That this was a bondage and delusion that could only be gone beyond with the help of someone who had transcended all limitations seemingly imposed on the human condition and was turning about to help others. My previously rather random self-study had, it seems, opened my heart to recognizing a teacher who could guide me beyond my limited experience of what is *happening*.

The spiritual practice he offers involves the progressive transformation of one’s whole understanding of reality. All certainties tend to fall away. All attempts to make familiar and to control, motivated by fear, begin to be understood. And one also appreciates the mystery of our being together in this place for this brief time between life and death; and the preciousness of being able to meet and not be afraid and to stop from killing each other or violating each other in some form or another; to feel how we are all in the same boat here – in need of love and to live in the sphere of love. To create together from that place. A place of ultimate happiness. To grasp the lesson of life: that you cannot become happy, you can only be happy. The necessity to practice happiness from an ever

depthful and wounded feeling of our mortal condition. To participate in the creating of the “sheltering” and sanctuary for all.

For most of my career as a teacher educator I have been involved in this intensive contemplative way of life and I have been trying to identify and articulate how that way of life has influenced my teacher education pedagogy. In an important way I feel it has strengthened my inquiry-based stance. It has opened up a greater range of human experience and belief to be examined and provided a moral foundation and purpose to my teaching practice. I work to try and give beginning teachers a feeling for examining their teaching from the point of view of the learner. One approach to this is to be asking them to observe and evaluate the quality of the teaching-learning *happenings* that they are experiencing in my sessions. In other words, I look to initiate an inquiry into their *immediate* learning experience – as student-teachers. I offer my own teaching to be “de-constructed” in an undefended manner. My own inquiry is increasingly from a disposition of “not-knowing” and more open to exploring different possibilities.

Postman and Weingartner described the inquiring teacher as one whose basic mode of discourse with students is *questioning* in order to open minds to unsuspected (by the teacher as well as the students) possibilities. In the midst of all our questions, I hold the vision that sooner or later our explorations and conceptualisations together will manifest in change of practice and point of view – relative to our teaching and our lives.

Inquiring teachers do not look for a single statement as the answer to a question but rather, as Postman and Weingartner put it, they require as many as possible, *reasons, causes, and meanings*. They are cautious about implying any sort of limits on learning and thus their lessons develop from the *happening* of the students interactions and not from a previously determined “logical” structure.

In this brief extract I have indicated my interest in establishing a relationship between an inquiry-based stance and a spiritual practice that can inform a teacher education pedagogy.

References:

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