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Making Spaces to Learn

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**“Making Space for Learning.” An Essay Review of *What the Best College Teachers Do*.
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In 1908, George Herbert Palmer wrote *The Ideal Teacher*, an extended essay that explored four characteristics of the ideal college professor. Two of them — a wealth of knowledge and experience on which to draw, and the ability to invigorate life through learning — focus on the teacher’s capacity; they highlight what he already has within him: his knowledge, his insights into subject matter, his range of experiences, and his ability to draw on all of those to animate learning. The other two characteristics Palmer identified — “the aptitude for vicariousness” and “the readiness to be forgotten” — highlight the importance of having the propensity to imagine, even live through, others’ perspectives and experiences and to step out of the way of their development — their growth of capacity — both during the time one teaches and after the teaching is done. These characteristics shift the focus from the teacher to the student, emphasizing both the teacher’s capacity to conceive of and consider the learner’s perspective and her willingness to serve as a catalyst for learners’ development apart from and beyond her, rather than making herself the center of the educational experience.

That in order to be excellent, teachers must situate themselves within and also distance themselves from the learning process — draw on their knowledge and experiences and at the same time invite students to draw on theirs — throws into relief the necessary balance between teacher and student responsibility in creating a space for learning. Teachers — and students — who wish to contemplate and strive for this balance need support in doing so. I have chosen to focus on Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* for this essay review because it models what it advocates: it opens up a space for thinking *about* effective teaching and learning that supports the creation of a space *for* effective teaching and learning. Like *The Ideal Teacher*, the title of Bain’s book might suggest that it will provide a set of prescriptions for success in the college classroom. However, like Palmer’s four characteristics, Bain’s claims, presented throughout the book as questions — one overarching question per chapter, with many subquestions within those — prompt and support ongoing analysis of what makes good teaching.

They thus challenge teachers to explore and strive to enact good teaching practice in their own ways.

Inspired by the successful teachers in his own life, Bain wrote *What the Best College Teachers Do* when he was the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at New York University. In the book's appendix he describes in detail the approach, methods, and research questions he and his co-researchers used. Bain and his colleagues drew on a pool of potential candidates gleaned from interviews with “hundreds of students about teachers who had made a significant and positive difference in their intellectual and personal development,” conversations with professors about “colleagues who had strong reputations for helping students achieve high learning,” lists of major teaching award winners, and individual recommendations (p. 182). They narrowed their focus to the work of 63 teachers from 24 institutions — undergraduate colleges, law and medical schools, and other graduate contexts, from open admissions colleges to selective research universities. Some of these teachers were part of a speaker series at Vanderbilt and Northwestern that featured professors from other institutions “who had achieved impressive teaching results” (p. 4). Bain and his research colleagues studied 35 of these teachers in depth, and their classroom practices are evoked throughout the book in the descriptions, vignettes, quotations, and analyses Bain provides.

Bain defines outstanding teachers as those who “achieved remarkable success in helping their students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how students think, act, and feel” (p. 5). Here Bain echoes George Herbert Palmer's emphasis on good teachers' ability to invigorate life through learning and John Dewey's claim that genuine education disposes one to seek further learning. The terms “sustained,” “substantial,” and “positive” highlight the importance of the effects of teaching over time, as meaningful, and experienced as affirming not only in terms of learners' thoughts but also in terms of their actions and emotions. In contrast to teachers who focus solely on student performance on standardized measures regardless of whether those students in fact understand or are affected by what they study, Bain and his colleagues were interested in teachers who inspire students to integrate and be transformed by what they learn — to feel and act on as well as understand what they learn.

No single source of evidence substantiated Bain's assessment of outstanding teachers; that assessment depended, rather, on the context and the purpose or goals of the educational

context (medical students versus theater students, for instance). Bain and his colleagues considered students' performance according to standardized forms of measurement or in other field-appropriate forums, colleagues' reviews, and student testimonials. Drawing on all three of these, the specific criteria applied across teachers were (1) student satisfaction and desire to keep learning (not just that they performed well on an evaluation, but that the course fostered deep understanding, developed multiple perspectives, and transformed students) and (2) colleagues' assessment that what students learned was valuable (pp. 7-8). The teachers Bain and his colleagues studied regularly inspired comments from students such as "you'll learn more in this class than from any other at this school" and "this class changed my life" (p. 6), and, as importantly, these teachers' students talked about "getting into it" and "making sense of it all" (p. 9) rather than focusing on the need to "get it [the work] done" and "covering all the stuff that was going to be on the exam" (p. 10). The courses of the teachers who were selected for analysis also met the criteria set by colleagues regarding the pursuit of learning objectives that are "worthy and substantial" (p. 8).

Data sources for the study include formal and informal interviews with the focal teachers; public presentations or written discussions of the teachers' ideas about teaching; syllabi, assignment sheets, statements of grading policy, lecture notes, and other written materials prepared in connection with particular courses; observations of the teachers' teaching in the classroom or elsewhere; students' products, including their attitudes, conceptions (collected in interviews, small group analyses, and rating forms) and academic work (papers, projects, performances, and so on); and colleagues' comments, usually to provide judgments of learning objectives.

In his introduction, Bain discusses the genesis of the study, some of the people who feature in it, his operating definition of excellent teaching, the study's methodology, how student ratings are conceptualized and used in the study, and an overview of the major findings, organized around six broad questions, each of which Bain uses as a chapter title for the body of the book: (1) What do the best teachers know and understand?, (2) How do they prepare to teach?, (3) What do they expect of their students?, (4) What do they do when they teach?, (5) How do they treat students,? and (6) How do they check their progress and evaluate their efforts? Bain insists that readers keep in mind that he is focusing on what good teachers do well, not

suggesting that these teachers never make mistakes or fail or that any particular good teacher employs all of the strategies he describes. Highlighting the shared responsibility of teachers and learners for the quality of the learning space in which they engage, Bain emphasizes that these teachers do not blame their students for the difficulties they face (which would put all the responsibility on the learners), and that they see themselves as ongoing learners too, an identity they enact by developing curriculum and participating in larger educational enterprises beyond their own classrooms.

In Chapter 2, “What Do They Know about How We Learn?”, Bain explores what the teachers he and his colleagues studied understand about human cognition, motivation, and development, whether or not they have formally studied educational theory or psychology. Good teachers not only know their disciplines well, reinforcing George Herbert Palmer’s first quality of the ideal teacher, they have a meta-cognitive awareness of what is difficult about the discipline, they have learned from students what the pitfalls and challenging parts of a subject area might be, and they have learned how to break down the subject and its facets into accessible pieces (p. 25). In addition to understandings keyed to interface with subject matter, the teachers Bain and his colleagues studied have a sense of what motivates and what discourages students more generally: They “tried to avoid extrinsic motivators and to foster intrinsic ones”; they gave students control over their education and “displayed both a strong interest in their learning and faith in their abilities”; they offered “nonjudgmental feedback” stressing opportunities for improvement; and they encouraged cooperation and collaboration rather than competition, giving “everyone the opportunity to achieve the highest standards and grades” (p. 35).

Successful teachers understand the following key concepts about teaching and learning:

1. Knowledge is constructed, not received: Students are not empty vessels but rather active agents in their learning, and teachers are not “transmitting knowledge” but rather “stimulating construction” of knowledge (p. 27).
2. Mental models change slowly. Therefore, learners must be engaged enough, feel safe enough, and be willing to invest time and energy to complicate and revise their assumptions and naïve theories. The way to change mental models, according to the teachers in Bain’s study, is not for teachers to deliver the basic

facts for students to store away but rather for teachers to create opportunities for students to develop an understanding of deep underlying principles, problematics, and possibilities.

3. Questions are crucial. Not only do the best teachers frame engaging and challenging questions for students to explore, they also invite students to frame their own questions. As one teacher put it, “When we can successfully stimulate our students to ask their own questions, we are laying the foundation for learning” (p. 31).
4. Caring is crucial. If students do not care, they will not take on the serious challenge of learning something. They may memorize material and retain it for a short time, but they will not “try to reconcile, explain, modify, or integrate new knowledge with old” (p. 31).

In this chapter Bain also discusses the importance of taking a developmental view of learning — understanding that learners can embrace and move through different kinds of knowing (e.g., what Belenky and her colleagues defined as received, subjective, procedural, and separate or connected knowing [1986, p. 43]), each of which implies something different about what it means to learn. Part of being a good teacher, according to Bain, is knowing how to reach learners, knowing what questions to ask to move learners forward from wherever they are. This capacity requires the “aptitude for vicariousness” that George Herbert Palmer named as the third quality of the ideal teacher. With this understanding of learning, the best college teachers co-create with students the conditions of learning — what Bain calls a natural critical environment for learning. Highlighting the importance of students being active and critical thinkers engaged with genuine challenges, Bain defines this environment as one in which teachers “embed the skills and information they wish to teach in assignments (questions and tasks) students will find fascinating — authentic tasks that will arouse curiosity, challenging students to rethink their assumptions and examine their mental models of reality” (p. 47).

In Chapter 3, “How Do They Prepare to Teach?”, Bain asserts that instead of asking questions like what information will I cover, what texts will I use, and how many tests will I give, the successful teachers in this study asked these questions: (1) What should my students be

able to do intellectually, physically, or emotionally as a result of their learning? (2) How can I best help and encourage them to develop those abilities and the habits of the heart and mind to use them? (3) How can my students and I best understand the nature, quality, and progress of their learning? and (4) How can I evaluate my efforts to foster that learning? Students are at the center of these questions; the natural critical learning environment is built with the goal of supporting student learning, as opposed to covering content. Bain includes 13 questions that successful teachers ask within these larger four, all focusing on the learning that teaching should foster within a natural critical learning environment.

Both the overarching questions and the more specific questions Bain includes marshal the teacher's knowledge and experiences in the service of constructing engaging learning opportunities for students and subsequently position students as active agents in the construction, pursuit, and analysis of their learning. For instance, one teacher explained that he planned for his course by "trying to write down the largest question that the course would address" and then listing "the questions that one would need to explore to address the larger issue" (p. 50). Posing questions rather than providing answers helps to create a space within which students can make explicit their fundamental conceptions and assumptions and learn to frame and pursue critical inquiries. Rather than answer the question, "What do I need to cover?" the teachers in Bain's study address the question, "What do students need to know in order to reason or create?" This focus on student learning is complemented by a focus on developing in students an awareness of their learning — a meta-cognitive awareness. And finally, these teachers critically analyzed their own successes and failures in supporting student learning, once again making themselves partners in rather than purveyors over the learning process.

Throughout the book, Bain emphasizes that there is no single expectation or strategy that makes teachers good. Rather, he suggests, there is an intricate web of beliefs, conceptions, attitudes, and practices that underlies successful teachers' efforts. In Chapter 4, "What Do They Expect of Their Students?", Bain suggests that the beliefs, conceptions, attitudes, and practices these teachers embrace include valuing each individual student, believing all students can achieve, setting high standards and conveying to students that they can meet those, and putting students in control of their own learning. Trust and respect are at the heart of these teachers' attitudes toward students, and all class policies and practices flow from central learning

objectives identified for that particular course as well as from mutual respect and agreement between teachers and students. Bain contends that successful teachers know that life experiences and societal expectations make a difference in student achievement, and they work to create opportunities to support student success, including the success of struggling students, by offering higher challenges and honor programs, not remediation, which can exacerbate phenomena whereby students live up (or down) to expectations teachers and society have for them. Good teachers also see learning as a process of personal and intellectual development, and they recognize that students need extensive practice to develop both personally and intellectually.

Valuing each student means believing, as one teacher put it, that “every student is unique and brings contributions no one else can make” rather than separating students into “winners and losers, geniuses and dullards, good students and bad” (p. 72). Believing all students can achieve does not mean setting high standards and letting students sink or swim but rather setting high standards, conveying confidence that students can meet those, and supporting their efforts. Putting students in control of their learning means to these teachers laying out the “promises and opportunities” (p. 75) of a course, explaining what students need to do to realize these promises, and making explicit how both the instructor and the students will understand progress. While these could be framed as requirements and evaluations, the more constructive language and the more collaborative process this language of promises and opportunities conveys contribute to the creation of the natural critical learning environment Bain advocates — an environment that is as much about relationships and responsibilities as it is about academic engagement.

Continuing the argument he makes in Chapter 4, that there is no single expectation or strategy that makes teachers good, Bain contends in Chapter 5, “How Do They Conduct Class?”, that no single pedagogical strategy constitutes the best teaching. Indeed, the teachers Bain features use a wide range of pedagogical approaches. Rather than focus on strategies, Bain identifies seven underlying principles employed by the teachers he studied: (1) create a natural critical learning environment (one that poses intriguing questions or problems, offers guidance in helping students understand the significance of the problem, engages students in higher-order intellectual activity, helps students answer the question, and leaves students with a new question); (2) get students’ attention and keep it (provoke curiosity, pique interest); (3) start with the students rather than the discipline (begin with something they know or care about); (4) seek

commitments (to the class and to learning, not in the form of a command but rather in the form of an invitation); (5) help students learn outside of class; (6) engage students in disciplinary thinking (model and make explicit how to do that); and (7) create diverse learning experiences.

Elaborating on these principles, Bain and his colleagues discuss how the teachers they observed created a natural critical learning environment through lectures, discussions, case studies, role playing, field work, and a variety of other techniques, including projects. But as Bain argues, “the method matters far less than do the challenge and permission for students to tackle authentic and intriguing questions and tasks, to make decisions, to defend their choices, to come up short, to receive feedback on their efforts, and to try again” (p. 100). Bain emphasizes that in these classrooms teachers and students are “working together” (p. 100) — striving to achieve a balance between teacher and student responsibility. In order to facilitate students’ engagement in a natural critical learning environment, teachers need to catch their students’ attention and keep it — offer them opportunities to apply the skills they are aiming to develop in ways that suit both their developmental and their basic human needs. One way to do that is with intriguing questions. As one professor put it, “the human mind must first focus on the problem of how to understand apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate something, and the teacher can help stimulate that focus” (p. 109).

Implicit in the notion that one needs to start with a stimulating question is the assumption that teachers need to attend to what will interest students. That is the third principle — that one starts with the students rather than the discipline. Some of the college teachers Bain and his colleagues studied started with “what ‘common sense’ might suggest” (p. 110) or, in the case of a class on justice, framing a scenario in which students need to grapple with what action they might take under particular circumstances. Engaging students’ existing interests, understandings, and convictions is complemented in good teaching, according to Bain, by seeking a commitment from students not only to the course and the professor but also to themselves and to other students. As one professor put it: “The decision to take the course is yours, but once you make that decision, you have responsibilities to everyone else in this community of learners” (p. 113).

The teachers Bain studied ensured that what they did in class scaffolded the learning students could pursue outside of class — e.g., “a discussion that gives students a chance to confront new questions and explore their thinking with others before tackling a project” (p. 114).

Likewise, the most effective teachers “use class time to help students think about information and ideas the way scholars in the discipline do” (p. 114). One teacher asserted: “We cannot learn to reason without something to reason about, but knowledge comes not through rote memorization of isolated facts, but from the ability to reason, that is, the ability to draw conclusions from reasoning” (p. 115).

The final principle the teachers Bain studied embrace echoes Gardner’s (1983) arguments regarding multiple intelligences. The teachers in Bain’s study conducted class in multiple ways: “Sometimes they offered visual information (pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, or demonstrations); other times auditory input (speech or visual symbols of auditory information — written words and mathematical notations)” (p. 116). Classes included time for both discussion and reflection; some learning was sequential, some more thematic; some methods were familiar, some were innovative and surprising.

The success of efforts to enact the seven principles listed here, Bain suggests, depends in part on two other capacities. The first is the ability to communicate orally in a way that offers clear explanations and directions, is explicit, engaged and engaging, and stimulates thought. The second is the ability to scaffold and support students talking through identifying key problems, supporting students’ explorations of those, stimulating evaluation of them, and finally inviting students to reflect on what was learned.

The focus of Chapter 6, “How Do They Treat their Students?”, is on what attitudes the successful teachers Bain studied display. Good teachers demonstrate an investment in students, not a desire or attempt to have power over them. As one teacher put it, “our teaching must communicate that we have an investment in the students and that we do what we do because we care about our students as people and as learners” (p. 139). Rather than measure success by examination scores, these teachers want to help students learn and to assess whether they are learning. Here again, teaching and learning are inextricably connected. One teacher asserted: “If they don’t learn, I fail as a professor” (p. 140). There is reciprocal trust in these teachers’ classrooms, and faculty treat their students as fellow human beings struggling with the mysteries of the subject matter and the universe (p. 144). The classroom constitutes a community of learners who treat one another with respect. In one teacher’s words: “The most important aspect of my teaching...is the relationship of trust that develops between me and my students” (p. 140).

Building on his findings regarding how the best teachers treat students and turning his attention to evaluation, Bain suggests that outstanding teachers use assessments to help students learn — and to learn to become better learners and thinkers — not to rate or rank their effort, determine whether they can regurgitate information or, worst of all, to trick or to stump them. Good teachers stress learning rather than performance, and grading becomes a means not to quantify performance but to communicate with students where they are in their progress. In Chapter 7, “How Do They Evaluate Their Students and Themselves?”, Bain discusses how the faculty members upon whom he and his colleagues focused get to know their students (for instance, through questionnaires) in order to assess their learning. The goal here, as one teacher explained, is “not so I can make judgments about them...but so I can help them learn” (p. 157). These teachers assess what students already know (for instance, through ungraded pre-tests) before teaching, and they regularly assess students throughout the semester, asking students to give feedback on what they are learning, or not. Many of these teachers, Bain explains, use “some form of anonymous feedback after three or four weeks of class” (p. 159). These teachers also make clear and explicit the criteria on which students will be judged, with the goal of establishing “congruity between the intellectual objectives of the course and those that the examination assesses” (p. 162). Finally, good teachers recognize the challenge of assessing another person’s growth and development and often ask students to assess themselves as well. Sharing responsibility for student assessment, making students partners in that process, contributes to the natural critical learning environment, as students learn to think critically not only about content but about how they learn.

Regarding evaluating themselves, the teachers Bain studied asked themselves variations of these questions: (1) Is the material worth learning (and, perhaps, appropriate to the curriculum)?; (2) Are my students learning what the course is supposedly teaching?; (3) Am I helping and encouraging the students to learn (or do they learn despite me)?; and (4) Have I harmed my students (hindering the desire to pursue further learning, not being responsive to diverse students, etc.)? In addressing these questions, the teachers Bain focused on consult students. As one teacher said: “If I want to know whether I’ve challenged my students intellectually or stimulated their interest...what better way than to ask them” (p. 166). Teachers also develop scholarly, reflective portfolios — critical narratives of their pedagogical

commitments and practices. They thus undertake the kind of meta-cognitive reflection on their practice in which they ask students to engage regarding their learning.

In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Bain offers college teachers an extremely readable, engaging, and grounded discussion of what many successful teachers do — a candid and inspiring exploration of what can work in a classroom without promising to be a recipe for success. In the introduction, the appendix, and throughout the book, he provides questions that can guide any teacher in the demanding work of preparing for and practicing his art and a challenge to teachers to address these hard questions for each class and each new group of students. The responses teachers offer as well as Bain’s own narrative provide a necessary reminder that good teachers know that they always have something more to learn and that good teaching is not just a matter of technique but of continually striving for a balance between structuring a learning environment and supporting diverse, individual learners as they make their ways through it. In his epilogue, Bain summarizes his findings based on the teachers he studied through addressing the question, “What Can We Learn from Them?” He offers a discussion of the “fundamental shift” (p. 173) that needs to take place regarding how teaching is conceptualized — not as transmitting knowledge but, rather, through embracing the conviction that “teaching occurs only when learning takes place” (p. 173). This assertion is not simply about the inextricable relationship between teaching and learning but, more deeply, about the necessity of defining teaching in terms of learning.

This assertion could, I suggest, inform our thinking across educational contexts. Pulling from Bain’s argument, I discern a number of qualities that contribute to the process of defining teaching in terms of learning not only in college classrooms but in pre-college contexts as well:

- creating opportunities for students to be actively engaged not only with the process of integrating and understanding subject matter but also in the uncertain, open-ended, and ongoing process of transforming themselves through their learning (Cook-Sather, 2006);
- positioning both teachers and students as learners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Thomson, 2008);

- recognizing how challenging and slow learning is (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000)
- starting where the learner is (Bruner, 1977) and both following and ending where the learner is: as students take increasing responsibility for their learning, teachers attend to them ever more fully, rather than try to move them somewhere else;
- inspiring problem posing as well as problem solving (Shor, 1992);
- acknowledging the role of relationships based on trust, respect, and caring (Noddings, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000);
- supporting meta-cognition and reflective practice (Rodgers, 2002; Schön, 1983); and
- employing a variety of strategies to scaffold learning opportunities (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

In this list I include some parenthetical references to educational theorists who make similar arguments regarding pre-college as well as college learning environments. I include these particular references to illuminate the parallels between Bain's findings and research on effective teaching and learning at the pre-college level. Across educational contexts and levels, there are striking similarities in what it takes to make spaces to learn.

The ways that the researchers referenced above and the teachers such as those in Bain's study conceptualize spaces conducive to learning is corroborated by students at the secondary level. As I discuss in *Learning from the Student's Perspective* (Cook-Sather, in press) and as others document elsewhere (Cushman, 2003; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck, 2007; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Smyth, 2007; Wilson & Corbet, 2007), secondary students want the kind of classrooms that Bain describes the best college teachers creating with their students. They want teachers to know them as students and as people and to develop relationships with them; they want teachers to create and maintain a positive classroom environment in which they feel comfortable, challenged, and supported; and they want teachers to design lessons in which they use a variety of pedagogical strategies to engage diverse learners. Cutting across students'

explanations of their hopes and needs in these areas are two recurrent themes that surface regardless of the specific topic (e.g., classroom management, testing): respect and responsibility. Secondary students want to be treated with the respect they are expected to show, and they want to be afforded opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning. How teachers meet these challenges in different contexts and across different student populations will vary, but the essence remains consistent.

In arguing that good teaching is about making a space to learn, I join other educators committed to redefining teaching in terms of learning. Parker Palmer, an educator and activist who focuses on community, leadership, spirituality, and social change, argues, “‘to teach is to create space’” (quoted in O’Reilley, 1999, p. 1). He makes this claim in his introduction to Mary O’Reilley’s *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, a text in which she takes up that concept not only to speak to the role of the teacher but also to highlight the role of the student in creating a space for learning:

Most of us believe, at some level, that what happens in the classroom is caused by the teacher. In reality, we cause or control very little. To ‘create a space’ acknowledges both our sphere of responsibility and our lack of control. The idea of filling students, well-intentioned and nurturing as it may be, rests on the conviction that we know what they need, that their hunger is like our own, or something like the hunger we felt in college. This may not be true. How do we find out? Probably by keeping quiet much more than we have ever imagined possible, and by listening more astutely than we have before, even if we have listened long and hard. (p. 2)

O’Reilley’s distinction between responsibility and control regarding the teacher’s role and her call to listen to students offer some guidelines for how teachers might redefine teaching in terms of learning — how we might redefine the teacher’s role in terms of a redefined student role. In composing *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Bain and his co-researchers listened to college teachers and learned what they do to facilitate and support student learning; the necessary complement to this listening to teachers is listening to students — “more astutely than we have before, even if we have listened long and hard” (O’Reilley, 1999, p. 2). As Katherine Schultz (2003) suggests, “Listening to teach offers a way to reconceptualize teaching as an ongoing process of learning over time” (p. 4), and in doing so it also affords students the opportunity to take up the complementary responsibility to teachers of making the classroom a space to learn.

Palmer's four characteristics of the ideal teacher, the questions and answers offered by *What the Best College Teachers Do*, my own and others' research in the field of student voice, and the assertions of educators like Parker Palmer, Mary O'Reilley, and Katherine Schultz clarify what I see as a generative paradox or irony at the heart of what good teachers do: They bring their knowledge and presence to bear on the challenge of creating a space for student knowledge and presence. In order to be effective, a teacher needs to scaffold learning for her students, and thus be very present both through planning and through guiding students as they enter the scaffolded space. She needs, at the same time, not to take up that space but rather leave it open for students to fill.

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