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Shawn Pohlman
Maryville University

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TOWARDS A BLENDED STUDENT/TEACHER VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM: REFLECTIONS OF A TEACHER WHO WAS "PULLED UP SHORT"

Shawn Pohlman, Associate Professor of Nursing, Maryville University

"Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind" (Theodor Geisel)

Ah, the whimsical wit of a beloved poet, Dr. Seuss. I was drawn to these "words of wisdom" as I embarked on a pedagogical journey just two short years ago—so much so, that I had scribbled his quote on a sticky note. I frequently glanced at that note—tacked to a wicker basket in clear view alongside my computer screen—to muster the strength to take a leap of faith and turn my more traditional lecture-based classroom essentially upside down.

It was summer, and I had just read an intriguing research paper that detailed the implementation of team-based learning (TBL) into a nursing course. This teaching strategy transposes the traditional roles of the teacher and student: essentially, the teacher assumes a less directive role while the student is nudged to take on the more active stance of a teacher (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008).

Although my motivation for making this change was to deepen students' understanding of nursing, as I reflect back I have come to a new appreciation of this entire process from the student's perspective. By thrusting junior-level students into *my* new teaching/learning paradigm, I had quite inadvertently, but with good intention, assumed the role of headmaster in my own Whoville. Dr. Suess, I'm afraid you led me somewhat astray!

Over that summer, I carefully carved out my new syllabus after combing through the literature on TBL, paying particular attention to the research behind this teaching method, as well as strategies for implementation. I discovered that what lies at the core of TBL is the utilization of a structured, *student-centered approach* that focuses on active learning strategies (Mennenga & Smyer, 2010). This approach is different from some nursing classrooms in that students are held accountable to learn some of the content on their own (prior to class) and, during class, they participate in team activities such as group testing and case studies.

My ambitions for wanting to nudge students to be responsible for some of the course content were of the highest order. One reason may ring familiar on many levels: to strike a better balance between theory (content) and practice (context). From a nurse educator's stance, I strived to enhance students' appreciation of the salience of the life worlds of their patients, moving well beyond pathophysiology. In order to do this in a classroom that, per policy, mandated that students pass a rigorous standardized final exam in order to progress, I had to find some way to shift a portion of the content onto the students' shoulders. Doing so created some class time to delve into more nuanced topics that I highly valued: health disparities, homosexuality, poverty, race, gender, health care reform, and the influences of media, to name a few.

In a TBL classroom, students are held accountable for a portion of course content through readiness assessment tests, taken both individually and in teams, which are given prior to any

formal content being delivered via lecture (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008). In my course, students were expected to a) read carefully scripted pages (typically 30-35) in their textbook every 1-2 weeks; b) take two pages of written/typed notes using a key concept reading guide and c) come to class prepared to take their readiness assessment tests on basic concepts from the readings (using their notes to help them).

Within the first few weeks of teaching using TBL that following fall semester, a paradox emerged as some students waged a revolt against the very "student-centered" role with which I had "empowered" them. I began to question the wisdom of that sticky note, once held in such high regard. Which "who" voice matters most anyway, the teacher or the student? After all, teachers care deeply about student learning; but, do we really know what is best? How do standardized exams, which nursing students must often pass to progress in the curriculum, impact the delicate balance between the voices of teachers and students? In this paper, I will explore these questions as I describe my path towards a blended voice in the classroom—all in the hopes of generating a sigh, a chuckle, and maybe even a "aha" moment or two.

From the beginning, I felt as if I were walking a tight rope between broadening student understanding (which is a goal closer to my heart) and making sure students passed their standardized exam (which is a goal closer to their hearts). I was walking a fine line, but I did so to honor my own scholarly fidelity. I first learned of the notion of scholarly fidelity from Shulman (2000), who described the problems that educators face as they redesign courses to "reflect more faithfully the discipline they have come to love and understand" (p. 96). His thoughts really hit home with me as I juggled similar challenges: Staying faithful to nursing, a discipline I truly love; staying faithful to the learning of students, who are often focused on passing exams but are so in need of a deeper appreciation of the differences and situated possibilities of humans in health and illness; staying faithful to the community of patients and families for whom these students will serve; staying faithful to the nursing program, whose success is primarily measured numerically via state board passage rates; and staying faithful to my own sense of self. There is no doubt that my scholarly fidelity—to teach nursing in a way that captures the complexities of the lives of patients—is not an easy task but one to which I felt a deep sense of commitment.

There is a growing body of evidence to support the need to teach differently from the past. In a recent large scale study of nursing education, researchers discovered that nursing students are weak in the "cognitive apprenticeship" and proposed this remedy: "to shift from a focus on covering decontextualized knowledge to an emphasis on teaching for a sense of salience, situated cognition and action in particular situations" (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard & Day, 2010, p. 82). In a similar vein, Baxter-Magolda (2001) proposed the need to transform higher education to promote student's self-development. She presented the results of a longitudinal qualitative study, which included detailed narratives of recent college graduates (ages 18 to 30+ years) as they wound their way through the self authorship of their lives. One study participant, Anne, represented the voices of the collective group with this poignant comment upon reflection of her college days: "life is not multiple choice" (Magolda, p. 193). These stories revealed "how undergraduate education could—and should—be redesigned to focus on thinking and self-authorship" (p. 193).

Although some college graduates may be able see the importance of deeper thinking and self-improvement when looking back, that stance doesn't sit as well with some students currently in college who have been accustomed to passivity. Case in point: the first night of my newly revised course I heard students' discontented grumblings and felt a negative shift in our classroom energy force-field (have you ever noticed that?) as one student raised her hand and asked in a disbelieving, somewhat angry tone, "Will we be able to answer the state board type of questions with this TBL method?" "Yes," I replied trying to convince myself, "this type of learning will actually allow for a deeper understanding of the content." Inside, I wondered: What if the students did poorly on their standardized exam after all? My stomach churned. Of course, I didn't help myself with my "Top 10 reasons Why I Want to Use TBL" PowerPoint slides that I presented that first evening. I look back on those slides now and laugh: What was I thinking?

Here are some rather comical examples:

Number 10: Lecture can be boring (for me and you)

Number 7: It is fun to watch you guys work in teams on questions!

Number 6: I get to use those neat scratch-off forms so group tests are automatically graded

Number 4: I like being creative and doing new things—you never know till you try!

Number 3: I value different types of learning activities, and finally…

Number 1: TBL is an evidence-based teaching and learning practice.

I imagine you are catching the drift here: It was all about *me*. My attempts to be light-hearted fell flat because I was imposing my new teaching approach *on* them rather than developing a new approach *with* them. This was the first of several missteps along the way as I worked towards a classroom where my voice and the voices of my students were mixed together—blended—in the hopes of a better learning environment.

During our second class, several students staged a vocal revolt of sorts when they had to take their first readiness assessment test without a prior lecture, despite having a key concept reading guide and 10 or so posted PowerPoint slides. As you might imagine, after that class it didn't take long for the "feedback" to roll my way (*and* my director's way). One student sent an email with a subject line that read: "flag on the field in class," as if taking on a referee role. I recall thinking: Wait a minute…how can a student give a penalty when I am supposed to be the one in charge of the game?" Not long after that email, another email followed (from that same student) suggesting I attend another teacher's class to witness that format as her class was filled with content and teaching. That suggestion didn't sit too well at the time. I thought: Bah Humbug! Tensions escalated as I felt strongly that I needed to stay the course because what I was doing was crucial as these students would soon be caring for real patients with real problems—problems that would require them to be self-sufficient learners. Students, on the other hand, weren't ready for my imposed self-sufficiency and reacted (I realize now) out of fear.

Around midterm, I did have one brave student (who was in my class the previous semester before TBL) come to my office to share the feelings of some students. "Dr. P," she began, "they don't trust you. I have tried to tell them, 'No, she isn't like that'…but, they aren't buying it." That one hit hard as trust is very important to me and something I had hoped to build, but obviously, had failed to do so. No wonder some students felt like "guinea pigs," a comment that surfaced a time or two on my electronic course evaluation. This interchange highlights a real dilemma for an educator who wants to try something new (and for all the right reasons): you have to start somewhere in order to initiate change, but that "somewhere" should not be from the top down. It should be from somewhere within a middle space—the interface between teacher and student.

Over that semester, as tensions continued to rise, I slowly began to authentically listen to the voices of the students, partially to ease my nerves and partially to make sure they were learning so that they could pass the standardized exam and, therefore, the course. I made the decision to do a mini-lecture just before each exam, which helped to calm some students down a bit. I was listening—but not fully—which made matters even worse for some students because they were getting a tempting taste of what they really wanted: a full-blown lecture given the week prior to any testing.

It is important to note here, however, that a small handful of students responded very positively to my approach from the beginning. Their smiling faces in the crowd were extremely helpful to me because they gave me the strength to return to class week after week, which in essence allowed me to continue down my path towards a blended voice in the classroom. One should not lose sight of just how important positive feedback is for both teachers and students alike.

At the end of the course, students submitted electronic evaluations. Several themes emerged, including the following:

1) It is only fair that content is gone over in the class that I pay for

2) I was not given a choice; I prefer lecture

3) I don't feel it is fair to have to go to outside resources (referring to the textbook) for clarification of content

4) It felt like a "culture shock"

5) Teachers should provide the content that needs to be learned and/or memorized in written format, so that students do not have to spend time on writing

6) Students should be notified in advance about TBL as students should not have to teach themselves

7) I'm not paying for someone with a PhD to not lecture…TEACH me!

All of these responses point in the same direction: student voices were silenced in favor of mine, which naturally created conflict, especially in light of the fact that students had to face a standardized exam at course end in order to pass the class. Herein lies another personal paradox when it comes to conflict: easily tolerating student resistance is not something that comes naturally to me, temperamentally. I often press forward with changes when I wholeheartedly believe in them, but doing so creates anxiety. Believe it or not, to get through that first semester with TBL I created a calendar of Tuesdays (the day the course met) which I faithfully scratched off after each class—a weekly ritual that empowered me to muddle through the chaos.

Utilizing a TBL approach was a big change in my classroom format, so I intuitively knew I had to plan to elicit student feedback at various points throughout the semester. Three weeks into the semester, I invited students to write a "Dear Dr. P" letter to me for extra credit and many students readily complied to garner the extra points. All in all, the tone of their letters was positive, which didn't align with the negative energy I was experiencing inside the classroom walls. Naturally, students wanted the points but were guarded in their responses as some may have feared potential repercussion because their letters were not anonymous. In response to their letters to me, I posted a "Dear Student" letter back to them. I think I may have gone a bit overboard, however, when I tried to garner support for TBL by writing about my inherent change-agent tendencies. Students did not mention my posted letter, but silence often speaks volumes. Although I really believe that written letters can be a source of connection (and that was my intent), they were ineffective in this case because, from the very first class, I had inadvertently erected a wall between our voices—we were "talking" alright, but not hearing one another.

In addition to the letters, I had also developed a short written feedback form which was available weekly for students to complete. I guess it is no surprise that the number of students who regularly took advantage of that opportunity quickly dwindled because the majority of students probably felt like this: "Why bother?" At the end of the course, however, I felt the compelling need for a detailed, meaningful course evaluation that I could get my hands on quickly (unlike the electronic evaluations which are more generic and come back just before the next semester start). So, I developed a paper and pencil evaluation where I listed all of the elements of the course, ranging from specific assignments to overarching aspects like team-based learning. I asked students this question: If you were the professor, what would you keep or drop and why? Looking back, I now can see quite clearly that this course evaluation was symbolic of a shift stirring within me—a shift towards a more blended voice. Although this gesture was just on paper and certainly too late from the students' perspective, I was inviting students to be the teacher. This was a start.

Since that time, I have completed three semesters of teaching using the TBL approach and my course has morphed rather substantially. Some examples include providing a lecture on audiotape prior to exams and personally clarifying some of the content with a 45-60 minute formal lecture in class the week *before* an exam. Meeting the students half-way has calmed their nerves (and mine) while still affording me precious time to teach topics that are near and dear to my heart and teach in a way that I philosophically believe in. One thing I have learned: If students revolt emotionally, they may disconnect from learning entirely and that risk is unacceptable. After all, learning is an emotional business for students and teachers alike (Claxton

& Allpress, 2008). I learned that when I began to really listen to the voices of the students and honor some of their suggestions, things began to change in *our* classroom.

Now honestly, despite the changes I have made, there is still some student grumbling. Just this last semester I had a student shout this out as we were reviewing answers to a case study: "Which answer is it anyway, yes or no?" I responded (with a smile on the inside), "Both," as I continued with further explanation. The student replied, "But I am a black and white thinker; I need things black or white." I paused and retorted, "I know, but nursing is filled with lots of gray, not black or white." She smiled briefly, while returning to her team to further ponder their case study. This interlude marks a moment of a more blended voice as we had a thoughtful exchange, a far cry from the tension-filled first semester. Afterwards, however, I was once again left with a lingering fear: Is it fair to her not to receive just one right answer, when that is how multiple choice and standardized exams are designed?

A course that includes a standardized test, which students must pass in order to progress, presents a huge teaching conundrum for me. On one hand, I feel a heightened sense of obligation to content, which is why I started TBL in the first place. On the other hand, as a result of my own fear of failure if students do not pass the exam, there is a greater need to maintain control over the classroom, which ultimately undermines learning as student/teacher voices are then inherently separated rather than blended. In addition, when standardized testing looms over the classroom, both student and teacher creativity may be lost in the shuffle. This is unfortunate as curiosity and creativity are important elements of critical thinking (Botstein, 2005; Jackson, 2005).

Although there are still a few students who would prefer a more traditional, lecture-based classroom, many are more content with the idea of being active participants in their own learning, including some self-teaching. Once students felt empowered in ways that were meaningful to them and they knew they had a voice in the process, many of the barriers to their learning using a TBL approach seemed to subside. As their teacher, I am now excited to walk into a classroom and feel a more positive energy force-field.

Recently, as I prepared to write this paper, I stumbled upon a new concept—"translating educator"—that goes a long way towards a fuller understanding of what transpired over the last two years. According to Cook-Sather (2009), a "translating educator":

seeks out and works to translate concepts and terms that signal powerful ideas associated with schools….a translating educator calls into question simple, fixed, or established understandings and invites more nuanced, variously informed, and more respectful interpretation of identities, such as 'teacher' and 'learner'….a translating educator not only works to complicate existing understandings—of concepts, identities, roles, and institutions—but also strives to redistribute power and agency among participants in education (p. 233).

According to that description, I guess it is safe to say that I lean towards that distinction; however, titles come with price tags and herein lies the cost of trying a novel approach: "the more radical or transformative forms of translation can find resistance or rejection among students who do not necessarily embrace the kind of empowered place advocated for them by

some of these translating educators" (Cook-Sather, p. 234). Alas, perhaps students were resisting the novel "student-centered approach" of TBL because it wasn't really very student centered after all.

This then begs the question: What does the word "student-centeredness" really mean? It seems that in higher education this word has become a catch-all phrase, but upon closer scrutiny, it is a thorny issue. From a teaching perspective, the word may conjure up images of spoiled students whose needs are front and center, likened to the notion of self-centeredness. From a TBL perspective, being student centered means a transfer of learning accountability from the teacher to the student. Being student-centered meant that student learning was at the center of my concern—and, if that meant trying out a new approach so that I had the space to enrich their understanding of nursing—so be it. From what I have learned from students, the phrase may more accurately denote a centeredness of voice, in tandem with the voices of the faculty. Taken together, these varied perspectives shape the response to my initial question: Which "who" voice really matters, anyway? The answer is simply that they all matter to a degree; but, what matters most is the intertwining of multiple voices—a blended voice in the classroom.

I have learned so much throughout this entire process. If I were to approach innovation next time, I would verbally engage students during the very first class to share in the journey. More importantly, I would make authentic changes to the syllabus based on our collective discussions. For those students who aren't as likely to share feelings verbally, I would provide a mechanism to get written anonymous feedback weekly—and I bet my response would be better if they knew, from the start, that I was willing to actually make changes then and there. I would move more slowly along the way, incorporating one or two aspects of TBL rather than embracing the method so rigidly. If I were to write another "Dear Student" letter, I would read it back to them in class, not just post it online, to create space for authentic connectedness.

To move towards a blended voice, both the teacher's and the students' scholarly fidelity must be honored and balanced. To do this, it is important for students and teachers alike to examine their roles during the education process. For teachers, "the challenge often lies in overcoming our own feelings as teachers to recognize, understand, and accept the true feelings of our students in order to work collaboratively to build a more meaningful learning environment" (Cook-Sather, 2009, p. 13). For students, pushing themselves to take a more active role in their learning is the only way to ensure that their learning is truly lasting and meaningful (Cook-Sather).

Reflecting back, I think it is safe to say that in the process of turning my class upside down, I was "pulled up short," a notion first articulated by Gadamer, a 20th century German philosopher known for his work in hermeneutics (or interpretation). Turning towards teaching, this concept goes beyond merely challenging students' assumptions and instead emphasizes self-questioning and doubts. This concept remains largely unexplored by educators as the idea of questioning our presuppositions is so unfamiliar, primarily because our prejudgments work into our teaching in often unconscious ways (Kerdeman, 2004). "When we are 'pulled up short,' events we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming" (Kerdeman, p. 145).

In simpler terms, I liken this concept to being blindsided—caught off guard—as a result of our own sometimes blurry lens. The good news for me, and ultimately my students, is that my understanding of teaching and learning has been enriched by being "pulled up short." Equally important to this process, however, was the time I spent reflecting on the entire experience along the way as reflection is an essential component of meaningful teaching and, therefore, learning. Like the novice teacher in the following quote, who wrote about his feelings after being observed by a fellow professor, I too often returned to my "magic closet" after class to think things over—time and time again—as I navigated my path towards a blended voice.

Even after my discussion with Professor Brown, I often opened the closet at home before heading off to campus, found a mask for the day, wore it, winced, and went home to rummage again in this magic closet. But at least I was conscious of my behavior, and able to calculate, to consider the effects of various masks, to listen to the ways they altered, or helped to embody, my voice. (Parini, 2005, p. 66)

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