

Cultivating Inclusive Learning Communities with Careful and Caring Conjunctions

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In truthful knowing, the knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons and creatures and things, with whatever our knowledge makes known. We find truth by pledging our troth, and knowing becomes a reunion of separated beings whose primary bond is not of logic but of love. (Palmer, 1993, p. 32)

This story is part of my journey in which I continue to seek truth and work to engage in the vulnerable work required for our community of practice. The first time I read Palmer's "pain of disconnection" that he described as permeating education, I felt as though I was reading my own heart and experiences as a classroom teacher, graduate student, and college professor. He, too, could say, "Everywhere I go, I meet faculty who feel disconnected from their colleagues, from their students, and from their own hearts" (Palmer, 1993, p. x). This was not a new concept for me, but the manner in which he wrote through this and other issues in education were both challenging and restorative.

The International Christian Community for Teacher Education (ICCTE) conference in 2006 is where I first heard Palmer's words and found a new professional community of practice. I've been to five of the six ICCTE conferences since 2006. I go because while I have incredible colleagues at Houghton College, our time at these conferences together multiplies God's sustaining grace, hope, and power that I experience as a Christian teacher educator.

My only hope in sharing this paper is that I can communicate effectively whatever it is you may need to hear so that we can grow even more active in our connections with our colleagues, our students, and our own hearts.

Reflective Practice has to Start Somewhere

"What will you do, if we don't hire you?" I remember this question clearly. I remember my inner thought

clearly: *These people don't know me. These people would never be interested in knowing me. They have doctorates! They teach teachers! I could never be a contributing member of their community of practice. What am I even doing here? How did I let my husband and mother talk me into agreeing to this interview?*

Deep breath.

Be honest.

"Stay home with my daughter and begin a garden."

I had taught for seven years as a special education teacher, two in an urban high school and five in a suburban elementary school. I had incredible colleagues at both schools. I had fallen in love with learning deeply and talking about what I was learning with my colleagues in those formative years as an inclusive educator. But I really thought this was the time for me to step back and stay home and be a mom full-time. Hadn't God confirmed this when my letters of interest to local school districts within 40 miles of Houghton went unanswered?

Well, they hired me. God had closed the window to teaching full-time as a special education teacher but threw open the doors to teacher education, Christian teacher education. A second child, a doctorate, several incredible colleagues, and eleven years of serving as a teacher educator later, I am growing to be a contributing member to a changing and growing landscape of practice, working beside my colleagues to cultivate and sustain a learning community for us as well as our students. This space brings me inner joy amidst incredible challenges. This space stretches me as well as supports me. This space requires me to stretch others as well as support them. The tension between these two actions has required me to remain engaged in extending and deepening my content knowledge while I listen carefully and respond with care to my colleagues, our

students, as well as state and federal mandates.

Did you notice all of those conjunctions? If not, go ahead and re-read that last sentence:

And, while, and even the coordinated conjunction, as well as. Conjunctions are such an important part of our language system, but they don't often get that much attention. However, when they do get attention on a paper, they are usually criticized or challenged. When they are discussed, everyone thinks they know how to use them most effectively. But they matter. Conjunctions matter, just as teachers matter. Teachers matter.

Our various and multiple responsibilities rely on our roles as educators. This is the reality that Scot Headley so pointedly illustrated with the wheel of pressure and influence during his invited lecture at the ICCTE 2016 conference. We must work to find alignment and balance so that we are driving the wheel and not allowing the wheel to run us over. We must be part of the voices that decide what is considered "best practice" for our respective disciplines. We must engage in all of the *ands* required in *our* field of teacher education.

Throughout the ICCTE 2016 conference, we engaged in dialogue around four main strands – strands that represent actions for which all teachers are responsible and that must be sustained for all educators who are disciples of Christ. Effective teachers are not all Christian educators, but all Christian educators must be effective teachers. This is no small calling, but as Christian educators, we have a reservoir of energy and resources that is not as readily available or sustained for our colleagues who do not share our faith and trust in the holy blessed Trinity: our Father, our Savior, our Holy Spirit.

Only through the Trinity, in whom we are empowered, can we consciously and consistently serve with open hands, hand in hand, handing down what is important, and finding alignment and balance in God's hands. I want to be clear here that I am not saying *or* in between these actions.

All of us who have been in education for any amount of time have learned that intentional participation in all four of these spaces is required for transformative teaching. These spaces in which we dialogued through-

out the ICCTE 2016 conference support us, the ICCTE, in our teaching, our scholarship, and our service, all of which are required components of our practice as teacher educators. Again, I am not saying *or* in between these components of our practice. We must seek to be and remain reflective teachers, competent scholars, and caring servants.

God's Sustaining Grace: Caring Service Requires Boundaries

One of our new colleagues had to take a long-term medical leave, which led me to step in and teach a brand new course with a significant overload, and I experienced the worse semester of my teaching career. The students enrolled in this course verbalized that while this change was unavoidable, they felt abandoned by the professor they were all looking forward to learning from, making it clear that I was not who they wanted to learn from. There were also a few fairly vocal students who had no qualm with complaining about my ridiculous standards and assignments loudly in the student center or coffee shop, so of course I received regular updates of what was not working for these students (unbeknownst to them). These students were struggling and their voices and experience still remain important for me to hear, reflect on, and respond to with care.

God's sustaining grace carried all of us through that semester with incredible and important learning opportunities. My biggest lesson was the importance of alignment and balance during that semester and life in general. My tire was flat, and the wheel was getting worn, the inside was beginning to shred, and in one small whisper, I heard *Sabbath*.

Sabbath? How? I'm a teacher!

Rest in me, Child. Stop thinking about Houghton College at all on Sundays – no grading, no planning, no e-mail, and no student meetings.

I did it and began to find a bit more peace. Then one Saturday, as I was getting ready to reply to one of my colleagues through e-mail while my children were waiting for me to come join them in the snow, my heart was caught. I closed my computer and said out loud, "OK, God, I will stop reading email from Friday afternoon to Monday morning, but I don't know how I am going to get everything done." That following

week, I chose to attend chapel, and A. J. Swoboda was there to talk about ... Sabbath. God used his voice to make it clear that *Sabbath* is an actual commandment and requires sacrifice, sacrifice that is just that – a sacrifice.

Which *and* was I going to have to sacrifice? For me, I had to sacrifice singing in the college's faculty and staff choir. I had to sacrifice having perfect PowerPoints. I had to sacrifice writing as much feedback on drafts of student papers as I like. I had to sacrifice my frantic pace and longing for rest.

These sacrifices allowed God's sustaining grace to guide me in being a caring servant for these students who clearly did not like discussing power, privilege, and diverse literacies. It was not easy when one of my students said to me, "You know I think that you would be a really great classroom teacher, I think that you should go back to the classroom – you'd do better work there, work that matters." I began to experience my first wobble in my career since I had completed my doctorate (Fecho et al., 2005).

God's Sustaining Hope: Competent Scholarship Requires Openness

Through this new course, I emerged into new literacies as I attempted to guide my students through a multi-genre project presenting a review of research. Instead of guiding them with my guidelines and rubrics, I smothered them. I smothered them with rubrics. I smothered them with five rubrics. This seemed a bit excessive, even for me, so I decided that I needed some

peer-mediation from one of my past professors, now a colleague. I sat down and showed him the rubrics and explained the tension I was feeling between opening up the assignment like I felt multigenre composition was calling me toward and restricting the assignment with rubrics to ensure rigor in this new (to me and my students) form of research literacy.

After he laughed at me and thanked me for not butchering multigenre literacies for my students, he walked me through the essence of what I wanted my students to gain through this assignment. Through our conversation, I felt freed from those five rubrics and realized that I needed to walk through the assignment myself and consider how I would learn the most through these new literacies.

This choice, this action, supported me to learn more about my own research around communities of practice. As I looked carefully at the components of a learning community, I had to figure out how each piece connected to the other pieces. When I sat with one of my colleagues and walked through the project, she was able to reflect back to me even deeper connections I had shown through my use imagery and positions of the imagery. The process of creating this project deepened my understanding of this framework, and sharing it with a peer took it further and left me with more to think about for my research and the space multigenre literacies can create for individuals as well as communities of practice.

Listening	Shut your mouth and listen to the ideas that come from your students and realize that they are incredibly rigorous thinkers when given space and the expectation to work purposefully and creatively.
Reflecting	What are you hearing and seeing that requires further development of your content and craft?
Learning	How and when can you sustainably make those changes? What do you need to learn? Are you willing to learn beside your students and position them as knowers? When do they take ownership of assignments?
Adapting	Be open to the evolution that is required as a reflective and critical educator. Facilitating requires careful listening and caring responses that challenge your diverse learners.

My requirements for peer conferences and a conference with me ensured that they were engaged in community learning, constructing and re-constructing their understandings around their research reviews. It supported me to empower their available designs to deepen their understanding and ownership of the content in which they were engaged. These conferences and this project taught me the value of listening, reflecting, learning, and adapting throughout my teaching practices.

These actions support our abilities to cultivate highly mediated and opened spaces for culturally responsive learning. This sacrifice of power made space for God's sustaining hope to guide me toward remaining active in my competent scholarship – relying on God's power, not my own so that I could continue to grow as an effective (albeit flawed) and reflective teacher educator.

God's Sustaining Power: Reflective Teaching Requires Hospitality

As I was mentoring my student teachers through that same spring semester, one of my student teachers texted me, freaking out about word study because she wanted to try some of the inquiry based word study that they learned about the previous year but couldn't remember what to do and where to start. We met at the end of the day and attempted a quick review of the month-long unit on word study she had done quite well on only one year earlier. A few weeks later after an observation, I asked her what I could have done differently to have support her and her peers to actually internalize the key points about inquiry-based word study. She said, "You know, I think it would have been helpful if I had made a word study center and used it with real students." I smiled, because while I recommended this to all of them, it was not required, and only two students actually told me that they had done so.

Throughout that semester, I asked all of the student teachers for ideas they had that would help this unit be more real and memorable. One student suggested, "Why don't you have a Literacy Day just like we have a Math Day?" All of the seniors chimed in with ideas of what that could look like and what they would have had to know to do so.

So this past year, I did it. I talked with three alumni who teach in local rural schools and they jumped on

board with their second-grade students: an entire school day at Houghton College immersed in literacy learning. The teachers provided spelling inventory analyses, running record analyses, and other literacy-related data for each of their students. My emerging inclusive educators reviewed the assessment data, grouped students by strategies and word study features the second-graders needed to grow in, and planned the entire day from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

In my students' post reflections, they were able to identify the course and program goals they grew in through this assignment. Again, I had to sacrifice the structures that I had grown comfortable with, that I thought were working so that God's power could guide me in being a reflective and responsive teacher.

This past year, my goal was to walk peacefully and with grace. I created structures to allow me to have time and space to grow as a teacher, scholar, and servant, and was walking with more ease. And then came graduation and that student who suggested I leave teacher education and return to the classroom found me and gave me an update and asked, "So I see you are still here. Did you think about going back to the classroom?"

I thought to myself, I did indeed. In fact, I spent a month in deep prayer, seeking God's will because I do miss the classroom. I do wonder some days if I'm making a difference at this level. And in that month, God's sustaining grace, hope, and power were finally realized. So I responded, "I did," with a genuine smile.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, and then God made it clear to me that I am where I need to be, doing what I can do in this place at this time."

My pace is slower, and I have finally found the time and spaces that are needed for me to really listen. Friends, time, and silence in our lived spaces are needed for us to really listen. Choose to invest some sustained time in silence, listening. Where is it that God is calling your voice, your influence? How will you prepare your voice, your influence? With whom will you share your voice, your influence?

In my listening, I have been convinced to stay in

higher education and continue to cultivate a space for my colleagues, local rural teachers, and my students to participate in a community of practice focused around digital literacies, literacies that are innate in the K-12 learners today, yet are silenced or marginalized in many school discourses.

One last word: This essay was originally the invited lecture I shared at ICCTE 2016. I arrived there, prepared to share about inclusive learning communities and our responsibilities to both model and teach our emerging educators to plan, teach, and assess diverse learners with inclusive and responsive practices. But just as I had to listen to the Sabbath whisper, I could not ignore the and whisper. So I ask that as you finish reading this essay and we go our separate ways, remember that we are embodied conjunctions. We are an important part of our language system that communicates so much about our culture. We may not get the amounts or forms of attention that we think education warrants and we may grow weary of all of our stakeholders telling us how to improve our practices. But we matter. Our voices can make a difference. You matter. Your voice will make a difference.

References

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