From Knowing to Understanding: a Learning Journey in Engagement

Investigating Our Practice

When I began this journey two years ago, I was looking for answers to a question that had become increasingly pervasive and yet frustratingly intangible in my teaching practice: *how could I resolve the student I was with the students I now teach?* Despite my exposure to some new ways of thinking about teaching and learning and my development of some powerful professionally collaborative relationships, there was still a disconnect. I was ready to do something about that. While my coursework and readings offered many "lenses" of reflection on this disconnect, it was when I began to inquire into Wiggins' and McTighe's (2005) framework of backward design that I began to see a way to actually resolve the disconnect within myself and with my students. Wiggins and McTighe propose a distinction between knowing and understanding, asserting that "*an understanding* is the successful result of trying to understand – the resultant grasp of an *unobvious* idea, an inference that makes meaning of many discrete (and perhaps seemingly insignificant) elements of knowledge;" in my teaching journey these past two years, I have endeavoured to understand how to make meaning out of the knowledge, experiences, and assumptions I brought with me to my program, and my inferences have shifted every aspect of what, how, and why I do what I do in the classroom closer to closing that gap between myself and my students. In this reflective paper, I will employ Wiggins' and McTighe's framework of backward design as a means of charting my movement from knowing to understanding, for while I began this program with an end in mind, I realize I also now end with a new beginning in mind.

My learning journey from knowing to understanding evolved as a result of learning activities I undertook in this program, which align themselves quite aptly with Wiggins' and McTighe's "WHERETO" design framework. Despite the often-frustrating ambiguity of the study-inquiry approach to professional learning, I am now grateful for this "organization"al (the "O" in the acronym) design, for its freedom permitted me the flexibility to become accountable to my passions and my assumptions. Each time a new "hook" (the "H" in the acronym) held my interest and attention, I was able to determine a new direction of "where" my inquiry would direct itself as a result of "where" my students were at with this process (the first "W" of the acronym). As I "equipped" myself with and "explored" (the first "E") new knowledge from my readings, discussions, and collaborative experiences, I was able to "tailor" (the "T") my inquiry to respond to both my needs and those of my students. Through the processes of critical reflection and feedback, I engaged in constant "rethinking" and "revision" (the "R") of my instructional and assessment strategies, a process that I know will continue for me. Because each field study required me to "evaluate" (the second "E") the implications of my work, I have been able to deepen my understanding of my teaching practice and subsequently feel empowered to share it with my students, their parents, and interested others in my field.

> They were not given the time, skills, and opportunities to extract personalized meanings from their studies.

The learning that initially "hooked" me into this journey started with a presentation I observed by George Clulow at a district department head meeting in the spring of 2010. George presented us with the ubiquitous

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"Butler slide"(1988), and my drive to inquire engaged. Why should an assessment process that pairs evaluation and feedback result in a negative impact on student learning? What did this mean about my own practice? Did this have to be the reality for all students? Potential answers to my questions began to emerge during our first summer session in August of 2010. Observing my colleagues present their work on using portfolios and "numberless" assessment in their classrooms, I became intrigued by the "technical" aspects of implementing assessment for learning in my classroom. Since I had already begun to involve students more in their own assessment, I decided to jump in with both feet for the new school year: I would abandon the "safety" of my computer-generated marks program and shift all assessment to a student-maintained portfolio. I needed, however, to equip myself with the pieces of knowledge necessary to facilitate this shift. One of the first activities I tried was to write out my assessment policy formally. As a result of this activity, I developed a clear and specific understanding for myself that I could articulate to my students: "as your teacher, my role in the assessment process will be to help you to understand what is expected of you (learning outcomes), to demonstrate what constitutes 'excellence' in each skill area (performance standards and rubrics), and to provide you with regular feedback as you progress towards your learning goals. **You** are in charge of your grade in this course, and your teacher and your classmates are here to help you get there."

As I began to inquire into and develop my portfolio process during my first field study, I needed to find a way to tailor it to my needs and abilities as an English teacher, so I chose descriptive feedback and reflection as my key foci. As I adjusted to becoming accountable to a more formative assessment practice, I began to live, in every sense of the word, the reality that, as both teachers and students, "We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us" (Marcel Proust). This journey requires openness and vulnerability and responsiveness. I began to see my students as "texts;" what conflict or challenge was I opening up for them by asking them to understand their own learning story? More significantly, what could I learn about my own teaching practice by listening to their challenges and conflicts? In the course of my first field study, as I endeavoured to explore and therefore better understand the implications of my shift in practice, I provided students with an opportunity to give me feedback on the feedback techniques I had used in the classroom. This survey surfaced a genuine concern among a handful of students that they didn't feel they knew how to understand their learning in this context without somehow aligning the information with a grade/percentage. The old version of me would have heard this concern, then chosen to forge ahead anyway. The new version of me chose the harder path: I responded. The result, a document I created to help students understand how to convert or translate the information in their learning portfolios into a grade, remains one of my proudest developments, not just because it suits my own personal need for linearity and organization, but because when my students finish their learning portfolio conferences with me at the end of the semester, we are both, almost invariably, awed by how much we have understood about each other's learning through this process.

An interesting by-product of my first field study emerged as a result of my decision to re-organize students' evidence of learning for assessment under the skill categories of my discipline: reading and viewing, writing and representing, speaking and listening. As soon as I began to explore these aspects of learning as separate skills, I came to a somewhat embarrassing epiphany (for an English teacher): I had been assuming my students could read, and thereby assessing their reading without explicitly teaching it as a skill. This was no longer congruent with my process, for a key AFL practice is to ensure that "students know the criteria in advance of their performance, [so that] they have clear goals for their work" (McTighe and O'Connor, 2005).

I began to explore the performance standards rubrics for reading assessment, but soon found them too clunky and disorganized to use meaningfully with my students. Fortunately, that year I had also decided to "volunteer" myself to assemble a Developing Readers inquiry group through the Surrey School district. My team members (consisting of new and established colleagues in my English department) were willing to take on the rubric with me and, collaboratively, we created our own version that became a much more thoughtful and user-friendly revision of the ministry standards. As a result of our collaborative effort we became clearer in our own purpose in teaching and assessing reading in our classrooms, and came away with a set of exemplars with which to assist and guide our students. As I formally evaluated this piece of my learning during my second field study inquiry, I realized how significant this shift in thinking had become for repurposing my understanding of my role as an English teacher in terms of not only the way in which I teach reading, but the way in which I now teach students to think: collaboratively.

As I moved from my first to my second field study, one significant reflection stood out to me: AFL was not *the* answer to student engagement, but *an* answer. I had established a solid framework or foundation for learning to occur in my classroom by adjusting this part of my practice, but was I truly getting students to connect with their learning on a deeper level? As I pondered where my second field study would take me, an earlier reading from my course re-surfaced to "hook" me: Parker Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach*. As our instructors and mentors in this program advised us to find our "passions" in order to find a focus for inquiry, I recalled Palmer's reminder that "we became teachers because we once believed that ideas and insight are at least as real and powerful as the world that surrounds us… we must remind ourselves that inner reality can give us leverage in the realm of objects and events." Why I had become an English teacher in the first place? Because I love literature. What bothered me most about students who disengaged in my classroom? The realization that they were denying themselves access to the transformative power of literature. As my understanding of engagement began to crystallize, I felt more prepared to transfer this understanding to my students, to help them recognize that "finding areas of personal passion is important not only to their developing sense of identity, but also to creating an appetite, and the skills and dispositions, for lifelong learning" (Bruce Beairsto). Thus, my second field study turned inward, and with great assistance from Wiggins' and McTighe's (2005) *Understanding by Design* (which I *almost* read cover to cover), I focused on using essential questions to guide my students toward a place in which they would, hopefully and ideally, connect personally with literature and thereby possibly experience engagement and academic success from the inside. I made myself vulnerable and offered my hope to my students, that they, too, would realize that "fiction can take us anywhere, to any time, and help us sense how it might feel to be different sex, race or nationality. And these experiences [might] help prepare us for the slings and arrows of our own uncertain future" (Julia Steiney, 2011). In an attempt to structure this kind of shift in understanding for my senior students, I introduced Wiggins' and McTighe's framework of the "Six Facets of Understanding." Their ability to engage with this framework became my second proudest

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development and reflection during my program. Through empathy and perspective, my students became more attuned to the characters and their choices, and, more significantly, to their own reactions to these characters. However, more significantly, engaging with these aspects of understanding prompted me to recognize how and why and when students were connecting with literature; as a result, I feel I am tailoring my content selections and assignments more meaningfully now to my students' needs, interests, and perspectives. As I become less "mechanical" (Hall and Lord, 2001) in this process, the power of essential questions is truly beginning to resonate in lesson design revisions that feel more pedagogically coherent and evidence of student thinking that is far more powerful and insightful than I've seen in previous years. A case en pointe: on a recent assignment, a student referenced James A. Baldwin's assertion "it was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive" as a part of his argument about the ability of fiction to connect us to the real world. This from the boy who claimed in October that he was a) not "good" at English, and b) didn't see how he would use "English" in his future.

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Despite my often tumultuous, overwhelming, yet ultimately motivating journey from knowing to understanding, I have recognized that leadership or advocacy is a place where I would still like to grow. Though I feel this is a strength in my relationships with my students and with some of my colleagues in my department, I also feel an insatiable urge to expand my role beyond the "culture of nice" (MacDonald, 2011), and to seek a place in a professional environment where "teachers are challenging each other's and their own thinking, beliefs, assumptions and practice." Thus, in my final field study I decided to face, head-on, the structural and collaborative challenges of my school's staff, specifically in light of our transition this school year to a split bell schedule, with two separate "shifts" and separate lunch hours. Though this issue "hooked" me and held my interest, deciding where this field study was going and what I expected to discover in my explorations became the challenge as I wrestled with the assertion that "if you want to understand something, try to change it" (Hobson, 2001). My attempts to use distributed leadership techniques to connect with my colleagues, to give them voice and opportunity to express their ideas about personal and professional collaboration, have given me insight into my own needs as well as those of my colleagues. William Glasser's control theory puts forth the concepts of power, freedom, fun and belonging as genetic necessities; rethinking why I need to seek belonging and exert a sense of power in my workplace are questions I recognize I now need to explore in greater depth by challenging myself to confront the obstacles to them in new ways. In this capacity, I am still a "work in progress;" nonetheless I remain hopeful that in my leadership efforts as well as my teaching work I will recognize that "teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge – and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject" (Palmer, 1998).

Thus, I ended my program, and will move on to the Masters' program, with a new beginning in mind: *how can I resolve the teacher I now am with structures I must work within?* While I have begun to deeply understand the "why" behind and the methods I might employ to "provide quality education for the kids we have, not the kids we used to have, want to have, or kids that exist in our dreams" (Colleen Politano), not everyone yet sees that their resistance to change is, in my opinion, somewhat in keeping with Einstein's definition of insanity. Rather than become frustrated by this, however, I think it is time for me to look up from what I have engaged with over the past two years and see how this is reflected in and by those around me, for, as Parker Palmer (1998) suggests, "we cannot see what is 'out there' merely by looking around. Everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world. By putting on new lenses, we can see things that would otherwise remain invisible." Much of my inquiry, reflection, and development now need to be directed towards recognizing and valuing the changes I have been a part of, and the colleagues and students who have supported my growth toward my new place of understanding. As I continue to grow in my understanding of the purpose of education and my role within it, I hope I begin to see for myself that a true measurement of successful educational leadership is "how many leaders [I] have developed and left behind who can go even further than [I] did" (Michael Fullan, 2003).

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