

Warnie Richardson

Carole Richardson

# WALKING THE TALK



putting theory  
into practice

twenty five narratives from  
a faculty of education

## Walking the Talk: Putting Theory Into Practice

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# The Democratic Teacher

Carlo Ricci

*Let us take, for example, the practice of cooking. Cooking presupposes certain kinds of knowledge regarding the use of the cooking stove. How to light it. How to turn the heat up and down. How to deal with the possibility of fire. How to balance the ingredients in harmonious and pleasing synthesis. With practice newcomers to the kitchen will confirm some of the things they already know, correct others that they do not know so well, and gradually open up the way to become good cooks.*  
(Freire 29)

GOOD MORNING, AND WELCOME to the Nipissing teacher education program. I would like to start off apologizing for my lengthy one sided dissemination of information today, and assure you that this is not going to be typical. There are several introductory things we need to get through. I would like to start off introducing myself, and presenting my political bias to you.

As most of you know, my name is Carlo Ricci, and I teach the Curriculum Development Assessment and Evaluation course. This course is divided into three parts: in the first section, we are going to examine various orientations to education; in the second section, we are going to examine how to create a unit; and in the third section, we are going to examine assessment and evaluation.

I will give you more detail on each of the three sections in a minute, but before I do I want to share with you my vision of education, and how it differs from what we currently have in Ontario. My primary theoretical influences are critical pedagogy and holistic education. In Ontario, the predominant educational orientation is an essentialist approach to education. A critical pedagogue is interested in what Paulo Freire calls “right thinking”. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire tells us that part of “right thinking” is to decidedly reject any and every form of discrimination. “Preconceptions of race, class, or sex offend the essence of human dignity, and constitute a radical negation of democracy” (41). As a critical pedagogue, I am interested in the amelioration of society by giving those who have traditionally been oppressed and silenced a voice. The goal is to transform injustices within the status quo, and empower those who have traditionally been disempowered.

A holistic educator argues that “The aim of education should include the development of the whole person: intellect, emotions, body and spirit” (Miller vi). Instead, Miller goes on to argue that the schools are focusing on a few skills that can be tested [the essentialist model] and the price that we are paying for this narrow vision is huge.

As a critical pedagogue, I argue that the standardized curriculum we have in Ontario is undemocratic. I look forward to dialoguing with you about this throughout the year, but for now I just want you to consider the undemocratic nature of creating a curriculum that is standardized in a democratic society that should make difference its goal, not standardization. Put another way, if we value democracy, we need to value difference, and not standardization. Furthermore, the government introduced a grade 10 literacy test that all students need to pass before they can graduate from high school. The end result in many cases is that many teachers are pressured to teach to the test. And many students who do not fit the standardized model of learning will not get their high school diploma, and therefore will have their future options severely limited.

I realize that what I am doing is unfair. I am giving you all of this information without giving you a chance to respond. Let me stop and ask for questions or comments.

*Student 1:*

I agree with what you are saying, and I am glad that in this class we are going to address substantive issues, and not merely be trained into the status quo. I see this as the difference between education and training. Education gets us to critically reflect on the status quo, whereas training just tells us what it is and provides us information in how to work it more efficiently. I am looking forward to the rest of the year.

*Carlo Ricci:*

Thank you.

*Student 2:*

I disagree with what you are saying. I have two points. First, I am paying to learn how to become a teacher in Ontario, and at the end of this program I want to feel confident in working within the system. I want to be trained. Second, Carlo, you are against standardized testing, right? How else can we ensure that we are competitive in the global market?

*Carlo Ricci:*

You raise some interesting concerns; hopefully, we can continue to discuss throughout the year. For now, I will offer a brief response, and look forward to a continuing dialog. In response to your first point, by reflecting critically on what is expected of us in Ontario, we will inevitably gain a deeper understanding of what the curricular expectations are like in Ontario. In response to your second point, I think you are absolutely right in having us think about what the purpose of education is. Are teachers mere commissars of the capitalistic system? Do we work for IBM, Walmart, and other big corporations? Are we willing to reduce our jobs to teaching

our students how to become better workers, thereby replacing the nation state with the corporate state? Or should education be about something more?

Once again, my political bias is as a critical pedagogue and a holistic educator. This means that I believe in democracy. I believe that we need to educate our students with the goal of the amelioration of society and the individual. We cannot reduce human beings to a limited set of skills that they can be tested on. For example, we cannot ignore our spiritual side that is fed through the arts, and we know that we are doing just that: cutting out the arts and, in the process, our soul in favour of the corporate nation.

Before I conclude, I would like to briefly outline how this course fits into my philosophy. First, I cannot stress how important it is for us to remember that education is not neutral, but political. In the first unit, we will be looking at various theoretical orientations to teaching. By exploring various orientations, it will be easier to see that how we teach in Ontario is not neutral, but politically charged. Given that there are other orientations, changing those in power can lead to the adoption of one of the other orientations.

Our second unit is on units. We will examine how we are expected to do them in Ontario, discuss what orientation this belongs to, and critically reflect on its merits and limitations. As well, we will discuss how other orientations treat the creation of units. And finally, we will look at assessment and evaluation, once again, critically reflecting on its merits and limitations. Of course, as teachers we do not neatly fit into a particular orientation, and this will be discussed as well.

In conclusion, teaching is an art; and like all good artists, teachers need to define their teaching from within. As a preservice teacher educator, my goal is to empower you and provide you with the information you need to critically reflect on what you are expected to do. As preservice teachers, you need to be made to feel empowered and in control. You need to be given the opportunity to feel human, and in turn to interact with your students as human beings. All too often, teachers and students pass each other in the

halls without acknowledging each others' presence – without validating each others' existence. We need to learn to listen and to talk with our students, and not merely talk *to* our students. Learning takes place in a community of learners, in which the teacher is a member of that community. The teacher needs to assure the students that she or he is also learning within the community. In order for this to happen, teachers and students need to engage in what Freire calls problem posing education. They need to talk about substantive issues and deal with genuine problems. I would like to offer a series of comments that students have made about my teaching. I do this not out of narcissistic pleasure or self aggrandizement, but to show the impact we as teachers can have when we connect to others on a human level. As a human being, this connection is our greatest gift:

*Dr Ricci,*

*WOW! You made my day! Thank you so much for the encouraging feedback! It's ALWAYS nice to receive feedback, but it's ESPECIALLY lifting when you aren't sure if your presentation went over well!!! I hope that ALL preservice teachers will model themselves in your likeness – I know I will certainly strive to do so!!! . . . You are an example to us all! Thanks again for the lift!*

*Melanie Blanchette*

*I enjoy your class because it is so different from all of my other courses. You actually do what you profess to believe in and not all profs do. Thanks for a great class.*

*Andrea Laidlaw*

*Again, thank you for making my first evaluation so encouraging and “non-terrifying.”*

*Robin McKay*

Contrary to our current practice, teaching is not an externally imposed recipe, but it must come from within. And each of us needs to discover the teacher within.

*At this point, you expect, usually,  
general principles, rules.*

*But teaching is a practice. It is  
Personal experience.*

*Teaching is a discipline that  
Comes from within. Not one  
That has been forced on you from  
Outside.\**

*\* I have borrowed Frédéric Leboyer's text, and replaced the word "birthing" with "teacher".  
This is from his book Inner Beauty, Inner Light*

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