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Space for Dilemmas = Space for Growth

I have recently been exposed to readings in which teachers share their challenges and dilemmas and openly define teaching as an activity in which there are no clear-cut answers. Having taught for some time, I also experienced many problems which I did not know how to manage. What is important, though, is that while experiencing them, I had a deeply-ingrained conviction that as a teacher I should not have any doubts. I felt that it is expected of me to have all the answers, just because I am a teacher. The fact that we openly talk about dilemmas helps me shift the mindset that a teacher should always know everything.

The dilemma that I have recently experienced is related to the doubts which I have while grading students' paragraphs. I sometimes encounter words or expressions in students' writing which I feel are not correct for the context in which a student is using them. Since I am not sure myself if something is used correctly, I check the words in a dictionary and see if they can or cannot be used in a specific context. I think to myself that just because I have not seen a word used in that context, it does not mean that it cannot be used like that. Even though I know that consulting a dictionary is the right thing to do and is the right way to manage this problem, I feel that I should know the answer to my questions without using any dictionary. What makes me feel even more frustrated is that I feel I am taking so much time to grade, especially when I need to check the words that I am not sure about. Overall, I often feel overwhelmed and frustrated with the task of grading.

Zembylas talks about the fact that emotive can either intensify or dissipate an emotion. I feel that my emotions are still strong now that I have written about it. I have also been thinking

about a way to manage this dilemma and I think that I need to accept the stage at which I am right now and accept the fact that I will be facing these challenges when I grade students' writing. I think that by being more understanding towards myself and giving myself the space for having doubts will help me approach grading in a more relaxed way. I think this is similar to Catherine's experience, because she also created her own "space of emotional freedom" in which she taught in agreement with her values and ideals. I especially like Catherine's words about the role of reflection: "when you reflect on how you feel, you expand on how you feel, you expand your repertoire, you reach a deeper understanding of yourself, of who you are as a teacher. You ask another question." I realized that I put a lot of pressure on myself. Instead of feeling frustrated when I need to grade, I could ask myself: What is grading going to look like today? And I could answer the question by saying that there will be moments when I do not know how to correct something and that it is fine, because this is part of teaching. I think that approaching grading with this kind of mindset can change the experience of grading a lot.

Another dilemma which I faced took place when I was answering a question that a student asked. Specifically, he asked if a noun can be an adjective. I explained that it can be and I used an example using the adjective "brick" that the students learned in the same class period. I said that we can use bricks to build buildings, but when we use it before a noun ("This is a brick wall") it becomes an adjective. Then, the student said that if "brick" is before a noun it is an adjective. That was correct, but I also said that a lot depends on the specific sentence, because we can also say: "The wall is brick." The dilemma which I experienced while explaining this grammatical point was related to the fact that I saw the student did not fully understand my answer. As I am watching the video-recorded part of the lesson, I can see that there are a lot of pauses in my explanation, because I was waiting for the student's reaction which would suggest that he understood.

When I reflect on this experience I realize that perhaps this grammatical point was too nuanced for him at that point. I feel that now I would explain this point in the same way as I did a couple of weeks ago, but I would probably also add that we would have more practice with adjectives before a noun and at the end of a sentence. Saying that would help reassure the student. Another reason why I perceive that experience as a challenge is related to the fact that when I said the sentence: "The wall is brick.," it sounded a little strange to me and I was no longer sure if it was correct. This is why I looked at Frances and she confirmed it was correct, which helped me feel more confident about what I was saying. What I also find helpful are Catherine's words which she uses to talk about her space for emotional freedom: "I felt I didn't need to know all the answers... Feeling comfortable for the first time to my students, "I don't have all the answers," opened the doors for a deeper reflection on my feelings, my teaching, and my self-confidence."

The readings and the reflection on my experiences help me realize that questions and lack of certainty will always be part of my teaching and I should not pressure myself by thinking that I should have all the answers. Through analyzing my emotions of self-doubt and uncertainty, I was able to become more aware of their source, which was the belief that as a teacher I should know everything. I also become aware that by holding this belief I not only felt stressed but I also limited my own growth, because not knowing something was a reason to feel that I was not competent instead of encouraging me to learn more. In other words, if I give myself space for experiencing dilemmas, I will also give myself opportunities for growth.