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## A Haven for Learning: Gaining Professional Knowledge through Sincere Conversation in an Online Reading Course

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# A Haven for Learning: Gaining Professional Knowledge through Sincere Conversation in an Online Reading Course

## **Abstract**

As an educator teaching an online course for the first time, I observed that the teachers in my class engaged in meaningful and sincere conversation and gained deep insight and greater awareness about their practice. Sincere conversation obviously differs from brief verbal exchanges operating at the surface level. It is conversation that invites self-reflection and contemplation through reciprocal trust, respect, and active listening. This study discusses how sincere dialogue, which leads to greater understanding of what it means to be an effective reading teacher, was enhanced during an online reading course. It highlights how the right conditions created in an online setting can encourage relationships and lead to professional knowledge.

Quand j'ai enseigné un cours en ligne pour la première fois, j'ai remarqué que les élèves enseignants qui se trouvaient dans ma classe avaient des conversations constructives et sincères, qu'ils comprenaient bien leur profession et qu'ils en prenaient davantage conscience. Les conversations sincères diffèrent des courts échanges verbaux qui se déroulent en surface. Il s'agit de conversations qui invitent l'auto-réflexion et la contemplation par le biais d'une confiance et d'un respect réciproques, et d'une écoute attentive. Cette étude présente la manière dont le dialogue sincère, qui mène à une meilleure compréhension de ce que cela signifie d'être un enseignant de lecture efficace, a été mis en valeur lors d'un cours en ligne sur la lecture. Elle met en relief la manière dont les meilleures conditions créées dans un cours en ligne peuvent encourager des rapports et mener à la connaissance professionnelle.

## **Keywords**

sincere conversation, professional knowledge, reading, online course, teacher stories

Conversation is part of everyday life and varies according to the levels and depths we reach through it. On the simplest, surface level, conversation involves a limited, often minimal, exchange. When mutual interests emerge, however, conversation can grow into an interaction that reaches to profound levels. Such exchanges become what I can best describe as *sincere*. In other words, they express that which is truly and deeply felt, and can be a way into deeper contemplation about our teaching practice. This being said, in order to gain a better and necessary understanding of sincere conversation, there must first exist “a presupposition of interaction” (Hibberd, 1985, p. 163) or premise from which we begin. This presupposition is that from the onset such conversation must be entered into with attitude free from pretense and continue to proceed from genuine feelings. Coming to terms with what this actually means and gaining a sound perspective on sincere conversation is integral to understanding the tenet of this study: an appreciation of how such defined conversation leads to professional knowledge in teaching.

Robert Wicks (2000) poses the question, “How do people feel when they are with me?” (p. 25). This question, which can be applied to everyday encounters in order to recognize our way of being with others, is also significant in terms of our encounters in teaching. It also highlights the need to establish that “the educator’s sincerity is a powerful determinant of what the teaching experience will be for him or her” (Hibberd, 1985, p.162) as well as for those with whom such encounters occur. However, understanding the educator’s sincerity is not easily accomplished. After all, there are no actual “behavior tests which could discriminate between sincere and insincere responses” (p. 163). Almost thirty years ago, Hibberd argued for the need to come to a clearer understanding of the idea of sincerity and proposed that the concept of sincerity was neglected in educational research (p. 163). He suggested three versions embedded within the popular understanding of the idea: the depth version of sincerity, the consistency version of sincerity, and the openness version of sincerity (p. 164). While attempting to untangle these versions would take me beyond the limits of this paper, I will argue that engaging in conversation with depth (not superficially), openness (with honesty unalloyed by ulterior motive) and consistency (steadfastly and reliably within different contexts) is critical if a conversation is indeed to be considered sincere. Pendlebury (2008) agrees, insisting that

Sincerity involves having an appropriate set of values that (i) shape one’s attitudes to the people to whom one speaks, an attitude that under normal conditions tries to sustain an assumed trustful relationship; (ii) are responsive to the different kinds of communicative expectations in different contexts and role-defined situations; and (iii) require an understanding of what people deserve. (p. 178)

In other words, “Sincerity is displayed both in how one looks outwards to others and in how one looks inwards to sustain self-respect” (p. 178). Rogers and Babinski (2002) further suggest in regard to sincerity and conversation that “Genuine dialogue is valuable because it ‘forces’ us to think and to listen, thus allowing us to come up with new ideas while encouraging us to think about things in ways we have never thought of before” (p. 15). This paper explores conversations entered into about the teaching of reading; conversations that, because of their nature, created a haven of sorts for students enrolled in an online Master of Education (M.Ed.) course about the nature of the reading process. Seventeen teachers were enrolled in the course; however, they were divided into groups according to grade levels taught and interests to engage in discussion

threads. This study focuses on one of these discussion groups. In this particular group, eight elementary and middle school female teachers engaged in weekly discussion threads online. This study explores the question, “How do professors create the conditions for sincere conversation in an online setting?” Further, it makes the claim that such dialogue encourages M.Ed. students to think about their practice in new and meaningful ways.

### **Creating the Conditions to Encourage Meaningful Dialogue**

While I had never taught an online course before, I knew that, as Lock (2006) points out, “It cannot be assumed that an online group with common purpose will evolve into community” (p. 674). This, and my having worked with adults in different contexts over many years, urged me to be cautious about making assumptions concerning how well the students would communicate with one another in the online setting. I knew that creating the kind of community in which the students, who were teachers by profession, would experience “a general sense of connection, belonging and comfort” (Conrad, 2005, p. 1) would require that I do a lot of research and preparation. Conrad (2002) speaks to this notion when she points out that community is affected by myriad factors, including learners’ own perceptions of the online community, levels of participation in online activities, and the fact that learners are “pushed not pulled, into a community framework” (p. 3). While I would agree with Conrad that attitudes, participation, and other factors contribute to the overall success of learning in a virtual environment, the notion of pushing or pulling is questionable, at least in terms of this particular course. Students enrolled in this course by choice and were all teachers of reading. Therefore, they most likely entered the course with expectations of what it might offer their own professional growth and development. As the instructor of the course, I intended to create an engaging online learning environment that might foster meaningful dialogue and help the students to advance their knowledge and understanding of their practice. Cooper and White (2004) stress that “Students, be they children or adults, learn better when they feel connected to the subject matter, to their peers, and to their teachers” (p. 5).

### **Connection to the Subject Matter**

The students who participated in this study were teachers of reading who opted to enrol in this M.Ed. course to deepen their understanding of how to teach reading. They were also part of the larger community of teachers in the province of Nova Scotia who were attempting to make sense of their teaching lives in view of the changes that were sweeping across the province at the time, changes that included expectations that teachers be trained to be more adept at reading instruction. Therefore, while the students made a connection to the content of the course from the beginning, I wanted to enhance this connection by carefully considering the texts that we would read and discuss. To this end, I selected as the main text Kyleen Beers’ (2003) *When Kids Can’t Read—What Teachers Can Do* (one of the books placed in the hands of teachers through a provincial initiative), believing it to be a good choice for several reasons: most students already had a copy of the text and it was teacher-friendly in language and content; it addressed the needs of a range of teaching levels; and it aligned in theory with the direction that the province was going in terms of reading instruction. It was also a book that I had read and enjoyed.

Teachers who are committed to excellence in reading instruction recognize that there is no single program or method that is effective for all children. Therefore, teachers must find

opportunities to expand their knowledge, and one important way to do this is through engagement in quality professional reading. Pettijohn Powell (2005) supports this when she says, “Professional reading, while often overlooked, is an option for professional development that encourages teachers to investigate issues and problems that have risen in their own teaching experience and search for solutions that will enhance their knowledge and skill base” (p. 8). In this course, while the readings, including the main text and selected articles, were chosen to align with the direction of Nova Scotia’s Department of Education, they would also serve to “develop the skills of inquiry, reflection, problem solving and collaboration” (Rock & Levin, 2002, p. 7) and to deepen the connection to the subject matter, which Cooper and White observe is critical.

Each week, one member of the group of eight students began a discussion thread about the assigned readings for the week. The purpose of the discussion format was to describe how the key points of a reading resonated with, challenged, or extended their practices as educators. Guiding questions were given to the students as they engaged in readings; these questions helped students delve deeper into the course subject: What is the author’s main focus in this reading? What connections does the reading make with your experiences as a reader or as a teacher of reading? What new questions, insights, and possibilities does the reading raise for you as you consider it in relation to your understating of the reading process? Responses to such questions incited others in the group to respond, thus encouraging open conversation and deepening the students’ connection to the subject of reading instruction and even to each other.

### **Connection to Peers**

How does one go about making a class feel welcome, putting others at ease, and fostering connections between members of a group? Wiederkehr (1990) states that, “Your name is a word filled with the power of *you*” (p. 1), and insists that if you call people by name shortly after you’ve met them “they come alive” (p. 1). One part of building an inviting learning environment is taking the time for introductions, allowing each student in turn to begin a personal story, one that continues to grow as the course unfolds and that, as Lock (2006) states, “nurtures the establishment of relationships” (p. 663). This nurturing of relationships works both ways: the students begin to know each other, and they also begin to know you the instructor on both a professional and personal basis.

While the following list is not exhaustive, other ways of helping participants forge relationships in online environments is through participation in the following activities, most of which I adopted from teaching face-to-face and acquired through years of practice:

- creating on-line profiles;
- beginning each class with a community circle, in which each student shares something from their week;
- making heterogeneous base groups;
- asking each student to create a word cloud (e.g., Wordle) to share particular points in the early weeks of the course (see [wordle.net/create](http://wordle.net/create));
- asking students to take a key idea from the course and find an artifact that connects to their idea, thereafter bringing their findings (in the form of a photo) back to the class to share;
- asking students to post three sentences about themselves (two true and one false), whereupon their peers are to guess which two of the three are true;

- inviting students to participate in jigsaws (a cooperative learning activity);
- inviting each student to give their two-cents worth: each person has the ability to contribute twice to a question and the moderator keeps track. Once a person has contributed twice they can no longer contribute and must listen.

Through years of experience working with teachers in various contexts, I have learned that encouraging dialogue between students helps to forge relationships. While dialogue is encouraged during course instruction time, another way to promote dialogue in an online setting is through participation in discussion threads. In this course, discussion threads proved to be more than a means of facilitation—they were a very effective tool for inviting genuine conversation between and among students. Gentry (1990) states that, in order for discussion to be meaningful, “The instructor is responsible for providing the experiential stimulus and the quality of that stimulus will vary greatly depending on the pedagogic approach used” (p. 10). In other words, easing others into meaningful discussion is a process that must be attended to thoughtfully. In this course, open and genuine conversation was encouraged by creating a safe environment, offering quality professional readings, and developing guiding questions that would invite engaging discourse. All of these factors worked together and promoted engaging genuine dialogue.

### **Connection to the Teacher**

The role of the instructor of an online course is critical, not least in enabling and encouraging students to forge connections with each other. Students also need, however, to be able to reach and to feel a personal connection to the teacher of the course. There are different ways of opening up space and opportunity for students to connect with the instructor. For example, keeping lines of communication open through exchange of emails and responding to questions and concerns in a timely and respectful way are two ways to facilitate communication. Such means, however, are mainly a matter of protocol; more meaningful connections are fostered through intentional planning before the course begins, and then through close attention to other details as the course unfolds. Lock (2006) supports this notion and claims further that “The realization of online learning communities to facilitate teacher professional development is a matter of carefully and deliberately designing dynamic learning environments that foster a learning culture” (p. 663). To try to attain such an environment, one needs a positive beginning. Taking the time early in the course to put students at ease by making professional and personal connections with them, listening attentively, and being constantly available are critical.

A powerful way of forging a connection between me and my students in this course was through offering descriptive feedback on assignments. The feedback that I present is generally in the form of comments that are friendly in tone, and that identify what has been done well and suggestions for improvement. Often I give such feedback without a mark attached, and students have the opportunity to improve before submitting a final product. It has been my experience that written feedback without marks assigned increases student engagement in their learning, promotes intrinsic motivation, and creates a mutual respect between instructor and student.

I planned this online course with the inherent belief that modeling activities is important. In this course, for example, I asked students to share their “literary histories” (Tovani, 2000). In order to make my expectations of this assignment clear, I share my experience of an important

book in my life. Sharing this experience helped to create an open environment and helped me to connect to students on a personal and professional level.

### **Methodology**

Stories are fundamental to being human. It is for this reason that, whenever I have worked with teachers, I have noted that they inevitably share stories with one another. During our online reading course, as students engaged in conversation; they responded to discussion threads, made weekly observations about their practice, expressed personal beliefs, and shared stories. From my observations of the students' interactions in this online course, I have come to realize even more deeply the importance of stories. Bryman (2004) suggests reasons for our attachment to telling and listening to stories. He states that narrative

entails sensitivity to: the connections in people's accounts of past, present, and future events and states of affairs; people's sense of their place within those events and states of affairs, the stories they generate about them; and the significance of context for the unfolding of events and people's sense of their role within them. (p. 412).

In other words, narrative is an integral part of our lives—the way that we make connections and know ourselves and others with greater depth. As stories are prevalent to the professional lives of teachers (including those who took my online reading course), not least in helping them to understand their practice better, it is natural to inquire into such stories as a methodological approach.

This study, then, is a narrative inquiry that examines the stories and experiences of one group of students engaged in weekly discussion threads while enrolled in a fully online reading course in the winter of 2009 offered by a small Canadian university. A total of 17 students were enrolled in the course: eight elementary/middle school teachers and nine secondary teachers. Because the students held a wide range of professional interests and concerns in regard to literacy instruction, they remained together only during parts of our course time to discuss some of the broader issues. For some activities and for discussion threads, the students were divided into separate groups. This study delves into one discussion thread involving eight elementary/middle school teachers. In this thread, the students shared their stories concerning their practice as they explored the nature of the reading process. The course was delivered exclusively online via the Elluminate and Blackboard systems.

The course unfolded over a period of twelve weeks, and we met online weekly for a three-hour period. Throughout this twelve-week period students were asked to complete assigned readings and to engage in a variety of activities that required students to explore the nature and complexity of the reading process. It was through participation in online discussion threads—by either beginning a thread or responding to a thread—and by engaging in conversation each week that students began to think most deeply about their practice. These discussion threads and weekly conversations, in which each student shared experiences, became portals through which we began to explore personal beliefs and convictions about reading instruction. The content of these discussion threads, and the ongoing dialogue that ensued when we met online, provided the data used for this study. Ethical approval was granted for this study, and students signed a participant consent form; they could opt out at any time. Also, adhering to the narrative inquiry

process, each student reviewed and approved his or her narrative before I included it in the article.

Once a discussion thread was started, students were asked to respond at least once to the comments on that week's readings. Students were told that the responses to the discussion threads needed to reflect the connections they made with the readings (and possible links with their practice), as well as to build upon the comments of others. The guiding questions for the readings were designed to help the students in their responses. During each online class, we took time to meet in small groups (in online discussion rooms) to discuss the readings and the posted responses for the week. Students engaged in oral conversations that continued to deepen their understanding of the reading process.

## **Analysing the Data**

Transcripts were generated from our discussion threads, and transcript analysis was applied to code and explore two overriding questions in the course: What connections does the reading make with your experiences as a reader or as a teacher of reading? What new questions, insights, and possibilities does the reading raise for you as you consider it in relation to your understanding of the reading process? Consequently, I coded conversations as having either (a) words that described or represented the writer's experiences as a reader or as a teacher of reading (e.g., when Rachel states, "In elementary school... I do not remember learning reading strategies and skills") or (b) words that demonstrated new insights or possibilities in understanding the reading process (e.g., when Sadie states, "When I think of my own reading habits throughout the elementary years, I read only what was necessary to get through").

Once I had coded the threads and conversations, I began a process of identifying the narratives within each thread and proceeded to form a first draft of the personal stories of each student. Adhering to the objective of building relationships in the narrative inquiry process, I sent each student a copy of the story I had created based on what they had shared in discussions, so that they could offer feedback. As the students returned their stories I reflected on them in light of the research questions, added additional comments, and closed the narratives.

What follows is an exploration of one of eight discussion threads involving eight female elementary and middle school teachers who formed one group and met online to discuss subjects on a weekly basis. Each student has been given a pseudonym. This thread illustrates in an explicit way how attending to quality professional reading, creating an engaging and safe learning environment, and carefully and thoughtfully facilitating the course lead to engaging and sincere conversation and professional insight. What follows is Sarah's personal story of having uncovered the reading process and the questions that she raised to invite further discussion. Students responded to Sarah by sharing connections they made and experiences that they had had in their own journey of uncovering this process.

## **Exploring One Discussion Thread: Sarah's Story about Uncovering the Reading Process**

Sarah was the first student in our group of eight elementary and middle school teachers assigned to begin a discussion forum. (Sarah's discussion thread was posted on January 23, 2009. The conversations that followed from this thread occurred from January 25 to January 27, 2009.) She began her discussion by responding to the first course reading in "The Reading Process," (i.e., chapter 18 of *Guiding Readers and Writers: 3-6*, Fountas, 2001), and "Creating

Independent Readers” and “Assessing Dependent Readers’ Needs,” (i.e., chapters 2 and 3, respectively, of *When Kids Can’t Read—What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6-12*, Beers, 2003). In the opening thread, Sarah explained her thoughts in response to each reading. For example, she shared how difficult it was for her at first to understand the purpose of the first assigned reading. Initially, she was disengaged from the reading, but because she was determined not to abandon the text, she continued on and was eventually rewarded with new insights into the reading process. She seemed to realize that

[t]he purpose [in] reading this chapter was to become ‘aware of the reader’. It was about . . . the “skilled, advanced, fluent, competent, effective, good” reader. It was about what readers do and do not do (however they might be labelled), and some ideas to assist teachers of reading. I had found purpose. The chapter work became meaningful for me. I was able “to go . . . beyond the particular text . . . and make inferences about “the underlying message of the text.” I was able to gain insight into my own reading strategies in the reading process. Through continual questioning of the purpose for reading, I was able to make connections with my unconscious strategies and probable skills as they began to surface, consciously with a new awareness. I had not really considered the skills I use as a reader before. Interesting! I did not give up reading the chapter, as I now had purpose and it made sense to me. What a relief.

What Sarah considered as she continued reading the text is that the author wanted her to become more fully aware of her own strategies as a reader, of what she did when she encountered writing that was challenging. She talks about making inferences, continually questioning, and making connections. In other words, Sarah began to name reading strategies that lead to greater comprehension of the text. She continued to ask questions in the initial discussion thread:

Yet, I have come to realize that digging deeper requires conscious patience and work on my part as a reader. Does the fact that I am a reader have greater meaning here? How significant was my initial struggle with the reading? How is a struggling reader identified? Where is the line drawn between a struggling reader and a reader? Why does it matter? Might this new conscious awareness of the strategies I use in the reading process bring to the surface greater insights for me? Might it lead to a greater awareness of the reading process for other learners in my practice? What is it in what readers do and don’t do that feels significant here? How might this awareness affect non-readers and struggling readers in my practice?

As Sarah moved into the second reading from the course text, she continued to discover more about herself as a reader. Furthermore, as she was introduced to new terminology she was able to articulate her thoughts more accurately. For example, through reading she learned to distinguish the difference between a *dependent* (struggling) and an *independent* (proficient) reader, and how difficult it is at times to identify the dependent reader. To highlight this further, she shared the following personal anecdote:

I was reminded of how some kids manage to ‘fly under the radar’ throughout school without having gained the skills necessary to help them learn reading strategies and skills. I recall one such child my first year teaching grade 6 language arts. The ELA [English Language Arts] assessment results indicated this child did not meet expectations in reading. I would not have known otherwise. He was affable, gregarious, and articulate with oral language, and written conventions, and I had missed how he was unable to gather meaning from what he read. When writing a learning support plan for this student for the first time, I remember not feeling confident about what I might do to help this child. This is still an area where I feel unsure and amiss with what to do.

As Sarah continued to think more deeply about the reading, she made connections and drew from personal experience. In relating a story from her own teaching, she was awakened to the fact that sometimes as teachers we do not identify students who struggle with reading, because they have acquired coping skills and can present as very competent readers. She struggled with how to cope with this situation. As she brought her discussion thread to a close and invited conversation from other members of her group, she stated:

I believe listening (really well) is the hardest thing to do, and sadly I catch myself not doing it well enough. It’s difficult to be ever present to every student in a dynamic classroom. How might greater awareness of what good readers do be significant for the non-reader or struggling reader? Is recognizing the subtleties of the question or comment of a child (using all of our senses) a skill needed to be honed by teachers of reading? Kyleen Beers in chapter 3 speaks to the complexities of reading and a direction for teachers of reading when she writes “moving beyond ‘These kids can’t read’ to define” what kids can and cannot do, as well as “a constant awareness of what good readers do when they read ... helps instruction.” I wonder how conscious awareness of these complexities of the reading process might affect my practice.

### **Responding to Sarah’s Story: Students Engage in Sincere Conversation about Uncovering the Reading Process**

Each of the students who responded to Sarah’s initial thread made strong connections to her opening discussion. Students shared both personal and professional stories and related experiences. In the narratives that follow, each student relates experiences from her own schooling.

Rachel, the first student to respond, made a strong personal connection to Sarah’s statement about flying under the radar. She shared the following experience:

I was struck by your comment about children “flying under the radar” throughout school and not gaining the necessary strategies and reading skills. As a teacher, I find myself reflecting on my own personal experiences as a young reader. In elementary school, I can remember the entire class reading in unison. I can remember having to regurgitate information from texts. I can

remember sitting quietly, and independently reading from an assigned grade level reader. However, I do not remember learning reading strategies and skills. I do not remember digging deeper or making connections to texts. Perhaps my teachers too followed the assumption that “if they read it, it will come.” I continued to fly under the radar until graduation.

In this personal anecdote, Rachel was reminded of her own schooling and journey in learning how to read. In a very honest and open way, she shares the struggle she had to keep up with other members of her class as they read in unison and her attempts to read without the skills or strategies that would enable her to read with the level of independence expected of her. After Rachel shared this reflection, Abigail was reminded of a similar experience that she had had while in university:

It was not until university that I was asked to look at what I was reading in a new way. I struggled with this concept because I had never been asked to do so before. I had to teach myself how to actively engage with the text. I did not know that I had to bring myself to the reading process. For me, it was about the words on the paper.

Abigail recalled her own path to gaining proficiency as a reader and explains that it was not until she had completed public schooling that she began to engage with texts in a meaningful way, to make personal and other connections. She realized that reading up to this point had not really meant thinking about the words, eliciting meaning from them and engaging with them critically, but about simply going through the motions of ‘covering’ the reading. There was a profound lack of depth to the process, one deficient in what is necessary for understanding.

Likewise, when Lily entered the discussion, she made personal connections and was reminded of her own experiences as a developing reader. She related an experience from her own schooling:

I too had a similar experience. I do not remember being taught the strategies that we teach our students in our own classes. It wasn't until I took a Medieval History course at university that I was taught “how to read” a text. I am thankful that the professor took the time to work with us on digging deeper into a text. Throughout elementary school I struggled to do well. My parents worked with me constantly every evening using Reader Digest texts supplied by my aunt who was a teacher at the time. While in grade 4 my reading teacher considered “failing me” because I was unable to “read.” In talking with my mother recently I discussed this issue. She told me that I was able to read the words, that my problem was comprehending what I was reading. She felt that my problem was confidence. I can also remember reading word lists in grade 3 in preparation for reading a story, and constantly struggling to remember the words. In grade primary I remember the class being threatened with, “In order to grade you have to have completed all four readers and all four workbooks.

In this narrative of experience, Lily recounted her own struggle in learning to read. As she reflected on her experience in grade school, she recalled reading words but not comprehending, an experience similar to that of Abigail. She remembered the pressure that she was under to recall from rote memorization the sight words she was supposed to know and to complete the set of basal readers and accompanying workbooks that defined the reading program of the time. Lily's journey, like that of her colleague, was a trying one. She was lost in a world which made demands on her that she simply could not fulfill, setting her up for failure and defeat.

The conversation continued to flow, and Sadie had her own experience to share: For me personally, it was not until I was in my first Master's program and the professor taught us how to skim and make connections. She showed us how to divide the page up using margins for jot notes and only highlighting the key concepts not entire paragraphs (which I had a habit of doing during my undergraduate degrees.) When I think of my own reading habits throughout the elementary years, I read only what was necessary to "get through." My mother knew I "struggled" with reading and found it hard to motivate me to read. So, my mother would read to me nightly. She would read chapter books and novels and I would lie down and enjoy listening. I was able to visualize the characters, setting and create the story within my mind, something I was unable to do myself when reading. This oral strategy that my mother used with me eventually was the springboard to [my] reading independently.

Like the other students, Sadie recalled her early years in school, how she struggled and read only what she needed to in order to get by. She shared her good fortune in having a parent who read to her on a regular basis, enabling her to visualize and thereby to acquire an adequate level of comprehension. She also indicated her first breakthrough in becoming a skilful reader when she took her first master's level course. In her story we see how important it is for parents and others to stay the course, and to know who and what a reader needs at a given point in their literary lives.

Ella, who had only been following the discussion to this point, decided to enter it:

I am in the same boat as you, with regards to not remembering actually being taught the strategies we spend so much time modelling for our students. I have been trying very hard to recall how I learned to read, whether or not I was taught these comprehension strategies, etc. and I have no recollection of these things. That is not to say these things weren't taught, but simply that I do not seem to remember anything about how I learned to read. Like you mentioned, I too remember being able to decode text and answering simple questions which involved regurgitating words or phrases from the text. I also remember feeling frustrated when I couldn't quickly and easily locate the answer to a particular question. I remember thinking to myself "I wish the teacher knew that I would enjoy reading so much more if I didn't have to do a bunch of questions after I finished reading!" So, I suppose what I do remember about reading when I was younger was the endless questions after

reading. I think now of the interesting activities I plan for my students (or at least I think they are interesting!) and wish I could have done them when I was their age!

Ella's story is a familiar one: she recalls regurgitating words and answering countless questions, not seeing the process as meaningful or enjoyable, as one of discovery, but as routine and uninteresting. Like her colleagues, Ella did not have a positive experience in learning to read. Neither did Holly, who told the following story:

I believe that in my upbringing and schooling, I always believed what the adult had to say about a book and that there was only one way to understand it. I still find myself to be rather dependent and really have to force myself to analyze and synthesize and make judgments on things I read. That is one thing this Master's Degree has helped me do through reflection. I was never really taught to think by myself or make any emotional connections with a book. I don't even remember enjoying reading books until the summer of Grade Four when I discovered Nancy Drew! That love of reading soon faded as I shuffled off to junior high and high school. How sad is that? (Holly,

Holly admitted to still being dependent as a reader and needing to force herself to use thinking skills of a higher order when engaging with texts. This situation perhaps stems from never having been invited to think about reading in a critical way as a child, or perhaps encouraged to hold an opinion. Holly's story is testimony to how entrenched certain perceptions and beliefs can become, taking in some cases a lifetime to correct.

Holly's story and those of several of her colleagues indicate a difficult passage to becoming independent and skilful readers. But sharing such experiences offered each of these students an important opportunity to reflect upon their current practices. Their meaningful and sincere conversation, the reminiscences and reflections offered to the other members of our restricted community, may serve to help them to reconceptualise their own approach as reading teachers in the future. In any event the forum served as a means by which they could open up about their own experiences and discover similarities in the experiences of other students.

### **Understanding Gained through Participation in Engaging Discussion Threads**

At the heart of this study is the contention that by engaging in sincere conversation in our online setting, students would be encouraged to think about their practice in new and meaningful ways. To this end, what has been revealed is that students gained insights through sharing their stories and reflecting upon their practice, they

- read about other people's experiences, making them more experienced themselves (van Manen, 1997);
- entered into educational dialogue, talk that extended beyond casual "shop talk," enabling them to focus on what *mattered* to them;
- recalled memories that imparted more refined perceptions and served as data for understanding (Buchmann, 1992, p. 20), to enhance their own teaching of reading;
- were reminded of their obligations in teaching;

- resolved to remain more focused on their students as developing readers, to be explicit when teaching comprehension strategies, and generally to be thoughtful and intentional in their teaching;
- were challenged to think more deeply about how and why they engaged students in certain activities;
- expanded their understanding to begin to shape future curriculum; and
- were given an opportunity to test their ideas and articulate what they believe by participating in open and honest dialogue concerning some of the contentious issues that we face in teaching.

### **Fostering Sincere Dialogue that Leads to Professional Insights**

Three small words—make no assumptions—have provided numerous opportunities for insights I have gained. This precept has permeated every aspect of my teaching and affected the design and implementation of the online reading course. Ways in which I avoided making assumptions, in an endeavour to foster an environment that would lead to sincere dialogue and provide professional insight to the students in my online course include

- carefully selecting course text and readings so as to enhance connection to the course subject matter;
- building a learning environment that nurtures the establishment of relationships between students, starting with introductions;
- setting up meaningful discussion threads based on text readings and guiding questions;
- taking time to put students at ease by making personal and professional connections with them;
- taking time to be present during online teaching with quality; making sure that I listened attentively;
- building rapport through effective descriptive feedback;
- modeling activities when necessary; and
- engaging students in a variety of activities geared to building relationships.

### **Conclusion**

As Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) point out,

unconscious processes do not allow us to make active and aware decisions about our learning. It is only when we bring our ideas to our consciousness that we can evaluate them and begin to make choices about what we will and will not do (p. 19).

Sincere conversation can bring our ideas to consciousness in a very poignant way. It takes what is under cover out into the open, and when we hear each other's words and discuss our ideas, we come to a more profound understanding that "learning is not merely situated in practice—as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning

is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). The participants in this study engaged in conversation that helped to establish a sense of community that allowed them to talk about their practice and possibly to poise themselves for change in their practice. The significance and educational value of this study lie in underlining the importance for these students, teachers by profession, to have time and opportunity for dialogue, which is essential for their continued development not only as teachers, but as life-long learners.

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