Finding Clarity in Teaching: One Teacher's Struggle

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Abstract

Teaching and learning are interdependent terms, and the work of the teacher is to ensure that students learn. Teachers need to be clear on what they mean by *learning*. Learning is often judged by what students accumulate in content or is based on a student's mastery of content as revealed by grades. However, for the author, there is more to learning—specifically, the behaviors of the learner. The author proposes a *Rubric for Learning Behavior* to augment the concept of *learning* with a concept of the engagement of the *learner*. In doing so, the author clarified his own struggle to make sense of the relationship between teaching and learning.

***Keywords*:** Teaching, Rubric for Learning Behavior, teacher struggle, Dewey

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Introduction

For some teaching is a calling. For others, teaching is a vocation. For everyone else, teaching is something in between. For those who are called, the act of teaching is as much a part of themselves as breathing. It is the lifeblood and passion of a fulfilled life. For those of the vocation, the act of teaching is a means to an end; though perhaps for some, at least, a means composed of substance to enhance those ends. For everyone else, the act of teaching lies somewhere between the two perspectives, but certainly, teaching is a time honored work on any scale, important both to the individual who sits in any given class and the teacher who stands in front of the class, as well as important for the continued existence of cultures and societies, if not the human race.

Regardless of how one comes to teaching, the realization quickly materializes that the act of teaching is, contrary to popular notions, a daunting exercise. For the teacher of conscience and passion, the act of teaching is challenging and requires commitment and dedication. Time and effort go into preparing, presenting, and evaluating each act of teaching. Teaching is not for the fainthearted or the flippant. It is best seen in a personal comment made to my teacher-wife and colleague after our first full week of teaching in a public junior high school: "This is the hardest damn job I have ever had."

The challenge for every teacher, regardless of the level of students being taught, is to decide not only *what* to teach, but *how* to teach. The *what to teach* aspect is often defined contextually by the institution, the department, and/or discipline. On occasion it is at the whim and discretion of the teacher. Most often it is not discretionary and is at least specified to some degree by core competencies, academic or subject standards, or time honored points of canon. The *how to teach* aspect, more often than not, is determined by the teacher, though some districts (and state departments of education) are becoming more actively involved in these decisions. Still, in public education, the teacher is often left alone to his/her own devices, understandings, and proclivities to decide how best to teach the subject to which they have been assigned, content standards notwithstanding.

As such, teaching is a purposeful act. Understanding that purpose is the stuff which challenges the beliefs, attitudes, understandings, skills, competencies, and abilities of the teacher. Within the purposeful act is the realization that teaching is in fact a two sided coin: one side, *teaching*; the other side, *learning*. The intent of teaching, most commonly, is that a student will learn that which the teacher has specified, designed, organized, imparted or facilitated for the student within the context of some learning environment (Eryaman & Genc, 2010). That when an act of teaching has occurred, it often is assumed and taken for granted that learning has occurred as well. However, teaching and its counterpart, learning, are, as Dewey (1910/1997) specified, interdependent terms, both in actions and in outcomes: "Teaching and learning are correlative and corresponding processes, as much so as selling and buying. One might as well say he has sold when no one has bought, as to say he has taught when no one has learned," (p. 29). More recently, Fink (1993) notes a similar paradigm shift in attitudes about teaching and learning occurring in colleges and universities. He says, "This change is a paradigm shift in which institutions are thinking less about providing instruction (the teaching paradigm) and more about producing learning (the learning paradigm)," (p. 17). Fink not only endorses the idea that

learning is now the focal point of instructional efforts, rather he asserts the point is to "produce *significant* learning," (p. 18).

It is with this realization and at this point when teaching becomes a complicated affair (or perhaps, a more complicated affair), one that lacks clarity, at least for this author in finding his roles as an effective teacher in secondary public education (and also as a former assistant professor in a university setting). If Dewey is correct, and I believe wholeheartedly his assertion is correct, then the teacher must not only be concerned with the act of teaching, but also the act of learning—and all the outcomes that ensue therein (Bruce & Eryaman, 2015).

Facing the Dilemma

The act of teaching and the act of learning are two sides of the same coin. The teaching side has been a challenge, certainly, particularly with the stressful demands of the current high stakes testing environment which is focused more on scores than learning. Still, standing confidently in front of a classroom full of students with a well stocked supply of teaching strategies, techniques, lesson plans, and resources, where every learner is an individual with individual needs, wants, abilities, capabilities, and levels of commitment is only half the battle, only half of the coin. The major challenge in my teaching comes from the learning side of the coin. Despite my performance in the act of teaching, student learning is not as clear a picture. And this is where my journey to find clarity in teaching (as the whole coin) has embarked.

The beginning point to seek clarity in teaching, I have come to realize, is to come to grips with what one means by *learning*. If the act of learning is just as important as the act of teaching, then one must delineate the concept of learning as it relates to the teacher's own beliefs, and one must have some kind of conceptualization of what that learning looks like in action, particularly in relationship to the learning objectives or outcomes of the course of study.

Within the act of teaching lie markers or targets which the teacher strives to accomplish and which are to be displayed in the thoughts and behaviors of the students in the classroom or course. Through the demarcation of the topics, concepts, or ideas for a given topic of study or course, the teacher identifies what is to be presented and consequently what is to be learned by the students present in the course. These learning targets are the objectives or the learning outcomes of the course and identify for the student in advance what is expected to be learned or accomplished as a result of their experience and interaction with the course. For teachers, knowing exactly what one wants students to learn gives life, direction, and shape to the course. For students, knowing exactly what one must learn gives, life, direction, and shape to one's learning.

The obvious reality to framing an understanding of learning is that there must be some method to determine how students will be evaluated—how they will be judged as to the quality or depth of learning—as students journey through a course encountering the course content and for describing and summarizing their performance in the course as a whole. The typical measure of learning is found in *assessment* and its constituent, *grades*. The problem, of course, as any self-respecting teacher will acknowledge, is that one's approach to this seemingly straightforward, simple task of assessment and assigning a grade is that it is neither straightforward nor simple. Instead, the conclusion to which one arrives regarding the adequacy

of assessment and grading is dependent upon a variety of factors and decisions, among which are these: what to assess, how often to assess, what does assessment look like, what scale should be used to convey the results of assessment, and perhaps most importantly, what does the assessment (and its complicit grading scale) actually *mean* in terms of a larger concept of *learning*. While assessment may be necessary to find confirmation that learning has occurred, the difficulty for any teacher in finding clarity in teaching is to find answers to these three questions: if learning is the objective (and the result of effective teaching per Dewey's formulation), then how will the teacher know (1) if students have actually learned what was intended, (2) if the grade they have earned is truly reflective of their learning, and (3) if students are changed in any way by their interaction with the teaching that has occurred during their time participating in the course?

Searching for Clarity

Though I have posed these three questions as discrete questions, they are really variations on a single idea to which one must find an answer if one is to find clarity in teaching. Nonetheless, all three questions will be addressed individually in an effort to shed some light or find some insight on a search to find some clarity in teaching.

If Students Have Actually Learned What Was Intended

On the one hand, learning must mean that students have actually learned what was intended for the course of study as designed by the teacher. I would postulate that in every course there is content that must be learned—certain facts, concepts, ideas, principles, theories, processes, procedures, etc.—in order for students to become knowledgeable in that course of study or discipline. The guiding idea is that students enter a course of study or program as novices with little or no knowledge or competence and make their way through a progressive course of study acquiring essential knowledge, skills, competencies, resources, and understanding all the while building and adding to their accumulated knowledge and competence until they reach the end of their course of study and graduate with some level of expertise. For this sequence to work as planned teachers along the way must assess students in each course of study to make sure they have learned what was intended.

As voiced earlier, the critical question here is "What does one mean by *learned*?" Typically, if an assessment is given, and students pass the assessment with at least a nominal score, one can reason that students have learned. (It could be argued that even a non-passing score can indicate some amount of learning.) Assuming that the assessment reflects the content being assessed and is an appropriate assessment tool or strategy, then one can assert that learning has indeed occurred. But, realistically, what can be truly be asserted about student learning from an assessment, particularly a paper and pencil test typical of so many classrooms and which characteristically has limited interpretive power as to the actual *depth of understanding* held by any given student?

If our expectation of learning is reflected simplistically, then an adequate demonstration of knowledge in an oral response or on a paper and pencil test is sufficient. Students on these types of assessments are demonstrating the abilities of "remembering/knowledge" or "understanding/comprehension" or perhaps "applying/application" (Anderson & Krathwohl,

2001; Bloom, 1956) as delineated in Bloom's Taxonomy (revised term/original term). If our expectation of learning is more complex, then students might be demonstrating the abilities of "analyzing/analysis", "evaluating/synthesis", or "creating/evaluation" (Anderson & Krathwohl; Bloom) at the very least on essays, lab situations, projects, or the like. But is mimicry of content—whether demonstrated in a simple or deep formulation as indicated by Bloom—an adequate exemplification of learning? Is it sufficient to hold the perspective that students entering in a given academic program should master the content (i.e., have regurgitated said content in a conspicuous way) as an adequate testament to their learning? Surely, one may challenge, learning content is important—an accounting major should have command of accounting principles and concepts in order to demonstrate their understanding of accounting. The same could be said of most any other discipline as well. However, to move learning to the level of expertise expected of students by the real world, the *depth of understanding* in learning should be questioned as well as the amount of content accumulated along the way.

Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) presents a hierarchy of thinking skills and demonstration of knowledge which has been useful for many years in conceptualizing the presentation of content (teaching) and the demonstration of performance (learning), particularly the revised version designed by Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) which is more expansive and descriptive than the original. However, Bloom's configuration has fallen short in reinforcing a key idea regarding deep learning which Perkins (1998) calls "understanding performances." Perkins defines understanding performances as "activities that go beyond the rote and the routine," (p. 42). In a more expansive definition, Perkins notes,

> To understand a topic means no more or less than to be able to perform flexibly with the topic—to explain, justify, extrapolate, relate, and apply in ways that go beyond knowledge and routine skill. Understanding is a matter of being able to think and act flexibly with what you know. The flexible performance capacity *is* the understanding. (p. 42)

If learning is the objective of teaching, then one must ask: Do Perkin's arguments for understanding performances better describe the type of learning reflected in effective teaching demanded by Dewey than the mimicry of regurgitating content described earlier? Surely one would have to agree that learning at a deeper level of understanding ("going beyond") is superior to the mere accumulation and regurgitation of bits of knowledge ("rote and routine"). But there is within Perkin's formulation an idea that has confounded my thinking with regard to focusing on the delivery and accumulation of content as a focal point of learning: "being able to think and act." Perkins (1998) reiterates this idea when he says, "developing understanding should be thought of as attaining a repertoire of complex performances. Attaining understanding is less like *acquiring something* and more like *learning to act* flexibly," (p. 52, italics added for emphasis).

In answering this first question, learning typically and traditionally has seemed to me to be centered on "acquiring something" (i.e., content) whether at shallow or deep levels, but *acquiring* content is still the focal point of teaching efforts. But, I must ask myself, "Is amassing content all there is to learning?" Is there nothing more? What about "learning to act"? What exactly does that mean and how does that impact learning? Let me address this in a moment.

If the Grade Students Have Earned Is Truly Reflective of Their Learning

On another hand, learning must mean that students have earned grades that are truly reflective of their learning. Students enroll in courses of study to learn and prepare themselves for future vocations, careers, advanced study, or perhaps for personal satisfaction and edification. Universal in education at any level is the "grade" that students receive for their performance in the course or classroom. Grades reflected on traditional "report cards" inform students and others of the quantity and quality of the student's academic work in a given educational setting. Grades are often based on some sort of assessment devised by the teacher—to measure a student's response to assignments of one kind or another, to give credit for attendance or participation, or any number of other criteria—all of them formulated at a teacher's discretion. A grade may be based on just about anything if the teacher believes that something to be important or indicative of or relevant to a student's *learning*.

Student performance is typically evaluated and summarized in either evaluative words (such as *pass, fail, excellent, average, or poor*), a hierarchical sequence of numbers (such as, *100-0, 20-0, 4-0*), or letters of the alphabet (such as, *A, B, C, D, F*) (Juarez, 1994). Regardless of the scale, the point of grading is to label the performance of the student in the course and perhaps to signify the level of *mastery* the student has demonstrated. The problem is, however, that despite one's best efforts, grades are always an arbitrary designation. No matter how objective the criteria might be, from an exact answer or response to a detailed rubric of structured points, ambiguity always manages to creep into the configuration of the grade—how many "right" answers qualify for an "A" or a "B" or a "C"; how many quality points for a well developed thought, sentence, or paragraph; how much for "technical" quality or "creative" quality, or "insightful" quality; etc.—these are all designations and lines of demarcation determined by the teacher. Even a teacher teaching the same exact course, with the same exact syllabus as the teacher next door will have different interpretations of grade application based on personal interpretation, preference, or bias. All these decisions are arbitrary despite one's desire that they not be so. It is just the nature of the game.

Similarly, what exactly does a grade mean? First, a grade is an arbitrary designation, but secondly, a grade lacks universal application or meaning, despite the universal presence of grades in all aspects and levels of the educational world. But really, what does receiving an "A" mean on an assignment—that the student mastered the content and understands it completely, or that the student was tenacious enough to complete the assignment, or that the student has made sufficient progress from the last assignment to the present assignment to warrant a significant reward by way of the grade? Furthermore, does a grade in one class or section of a course meet the same criteria as the same grade in another class or section on a similar assignment? Also, a related aspect of grading is to provide some sort of feedback to students regarding their progress in the course of study. Receiving an "A" would presume that one has done well on a given task or assignment. Receiving a "D" presumes one has not done well. But what does that "D" mean to the student? What does it communicate to the student? Obviously, nothing of importance or significance is communicated, particularly when considering that the student needs to make improvements to his/her work or efforts on the task or assignment. Providing grades does not

help the student in any but the most superficial ways to monitor their own performance or demonstration of their own learning.

Notwithstanding these limitations of grading, we come back to another important issue: deciding the relationship between grades and learning. Two questions come to mind: "How can I be fair to all students?", and "How can I ensure that the best learners get the best grades?" One conundrum I have encountered in all teaching environments regardless of level is that not all students perform at the same level. Students come to a given class with certain attitudes, beliefs, abilities, capabilities, desires, proclivities, and demeanors, and none of them are the same, even when they happen to be identical twins as I have found on several occasions. This disparity plays out in (or more accurately, impacts) their performance. Even with a desire to avoid the "bell curve" with its symmetrical distribution of grades and instead to grade everyone against their individual effort, the challenge to grade consistently without bias is compromised. This is not to say that a teacher cannot be as objective as possible and as fair as possible, which may be a reason that objective tests are so popular—they demand less time to grade and give the appearance of impartiality. It is instead to acknowledge that the color of learning on an individual basis has many shades. As a result the teacher must be clear about what they hold up to be evidence of learning for all students alike.

Another conundrum of grading is that it is possible for some lackluster students to perform well on grading criteria—they have read all the text material, they have done all the assignments, they have passed all the tests, their grades are some shade of good—but as the teacher and resident expert on the content, one may conclude that these students have not learned all they could have learned or applied themselves to their full potential. Is this realization grounds for assigning a lower grade, thus indicating that these students have in fact learned less that their classmates who have applied themselves more diligently, enthusiastically, and/or demonstrably, and in doing so presumably learned more? Moreover, is it fair to award a grade to a student, when it is obvious to the teacher that the student has not performed to the same measure as a more stellar student?

Remember, if learning is the goal, then the quality of that learning is important. It is essential, then, to make sure that a student's grade as accurately as possible reflects that student's learning in the course. Frankly, I am just not sure that is possible given the arbitrary and ambiguous nature of grading. The bright spot in this conundrum of grading can be found in the kind of performance students engage in for a given grade. If one adopts Perkin's idea of performance for understanding and students are assessed based on their "acquiring something" through demonstrations "beyond the rote and routine", then perhaps there is some hope to finding clarity in teaching with respect to grading. More complex demonstrations of learning in practice may counteract the less revealing methods of paper and pencil tests, for example.

If Students Are Changed in Any Way By the Act of Teaching

Finally, learning must mean that students are changed in some way by their encounter with the teacher, the content, and the act of teaching. Recall from basic psychology that learning is characterized as "a relatively permanent change in an organism's behavior due to experience," (Myers, 2004, p. 303). Despite Myers articulating this point in the context of a chapter on conditioning, the point is applicable here as well. The very act of learning implies that some

change has occurred in students at least minimally on a thinking (and hopefully, behavioral) level. If one agrees with Perkins (1998) and holds that deep learning means going beyond the rote and routine to learning to act, then there must be something noticeable in the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of students engaged in the learning environment. And these actions of the learner must be more than grades, more than simple demonstrations of learning.

Learning to act would presume that students acquire and demonstrate what they have learned in a conspicuous way both in and out of the classroom (Eryaman, 2006, 2007). There are different ways of seeing learning in evidence and the level to which students demonstrate their learning can be evidence of the quality of the teaching they have experienced in a classroom or course. By way of example to illustrate this point, consider what students learn in math class. It is one thing for a student to solve a simple equation when the equation is presented clearly. The given student simply executes the steps presented by the mathematical notations to solve the equation and obtain the right answer. It is quite another thing for the same student to decode a word problem, particularly of some length and with lots of possibly conflicting information, and create an equation to solve the specifics of the problem (assuming that an equation is called for in that situation). It is still another thing for the student in question to be faced with a problem in the real world, perhaps one that clearly calls for mathematical thinking (say in a construction setting) and to create an equation (or perhaps several) to help solve the problem posed by the demands of the real world setting. It is, finally, still another thing for the student to untangle a messy real world-based problem with little definition or clarity. The student must first to decide what the problem is including its boundaries and parameters (what is relevant to the problem and what is not), or which of several interrelated problems must be solved first to uncover the relevant, key problem. Then, the student must decide if an equation is even relevant to the identified problem or at what point an equation might be relevant. Next, the student must decide which type of equation will best solve a particular step (or steps) toward the solution of the problem(s), one that might require other types of information as well and within which meaningful mathematical data or suggestions are buried. These situations of learning illustrate the concept of depth of understanding in learning advocated by Perkins, each problem situation being deeper than the previous one. But that students *can* solve the more complex of these problem situations demonstrates the change that hopefully occurs as a result of meaningful teaching. The most significant change in students after encountering effective teaching is that they understand, can discriminate, can make sense of, and can do the work of the course at greater level of expertise than when they started the class or course.

Finding Clarity

In struggling with the two previous points—acquiring content and earning a grade—I came to realize that there must be some other basis upon which to assess a student's performance, one which was more meaningful than acquiring content, more substantial than earning a good grade. I came to realize that I wanted students to demonstrate that they were *learners*, actively engaged in their own *learning*. To be an active, engaged *learner* goes beyond the act of *learning* regardless of the quality of the learning taking place (Bruce & Eryaman, 2015). I wanted students "to think and act", as Perkins so aptly put it. I wanted students to think and act in the pursuit of learning, with learning being both the means and the end.

With these thoughts and ideas in mind, I created the *Rubric for Learning Behaviors* (see Figure 1: Rubric for Learning Behaviors below) (Roberson, 2010). I began by identifying the characteristics I believed that excellent learners should possess, characteristics that I wanted to see publicly displayed by students actively engaged in the process and flow of the class. These characteristics are listed in the left hand column of the rubric and include the qualities of *attentiveness*, *engagement*, being *conversant*; of *thinking*, *analyzing*, *integrating*, and *synthesizing*; of *application*, *learning*, *risk-taking*; of having *passion*, holding a *scholarly orientation*, and possessing an active *work ethic*. These characteristics, at a minimum, if enacted by students to some degree would naturally cause them to be (1) engaged in the activities of the class, (2) engaged in the acquisition of the content being studied, and (3) engaged in the successful processing of that content. By displaying these learning characteristics they would be active and engaged learners well on their way to acquiring a depth of understanding in their learning.

To add dimension to these terms, I identified behaviors that I thought would capture the essence and meaning of each of the characteristics. I tried to allow flexibility in expression for each descriptor by using a general action verb phrase, like "displays attention throughout each class" (attentiveness). I did not want to split hairs or bog down the descriptors with a range of "displays attention" behaviors; rather, I wanted students to know that paying attention in class is an important characteristic of learners. How they display attention or the degree to which they display attention is up to the individual student and respects their individual learning style. Still the listing of descriptors—and they are by no means all inclusive—is meant to create a picture for the teacher as well as the student as to what learner behavior should look like in my classroom.

Table 1: *Rubric for Learner Behavior*

Student Behaviors	An "Excellent" Student:
Attentiveness	• displays attention throughout each class • displays mindfulness throughout each class • senses direction of class and activities and stays connected
Engagement	• generates questions and initiates discussion • displays knowledge of texts and articles assigned • demonstrates familiarity with class materials and handouts
Conversant	• responds actively to questions and discussion • demonstrates ability to add substantively to discussions • ability to converse and reason in scholarly style using language of the discipline
Thinking	• demonstrates high level of thinking skills (critical thinking) • demonstrates ability to abstract and make connections between concepts
Analyzing	• demonstrates ability to analyze course content • makes sense of course content by breaking apart and/or examining constituent parts of content
Integrating	• demonstrates ability to integrate course content where appropriate • makes relevant connections among various points of content, particularly those that are disparate in character

Synthesizing	• demonstrates ability to synthesize course content where appropriate • combines points of content to reveal new ideas or a new understanding
Application	• demonstrates ability to make application of course content to real world of work • able to connect theory to practice
Learning	• demonstrates learning in activities of class or completion of assignments • actively seeks to close the gap between teacher's expectations and the student's demonstrated performance
Risk-taking	• demonstrates willingness to take a risk in composition and completion of assignments and in participating in course activities
Passion	• demonstrates a passion for learning • demonstrates a passion for discipline of education • demonstrates a passion for excellence
Scholarly Orientation	• demonstrates a scholarly orientation toward course and course content • seeks to develop scholarly orientation to discipline and to increase personal knowledge base, including use of language of the discipline • demonstrates command of APA style of writing for compositions, citations, and references
Work Ethic	• accepts responsibility for own learning • engages actively in completion of course requirements without complaint • completes assignments that are of a high quality in timely manner • maintains standards of honesty and integrity in all facets of work for the class, particularly for work submitted as a requirement of the class • maintains the decorum of learning environment and displays respect for all members of the learning community

I had several goals in mind when designing the rubric. First, I wanted to provide a voice to ideas I had about what learners should look like, beyond organisms simply gobbling up content or striving for tangible rewards in grades. This helped to clarify my mental model of learning. For me, learning (what students accumulate) is a richer concept than at first glance and must include the *act* of learning (the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of the learner engaged in learning) itself. To not consider the act of learning is to ignore a key ingredient or component on the learning side of the coin. Second, I wanted to prompt students to think about their own learning (meta-cognition)—that learning has a certain "look" and is expressed in identifiable actions and that these characteristics impact the quality and depth of their learning. This is particularly important in a developmental sense. Younger students are not as adept in self-evaluation nor do they have the experience needed for effective self-evaluation. Providing them with criteria and descriptors is essential to their own development as accomplished learners. I also wanted students to realize that learning occurs in situations and localities other than my classroom, but that meaningful learning has similar processes and expressions regardless of locale or subject or teacher. Third, I wanted a way to augment and provide meaning to the act of assessing student performance, thus providing clarity for my teaching efforts. If I could be confident that students were truly acting and performing beyond the rote and routine in a way in which they were changed as a result of my teaching (and I could see that taking place in each

class session), then I would feel as if my teaching was truly effective, that I was capturing both sides of the coin, and as a result I could feel confident that students were indeed learning while in my class.

Displaying Clarity

Teaching and learning are interdependent terms, and the work of the teacher is to ensure that students learn. Unfortunately, even the best teachers cannot ensure exactly what students learn as all students construct their own learning. But effective teachers work to successfully create stimulating, engaging, positive learning environments in which learning can readily take place and in which students can participate actively in their own learning (Riedler & Eryaman, 2016).

In creating a stimulating, engaging, positive learning environment, it is important, I believe, that teachers have a clear understanding of what learning is, what learning looks like, and whether or not learning is occurring. It is to this end that I have sought to find clarity in my teaching, to discover for myself what is meant by *learning* and to identify the characteristics of active and engaged *learners*. I have come to the conclusion, like Perkins, that learning must be deep and to be so it must move beyond the rote and the routine processes of the classroom in which students accumulate content and earn grades to find a learning environment where students are able to think and act in ways that enlighten their own minds to the efforts of their own learning. More than I want students to be learning, I want them to be learners first and foremost. The *Rubric for Learner Behavior* is but one pathway to that end. But it is one end all teachers need to clarify for their own classrooms, for the learners who sit therein, and for the teaching that takes place, and for the learning that hopefully will occur.

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