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## Good Teaching Is a Conversation

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Last night, I finished editing a draft of a friend's article on artificial skin, which he had written for a scientific journal. The prose was exceptionally dense, almost opaque, built on a specialized vocabulary that I did not know. I could edit for mechanics and usage, but I could offer virtually nothing to criticize or clarify content. However, despite all these barriers to understanding, I could still tell that Carlos's explanation of the history and current state of knowledge in the artificial skin field was definite: this is what we know, and this is a new thing we'd like to figure out.

In the mid-1980s, when I wondered why my classroom was not an A++ Wow!! Process Writing Classroom after we had both participated in the then-radicalizing National Writing Projects Summer workshop together, a favorite former colleague helped me understand my tepid, hybrid change. She said, "Well you learn a new thing, but you don't take it on as a whole. You are already a formed 'self' with strong preferences and behaviors and you fit in to that formed self what you can of the new." So new knowledge not only has to fit in with old knowledge and make sense, just as Carlos's does, but it also has to fit in to our human condition.

Teaching is a messy profession, and unlike Carlos's scientific details, the details of our work are tightly woven into the myriad ways of humans. Yes, a cell or a small organism can be complex and sometimes unpredictable, but it is much simpler than we are, much more knowable and limited. But, even with such uncertainty, teachers do improve their practice. How did I move my thinking forward over 35 years as an increasingly experienced teacher?

Like many CES teachers, the ways that I have increased my knowledge, or learned new things, have come through a wide array of sources, some of which have been book- or research-based, and some of which have been through formal professional development. At the same time, a lot of my growth, especially once I settled in at Fenway High School, came through conversations with others, watching our head of school or another teacher taking risks and analyzing with them afterward. All of us trying to make really good, informed guesses. We are watching for good results, and then figuring out and sharing with others through talk why our efforts did or didn't work.

I learned to scaffold for real from watching fantastic planners at Boston Arts Academy and from special educators at Fenway who had an uncanny ability to take the pulse of and describe a remedy for our most challenged learners. On a professional development visit to an elite boarding school, Brewster Academy, I saw teachers use technology to offer seamlessly three different levels of tasks for every day's work. I attended co-teaching and special education workshops. And, as a teacher educator, I watched hundreds of hours of experienced and novice teachers at work, and I can document that even the most beloved and fantastic teachers usually only capture the minds of most of their kids, not all. I learned to love the complications of student-centered literacy instruction from my Fenway colleagues. I learned to notice and examine racial dynamics in my classroom from my thoughtful and generous colleagues of color and from all of my co-teachers and interns. All of these conversations moved my thinking forward as an educator.

Today, I set out to uncover whether other educators have used the precise phrase "Good Teaching is a Conversation," one of my many mottoes and one that I wanted to explore for this article. As I "Googled" to get a quick survey of on-line articles and, of course, wandered through lots of texts about teacher talk, I was struck over and over by the ways in which my field is indefinite, how much dissent we tolerate even in the face of deep, clear, and well executed research, how inconsistently we use research in our classrooms, how little teachers know about the courageous or the hideous in our own field's history, and how unanchored so much great thinking and spectacular writing is to the work of practicing teachers and administrators. Why is that?

Several pieces on my Google list were tied tightly to the theme “Good Teaching Is a Conversation,” so I read them all the way through. One was the provocative and eloquent “Good Talk about Good Teaching” by Parker J. Palmer from a 1993 issue of *Change* magazine. When I finished reading, I mumbled begrudgingly, as I so often do lately after my 35 years of teaching, “Hey that was my idea!” And then, right after, I thought, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” My Fenway friends and fellow Boston Public Schools practitioners have been reaching for effective and challenging teacher talk for decades in much the same way that Palmer was reaching in higher education, but I’d never read this article. I was puzzled, and asked myself more forcefully: how does knowledge grow in our field? How do we uncover and keep track of new or parallel thought? How do we improve our field when we can’t seem to accumulate knowledge coherently and firmly, neatly use in schools what researchers figure out, and then move on to pose a new question like Carlos does in his artificial skin paper?

One possible reason for our messy, indefinite field is captured beautifully in Palmer’s article. He writes, “An obsession with technique often leads us to ignore the human dynamics of the classroom. But when we reflect on teaching in a more open-ended way, we soon see that our response to any given moment depends primarily on what is happening inside of us – and how we diagnose what is happening inside our students – and only secondarily on the methods at our command. Good teaching depends less on technique than it does on the human condition of the teacher, and only by knowing the truth of our own condition can we hope to know the true condition of our students.” We are not as easily defined, predictable, or uniform as the cells and chemicals that Carlos works with and, along with that inherent complexity, we are highly changeable from context to context and from season to season.

As a lifelong urban educator, I have spent my whole career trying to discover the most powerful and rapid routes to complex skill and content learning for my often poor and almost always non-white students. When we reach for lofty goals in underserved and historically undereducated communities, we invoke the “Big Picture” to put our work and our students’ lives and work in perspective and to set it in a deserved grand context. We want our kids to feel entitled to the benefits that our society offers, benefits that more privileged students take for granted but that our kids must learn to expect and seek.

But the Big Picture for us humans is not only the big world out there that we can see and know, and in which we want our kids to flourish. For us, the Big Picture is also on the expansive inside, which we cannot experience concretely. I can’t think of another profession, except maybe medicine, that so deeply influences and is influenced by how happily, actively, and productively we experience our external and internal realities. Yes, I want my fellow teachers and my students to do well in the world, I want them to use their educations, to be ambitious, and to take advantage of every opportunity the culture has to offer. But I also want them to have connected, rich, and happy internal lives. No matter how pragmatic and focused we are on measurable intellectual goals and on external achievements, if we are connected to our kids at all, we are also deeply concerned with them as full people. We really can’t help it.

Fifteen years ago I taught Jovani, an African American young man who had a music dream, a brilliant mind, and an education that might have stunted both. He had a certain vigor and stubbornness that served him well, and he went on to a good job in medical support and a long-term side business as a music producer. I have seen him several times over the last fifteen years, but the first meeting is most memorable. I saw him on a Green Line trolley car in Boston about seven years ago, and we connected intensely for the ten minutes we were teetering on the train together. We had our hug and deep stare, a Fenway love-fest moment, and then we talked catch-up talk. He told me what he was doing, and I told him my recent stories. Then, as I was leaving, he said with intense emotion, holding my hand, “I want you to know that you changed my life when you told me what I didn’t want to hear, that my writing didn’t match my intellect and that I needed a lot of growth in that area.” I remembered the five-year old conversation, me leaning across the top of a beige file cabinet, him with one foot out the classroom door, already anxious to move on, me keeping him in with my hushed but critical plea.

When I meet a Fenway alumna like Jovani, I want to know how he has fit in the world, the outside Big Picture: has he made it in education, in work, in the economy, in the housing market, in the health care system? But I also look and listen carefully to discover how he has done in the inside Big Picture. How at ease is he in his own skin? How confidently does he make his way in the world? Did he pursue his own dreams? Does he do for others? Is he a happy, caring father? Does someone love him? Is he content? Is he

emotionally stable? Is he intellectually lively? Does he read? Does he watch the news? Does he argue moral and political issues with friends? Is his internal life alive, bumpy but beautiful?

The talk across the file cabinet was essential talk. As Jovani's teacher I needed to share something about his intellectual wellbeing that was deep, that made him question his image of himself in such a way that he would grow and build a more complete, flexible life for himself.

Good teaching is a conversation; it is always at least a duet. With our students, our conversation works or doesn't work depending on the myriad and mysterious ways that we build trust across age, gender, ethnicity and personality. With our colleagues, knowledge that influences practice grows as we share it and "work it" with each other. Good talk is difficult but it makes our work more powerful, satisfying, fun, and beautiful.

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Parker J. Palmer's "Good Talk about Good Teaching: Improving Teaching through Conversation and Community" appeared in the November/December 1993 issue of *Change*, pp. 8-13 and is available online at [www.couragerenewal.org/?q=resources/writings/good-talk](http://www.couragerenewal.org/?q=resources/writings/good-talk)

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Fenway High School was founded as a program for underperforming students at English High School in the Fens neighborhood of Boston. Fenway joined the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1989 and moved to its current location, which it shares with Boston Arts Academy, in 1998. Fenway is a Boston Pilot School and a CES Small Schools Project Mentor school. Serving 295 students, Fenway's focus is on setting high standards for all of its students. Ninety percent of Fenway graduates matriculate to college. Eileen Shakespear says, "Fenway is a peaceful but vibrant place where our students constantly tell us and others with pride, 'You have to do mad work here' I like that."

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For more on Fenway High School, see "Our New Experience: Teaching Students with Language Learning Based Disabilities in an Inclusive Community," by Rawchayl Sahadeo, featured in *Horace* Volume 21, Issue 2 and available online at [http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/359](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/359)

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