

Learning to Teach: Developing Practical Wisdom with Reflective Teacher Narratives

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Current educational discourse is flooded with concern about how to improve teacher performance.¹ Much of the conversation centers on how teachers can improve their skills for managing a classroom.² In Doug Lemov's widely distributed *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques to Put Students on the Road to College*, classroom instruction is broken down into a series of easily mastered "techniques."³ The teacher is depicted as a performer, rehearsing predetermined actions to master a part.⁴ Challenging rule-driven approaches to behavior, Walter Feinberg argues that moral and religious leaders should be "more circumspect about micromanaging moral behavior with a set of rules that curtail the creative expression of others."⁵ Teacher educators, like religious leaders, share the complex task of guiding people through extremely complex and morally significant decisions.⁶ In this essay, I maintain that teacher educators, too, should not micromanage behavior. While skills have an important place in teaching, they are only part of the work. After warning against micromanagement, Feinberg leaves the details of how to support moral behavior as "an issue for another time."⁷ As I will address later in this essay, previous research has eloquently articulated that successful teaching requires practical wisdom. Building on this literature, my focus will be on how practical wisdom can be supported in teachers.

To introduce some challenges a teacher may face, I will begin this essay with a narrative from my first year of teaching. I will argue that, in that first year, I lacked practical wisdom above all. After defining practical wisdom, I will devote the remainder of the essay to one of the many ways I cultivated it: the reading of a genre of texts that I have labeled "Reflective Teacher Narratives" (RTNs). I will define this genre, illustrate it by way of textual analysis of teacher-writer Vivian Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, and then explain how her text helped me develop practical wisdom. By beginning and ending with my classroom narrative, I write my own RTN as a means of illustrating and analyzing the genre.

A TEACHER IN NEED OF SUPPORT

I began teaching first and second grade in a progressive public school in a large urban city. My first task was to calm the chaos and, within a few months, I was successful at this. Those who have taught primary school will recognize that this happened relatively quickly. Though new to being a head teacher, I benefited from a dynamic teacher education program with a robust student-teaching experience. I also began my career having taught as a substitute teacher. Additionally, my principal and fellow teachers were very proactive about helping me.

As the chaos dissipated, deeper concerns emerged. One concern centered on Antonia.⁸ Though my prior experiences and education had prepared me for a lot, they had not prepared me for her. A complex mix of particulars made it hard for Antonia in my classroom. A recent immigrant, Antonia knew little English and struggled

to communicate with classmates and me. She desperately wanted to enter a clique of children whose friendships had begun the year before. New to the culture of the school and that of the country, Antonia copied behaviors without knowing what the other children's motivations were. This meant she seemed slightly out of sync much of the time. I was often frustrated. Antonia and I were not communicating very well, and both of us were suffering because of it.

Ultimately, as I will explain below, Antonia and I learned to work well together. There was no technique or trick that improved our relationship. Instead, only through getting to know Antonia better, learning new strategies to support her and her classmates, and changing my perception of the situation was I successful. These abilities, I will argue, amounted to an emerging practical wisdom.

PRACTICAL WISDOM

Many have argued that the complexity of teaching requires that a practitioner be able to respond thoughtfully to complex circumstances.⁹ This is commonly, though not exclusively, referred to as practical wisdom. Practical wisdom requires one to inquire into particulars, draw on skills and prior knowledge that allows one to execute an action desired, and be guided by a philosophical frame.¹⁰ In teaching, the particulars include the environment, the people in it, and the individual strengths and actions at the disposal of the practitioner. Teaching methods and understanding of content supports the teachers' actions. The philosophical frame is the teacher's values that have been examined and interrogated over time.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the term *phronesis* to refer to the kind of knowing needed to make decisions around action.¹¹ For Aristotle, *phronesis* is a type of knowledge about "human concerns" (*NE*, 1141b10) that brings together both "universals" and "particulars" to enable the person to act well (*NE*, 1141b22–24). A vast and varied inquiry on *phronesis* has inspired scholars from a range of disciplines.¹² Even in the field of education, the concept of *phronesis* is broadly invoked.¹³ Though I draw from Aristotle's conception of *phronesis*, I use the loose translation, "practical wisdom." Noting that Aristotle's terms "do not translate into our language and world without bringing certain distortions with them,"¹⁴ Richard Smith takes advantage of translation to create some distance from Aristotle's concepts. Instead of fixating on exactly what Aristotle meant, in a pragmatic turn, Smith chooses to "borrow from Aristotle where he is insightful."¹⁵ In Smith's words, "by liberating a modern sense of practical judgment from too close a marriage to *phronesis* and its problems I argue that we stand to gain much."¹⁶ For the purposes of this essay, one of the biggest differences between Aristotle's *phronesis* and the definition I use for practical wisdom is the relationship between craft and *phronesis*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that a craft "is a state involving true reason concerned with production" (*NE*, 1140a21–22). *Phronesis*, in contrast, relates to ethics, as it regards actions that "promote living well in general" (*NE*, 1140a29). Where some contemporary authors use practical wisdom to emphasize ethical conduct,¹⁷ others write more exclusively about professional know-how as a craft.¹⁸ That Aristotle distinguishes craft and professional knowledge from *phronesis* is no insignificant matter, but a thorough discussion of his distinction is beyond the scope of this es-

say. Of relevance is the fact that I will not distinguish between craft and *phronesis* in regard to teaching. Instead, I follow in the footsteps of numerous educators in maintaining that the decisions that guide minute details of a teacher's professional action directly relate to moral decision-making.¹⁹ What may seem like small acts lead up to an ethical approach to the world.²⁰

DEVELOPING PRACTICAL WISDOM

The development of practical wisdom in teachers can be supported in many ways. Without minimizing the importance of other methods, this essay will focus solely on the reading of RTNs. I have chosen to focus on reading these texts because they are accessible regardless of a teacher's location or school community. RTNs also tend to be relatively short and written in nonacademic language. RTNs are first-person narratives written by classroom teachers. Because there are many valuable first-person accounts of teaching that are not RTNs,²¹ this essay focuses in depth on what distinguishes RTNs from other first-person teacher accounts.

Bypassing debates about what constitutes a narrative,²² I draw on Hayden White's definition that a narrative has closure, links events causally, and suggests a certain ethical take on the world.²³ Further refining this definition, J. Hillis Miller argues that the most important component of narrative is plot.²⁴

The distinguishing features of RTNs also overlap with those of practical wisdom. RTNs detail both setting and the teachers and children who populate that space. A plot centers on the teacher's problem-solving. The teacher protagonists also have a philosophical frame that guides actions. Though philosophers such as John Dewey are often invoked, often the teacher offers a worldview without attributing it to other thinkers.

The earliest example of a RTN is Leo Tolstoy's writings on *Yasnaya Polyana*. An increasingly popular form in the 1960s and 1970s, some of the most frequently referenced RTNs are Sylvia Ashton Warner's *Teacher*, George Dennison's *The Lives of Children*, and Herb Kohl's *36 Children*.²⁵ The genre depicts urban, suburban, and rural public school classrooms as well as private schools. Though my research has focused on K–8 teachers, texts span from the preschool classroom to high school. I have written about upwards of twenty-five nonfiction books and articles that fall into the category, and I keep finding more. In addition to nonfiction books, there are also documentaries and fictional texts that closely resemble RTNs.

In this essay, I will showcase how RTNs address the particular, invite problem-solving, and offer a philosophical frame. Because an essential feature of RTNs is the emphasis on the particular classroom, I have chosen to illustrate these features with examples from just one text: Paley's, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*.²⁶ I have chosen Paley because her work is already part of contemporary conversations in philosophy and education.²⁷

FEATURES OF RTNS

THE PARTICULAR

You Can't Say You Can't Play depicts a year in Paley's kindergarten classroom in a small, mostly Caucasian, progressive private school in Chicago. Of the year in

question, Paley comments, “the classroom seems all tumult and tears” (*YCS*, 4) with exclusion running rampant. In this way, Paley sets the stage of the particular social environment that led her to adapt the controversial rule on which the book pivots, “you can’t say you can’t play.”

In addition to describing the setting, Paley directs the reader’s attention to specific people. As with most RTNs, the most fleshed-out person described is the teacher, Paley. We read her ongoing reactions and musings. We see Paley in the classroom and outside of it. In one episode, following a run, Paley comments, “my spirit continues to soar as I shower, breakfast and, once again, mount a platform [for a lecture to classroom teachers]” (*YCS*, 4). Far from Lemov’s technician-actor,²⁸ Paley’s identity cannot be separated into teacher and nonteacher. Ideas flow as she runs, showers, and teaches.

Paley emerges as no perfect performer but as a person with doubts and limitations. Before enacting “you can’t say you can’t play,” Paley vacillates. Initially, she wondered whether it was “fair” to force children to include everyone since friendship involves preference. She also concedes that sometimes inclusion can make an activity less fun for the original participants. Paley ultimately resolves this anxiety, determining that the price of exclusion outweighs that of letting everyone in.

Yet, she still hesitates. Reflecting on her irresolution, Paley wonders, “Am I still worried that it is not fair? More likely, I worry that it won’t work; I’ll invite the children to celebrate my new rule and find that no one comes to the party” (*YCS*, 56–57). Like the children in her class, Paley fears exclusion. The image of a party with no attendees is relatable and full of poignancy. Paley is not an actor playing an unpopular character but a hopeful, vulnerable, person.

Paley also zooms in on a few of her students. Through highlighting their words and actions, she shares the children’s ideas and experiences. As the book progresses, the children grapple with what it means to include and be excluded. As I address in the next section of this essay, we watch the children’s thinking grow into a more inclusive perspective.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Paley opens the book with a query: “must it be so” that children be allowed from the very beginning of school to exclude others (*YCS*, 3)? Not one to simply ponder, Paley determines to investigate this question with her students: “Posting a sign that reads YOU CAN’T SAY YOU CAN’T PLAY, I announce the new social order and, from the start, it is greeted with disbelief” (*YCS*, 3). The remainder of the book captures both Paley and her students as they take on this referendum.

Much like Socrates searching for truth with his interlocutors, Paley discusses exclusion with current and former students, other teachers and parents. Observing her students, Paley studies the effect of her new rule. Paley also excavates her past for experiences of exclusion and looks to written texts. An important mode of exploration for Paley is storytelling. As she writes in *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, “like the children, whenever I enter new territory I have the urge to make up my own stories.”²⁹ By telling an ongoing fictional story told to her class, Paley mirrors social tensions that emerge in the classroom.

The text closes with a third grader expressing that the school has become, albeit only slightly, more inclusive. As Paley acknowledges, inclusion requires a radical “new social order” (YCS, 3) which takes time to develop. As in a *Bildungsroman*, over the course of the year, Paley and her students work through the challenge and finish the year having grown.

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAME

Paley’s value of the individual guides her work. Though, as noted, Paley consults many sources, she primarily seeks ideas from her immediate community. Above all, she listens to children and, in this listening, places her trust in them. Showing her deep trust in children, Paley bases her actions largely on their insights.

Paley’s deep aversion to exclusion manifests itself from the first paragraph when she comments that hearing “you can’t play,” “resound[s] like a slap” (YCS, 3). Continuing to liken exclusion to physical violence, Paley remarks that while children are not allowed to hit, they are generally allowed to exclude. For Paley, exclusion is the “more damaging phenomenon” (YCS, 3) Paley takes seriously the perspective of every child including those who feel excluded and those who frequently exclude.

Though Paley’s philosophical frame influences the choices that she makes in the classroom, the frame is not rigid. Instead, Paley’s actions, observation, and conversations influence her philosophy. Though, as noted, Paley initially worried that forbidding exclusion was unfair, as the year develops, Paley ultimately determines that the damages are such that exclusion should never be acceptable.

DEVELOPING PRACTICAL WISDOM WITH PALEY

I first heard “you can’t say you can’t play” when I taught as a substitute for a class I would teach the following year. In the midst of a dispute Monty uttered this phrase to Raul and John. A year later, I discovered Paley’s text among the teacher resources in my classroom. Despite all my demands as a first year teacher, I finished *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* in a few days and then read Paley’s entire opus that year.

Paley’s context was very different from mine. She taught younger, mostly affluent, white, English speaking children in a very different region of the country. She was an experienced teacher nearing retirement. Paley had more control over her curriculum than I did. Paley’s texts gave me little direct instruction. Instead, by reading about her methods of teaching and inquiry, over time, I learned how to solve problems in increasingly complex ways.

Theorists have argued that narratives support practical wisdom in many ways.³⁰ Focusing on just three, I argue that narratives help the reader:

- see particular actions in detail,³¹
- witness someone problem-solving,³²
- investigate philosophy and action together.³³

THE CHANCE TO SEE AN ACTION IN DETAIL: ADAPTING NEW METHODS

Narratives typically deal in particulars.³⁴ This helps the reader to look at the author’s subject very closely. In zooming in on the daily functioning of her classroom, Paley highlights her teaching methods. As with Paley, I frequently told stories

to my students to introduce dilemmas and then asked them to help me resolve the story. Where Paley developed a fictional world, I drew inspiration from childhood adventures. After reading Paley, I employed stories more purposely and more confidently. I also learned methods for leading discussion launched from the stories. Paley encouraged me to give ample space for conversations even when I felt pressured to focus on more traditionally academic lessons. Paley's use of story also legitimated a teaching method that was different from that of my colleagues.

PRACTICING PROBLEM-SOLVING

Narrative enables the reader to see someone else think through problems.³⁵ If the reader faces similar challenges as the character, she can get ideas from how the character resolves the issue. An experiment on paper or with materials is far easier to undo than one done on the natural world.³⁶ Like Paley, I struggled my first year with rampant exclusion. As a new teacher, I didn't have to attempt everything she did. Instead, I could try out the elements that seemed to work the best for her and that would, in turn, fit in my classroom.

Even when a character's situation is drastically different from the reader's, reading can be useful. Aristotle argues that the more we act in a certain way, the more we become that way (*NE*). Similarly, Dewey writes, "whenever anything is undergone in consequence of a doing, the self is modified."³⁷ With texts, a reader has the opportunity to take on a challenge, consider the particulars, apply a frame, and imagine the outcome. In doing so, the reader improves his problem-solving abilities.

Reading *You Can't Say You Can't Play* launched an intellectual journey. As I read, I wondered how Paley would resolve her struggles. Her method of seeking out opinions inspired me, and I emulated Paley's explorations by conducting my own inquiry. I polled friends and engaged in daily conversations with my students about fairness and inclusion.

INVESTIGATING PHILOSOPHY AND ACTION TOGETHER

Martha Nussbaum contends that many narratives convey philosophical concepts.³⁸ Similarly, White includes an ethical framework in his definition of a narrative.³⁹ Through the character's struggle and the arc of the plot, a philosophy is engaged.⁴⁰ I was both intimidated and intrigued by Paley's conclusion that, if the children are to abide by the rule, so must she. To this end, Paley decided she would no longer give "time-outs," removing students from an activity if they were having trouble participating.

The punitive nature of time-out conflicted with my belief that children need support learning how to interact in a community. Separating people (even briefly) went against my inclusive philosophy. Yet, initially as a new teacher, I relied on time-outs to maintain physical safety in my classroom. Additionally, while I don't like separating children, I have found that most people require breaks. Though, ideally, an individual initiates the break, sometimes children (and adults, too) have trouble determining that they need one. Based on this ethos, I began encouraging children to request a break. After only a few discussions, I found they handled this very conscientiously. Other times, I would suggest a break based on a child's body language and actions.

Though this policy was an improvement, Paley's ban of time-out haunted me. I was troubled that my breaks still involved separation. In my third year of teaching, a yoga instructor introduced a "peace mat" for children to relax during yoga. Inspired by this and the donation of a very beautiful rug to the classroom, my students and I implemented the "peace rug." In contrast to the "break chair," the peace rug had room for two. It was cozy and pretty and became a desirable place to go. Eventually, I allowed the child to come up with an appropriate break. Some popular options were a walk down the hall with a calm friend, playing a short game, and reading a book. "Time-out" had evolved into a true break. After many years of development as a teacher, my actions came into alignment with my philosophy around separation.

A COMMUNITY FOR ANTONIA

Over the course of my first year, the daily interactions in my classroom increasingly began to reflect my philosophy that school should be an inclusive, safe, community. Where some of this can be credited to management techniques that made our days less chaotic, the shift was largely far more complex and subtle. Socrates refers to education as no less than a turning of the soul.⁴¹ Changing the classroom culture only happened when I began change how I viewed my students. One of the primary shifts was moving from thinking about children's actions in terms of management to a focus on creating a space that supported individuals. For this, I am deeply indebted to Paley.

To return to Antonia, I stopped viewing her actions as attempts to disrupt what I was doing but instead saw a child desperately trying to fit in. According to Dewey, we imitate to enter a community.⁴² Having spent much of her childhood in refugee camps, Antonia was new to school. The progressive school environment where I taught was extremely foreign. As I got to know Antonia better, I discovered that initially she saw no difference between recess and more open-ended classroom activities. It wasn't that she refused to draw a line as I had initially assumed from the management perspective, but that she didn't understand the lines that her classmates and I were drawing. When I saw Antonia's behavior as disruptive, we were both frustrated. When I came to see Antonia as a child trying to be included, I could initiate conversation with her in such a way that we were able to work together.

RTNs SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Returning to Feinberg's injunction to use stories instead of micromanaging behavior, RTNs provide relatively open-ended support to teachers. Robert Coles depicts many ways that narratives are influential while maintaining that he cannot predict direct correlations.⁴³ Coles explains that early in his career he made assumptions about the narratives that students would connect with. Eventually, Coles learned that the essential ingredients that connect people to books couldn't be predetermined in obvious ways.⁴⁴

I share articles, movies, my own stories, and book-length texts that follow the format of RTNs with my college students. I also encourage my students to share their own teaching experiences in a manner that imitates the format. Through RTNs, students are exposed to teaching practices, the reasoning of a practitioner, and connections between philosophy and methods. Essentially, through RTNs, new teachers meet more

experienced teachers with practical wisdom. Consistently, students enthusiastically report that RTNs help them to see situations differently and also gave them new ideas to try. In this way, both their philosophies and their practices are influenced.

Practical wisdom demands that the individual make his own decisions. To do so, the practitioner must be able to investigate the particular context, effectively solve problems, and act within her philosophical framework. Practical wisdom takes time, support, and practice, to develop. RTNs support the development of practical wisdom by immersing the reader in the classroom of a successful teacher. Without a developing practical wisdom, I could not have helped Antonia. To do justice to teachers and their students, practical wisdom with teachers must be the goal.

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3. Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

4. Green, "Building a Better Teacher."

5. Walter Feinberg, "For Goodness Sake: How Religious Stories Work to Make Us Good and the Goodness That They Make." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23, no. 1 (2004): 19.

6. John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (1909; repr., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).

7. Ibid.

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14. Smith, "Paths of Judgment," 327.

15. Ibid.

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