Understanding Students From Caring—Enlightenment From Pedagogical Phenomenology

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Under the phenomenological point of view, this essay analyzes one piece of the author's past teaching journal with the research method of narrative inquiry. The narrative analysis is developed by three questions: (1) In what way should a teacher look at his students? (2) How should a teacher care his students properly? and (3) What qualities does a good teacher need to possess? The author reflected on the journal while analyzing it and got to the conclusion that teachers should not look at students with pre-assumptions, but know them personally and give them proper caring to understand them and help them if needed.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, teacher caring, phenomenology, pedagogical philosophy

Introduction

The year 2005 is my third year of being an English teacher in a college, during which I gradually formed the habit of writing teacher's log. Story is the main style of my log, with varied contents according to everyday happening. Sometimes it was the description of a student's abnormal behavior, sometimes simple record of the day's class. With time passed by, these logs became more and more meaningful to my teaching. They helped in recording the process of my students' learning and growing, of my professional development as a novice teacher, and promoting my reflection on every aspect of my teaching to improve it continuously.

The topic of caring instruction occurred occasionally in the stories when I read them, which promoted my thinking—what is the relationship between teacher and students? In what way should a teacher look at his students? Caring is an important part in education. How should a teacher care his students properly to let them handle their own affairs independently while getting support and help when needed?

I will reexamine one of the stories I experienced with narrative inquiry method under the view of pedagogical phenomenology, in the hope that my reflection could promote further thinking and step out to have a trial in handling teacher-student relationship better.

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Related Theories

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is also called “story research”. Upon “qualitative research” as its methodology basis, narrative inquiry is the specific use of qualitative research. Narrative inquiry used in educational field as teacher’s research method was advocated by several Canadian curriculum researchers in 1980. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) thought that educational narration aimed at understanding and making sense of teacher experience. It was the best way for teachers to think of past experiences. This research method describes teacher’s real teaching life by means of teacher’s self story construction to show teacher’s teaching action in specific circumstance and students’ situation under that. On this basis, teachers make reflections and meaning analysis to form “personal practical knowledge” on teaching experience and get understanding and explanation on teaching activities. Nowadays, narrative inquiry has caused concern in Chinese educational field and has gradually been used in teacher’s teaching experiential research.

Pedagogical Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a science of humanity which studies life world—a world to be experienced without yet being reflected on, not the one to be defined, classified, or thought of. It must come out of life and express life in reflective way. Pedagogical phenomenology wants us to get rid of theories and pre-assumed concepts, put away our stereotypes and existing opinions, bracket or hang them according to Husserl, pay attention to students’ life world and life experience, and do beneficial reflection on them to form the sensitivity and reflectivity on specific educational situation. Pedagogical phenomenology looks life experience as the starting point of education, and puts more emphasis on people themselves, or the personality and the uniqueness of every student. Pedagogical phenomenology itself has a strong humanistic spirit (Van Manen, 1997).

Narrative Research and Reflection on a Teacher’s Log

In What Way Should a Teacher Look at His Students?

“Another boiled child” I signed. On the summer term of year 2005, a student in my class had not come to school until the third day of new term. Every new term when freshmen come, the school witnesses such scenery: cars sending for children cover the road outside the college; “princesses” and “princes”, the freshmen, are coming into the school, surrounded by parents and grandparents. With wonders and unwillingness, they usually murmur “It’s not as good as I thought. I want to go back home”. There are always students who have not come until new term has already started.

Such experiences form some pre-assumptions in my mind toward this student before I met her, which gave me “a boiled child” image and prevented my anxiousness to know the student better and the caring I should have toward this unusual student. Vanmene thought that all factors in educational concept should not be seen as “given” or “established”; meaning of education must be found in real life, for if we put away the pre-assumed and various “given” meaning, the only thing left is educational living experience. So, we need to seek for raw materials of living experience in every aspect of life world, reflect on those experiences, and examine the meaning of them. Only in this way, we can gain the basic characteristics of education (Van Manen, 1997). “Boiled child” was my pre-assumed opinion toward nowadays college student at that time, which segregated me with my students in mind before I got close to their real life. Education is the process of communication,

understanding, resonating, and inspiring between people. Teachers have to enter into students' life world to know them. Meaning of education can only be realized by equal communication between teacher and students. Later experiences helped me found that many pre-assumed opinions were the root of my misunderstanding toward students.

I usually disdain such kind of "boiled" students. "They haven't the slightest awareness of organization and discipline". I asked for the telephone number of this student from students' office, for I had to know the situation of each freshman as the teacher of the class. But I hesitated on whether to phone her directly or send her a message, whether to be strict and harsh or to be kind and caring, which would all influence the relationship between us in the future one year. On the second thought, I decided to put down my dissatisfaction at that moment and sent her a message to know her. "GU Xin, I'm your college teacher LIU Ying, new term has started for three days, what stopped your coming?". Soon after, she replied "Miss LIU, I'm really sorry. My mom was ill and I have to take care of her. I want to ask for leave for several days". Because of age, she could not make good arrangements between study and house work in family, but she handled the emergency quite properly.

Pre-assumed opinions influenced my attitude toward this student, but a simple phone call had nearly eliminated some of my preconceived ideas. When emergency happens, teachers do need communication with students, rather than some non-sense guesses and supposes, which distant teachers from students and also from facts. From the aspect of phenomenology, phenomenology as philosophy, according to the ancient definition of Aristotle, is the inquiry to the existence of all that exist (Husserl, 2002). Inquiries into the phenomena and essence of that exit to understand them. Sometimes, when we understand the reason of the appearance of some problems, they would no longer be problems but reasonable existence.

Knowing her reason for not coming to school, I felt released. I gave her the phone number of students' office, told her to ask for leave as soon as possible, and contact me if she was in need. Several days later on, the English listening class, I met this student. Compared with other students of the same age, she seems more mature. She wore in plain dresses and studied hard, which gave me the impression of capability and dependability. Two weeks later, she was elected to be the member of class committee. I thought it was her experience of taking care of her mother at home for long time that made her living a simple life and trustful to others. The day I held a meeting for class committee, she was absent again, reason for which is her mother's illness. I started feeling curious about her: What kind of family does she have? Why her mother was always in bad health? As a college student far away from home, why does she have to go back home taking care of her mother every time? So, from then on, each time she came back from home, I would ask her whether her mother was better or not. She always answered me in comforting tone, "She is much better now. Thank you!". Family condition formed her maturity and consideration that is different with children of the same age.

I felt curious about her family and had lots of suppositions, but I did not ask her for answers directly. After all, these questions concerned student's family privacy, which should not be asked about by teachers if student refused to talk about. Paulo Freire thought the relationship between teacher and students should be equally dialogical relation. Real education is neither "A" for "B", nor "A" about "B", but "A" with "B", going on with world as their medium (Freire, 1970). If teacher's caring toward students stays on the surface of daily greetings, teacher-students relationship can never reach mutual trust and improvement.

How Should a Teacher Care His Students Properly?

I felt released after knowing her mother's recovery, but found flash of melancholy on her face which should not appear at that age. Time flies. On an ordinary day in the second term, she called me, choked with sobs, "Miss LIU, I want to ask for leave, my mother passed away". I shouted out of control and then was frozen, without knowing how to answer her. After one second, may be two, I realized my rudeness and came back to consciousness at once. I stammered,

attempting to comfort her, but was worried about making her feel even worse. “Hurry home! Don’t be too sad! How will you go?”. “My father’s comrade in arms is going to send me back. Ticket for airplane has been booked”. She seemed calmer than me in face of the strike. Maybe she had already prepared for that.

Up to that time, I knew how serious her mother’s illness had been, and her father could not come back home in army. One week before that, she told me that her mother had become worse and she had to ask for leave. Only several days later after her returning to school from home, her mother had gone. I thought about all these things, with her sad face flashing in my mind. How could her bear that? Few days later, she came back, a black word “filial” embroidered on her sleeve. I was not daring to ask her about her mother, even not have the courage to look at her face. Every time in the class when meeting her, I could not keep myself from thinking about the word “mother” and bursting out with tears. The later time of the term in her class, I avoided mentioning the word “mother” and all topics concerned. I was afraid the word would remind her of the sadness, while at the same time afraid that she found my intensive avidness and felt worse. I created relaxing circumstance in the class, wanting to involve her to forget her sorrow temporarily, but I was afraid that other students’ happiness made her feel more lonely. I was careful in doing everything, but found the calmness on her face, which seemed trying to comfort others around. I thought she did not want to influence others by her own sorrow. I felt sorry every time watching her face.

Knowing the reason behind, I reflected on my attitude toward student and examined my response to the whole thing as a teacher. Up to now, I hate my disability of not giving her proper caring and comfort as her teacher. Original meaning of the word “care” is “sorrow”. Caring others is to help solving their troubles and sharing their sorrows or worries (Van Manen, 1997). Caring is not only emotional feelings to a teacher, it is also an ability, which requires teachers to be open toward students’ feelings and try to understand them with proper techniques, to know students’ troubles and help them growing up independently. As teachers, we must realize how to care children properly. When they are in trouble, we could give enough support as an adult and share their worries and anxiousness without letting them too dependent on us. Promote their maturity and let them learn how to understanding the world and themselves and how to take responsibilities.

Conclusion

My experience taught me that a good teacher should have the following basic qualities: the feeling of mission to his profession, love and care toward children, great responsibility, consciousness of morality and justice, open mind to self-criticism, mature of wisdom, resourcefulness and sensitivity to children subjectivity, intelligence of interpretation, pedagogical understanding to children’s need, decisiveness in emergency, enthusiasm of inquiry, steady view of morality, perception of the world, and positive attitude in crisis.

At last, I want to quote what Max van Manen said in his book *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* to conclude,

Good teaching (and parenting) is difficult since it is improvisational, normative, and pedagogical: Improvisational since good teaching requires instant action; normative in the sense that pedagogy always requires distinguishing between what is appropriate and less appropriate in one’s action with children; pedagogical in that all action presumes the virtue of a pedagogical tactfulness. Using reflective, anecdotal discourse, the tact of teaching explicates the meaning of pedagogical moments, the conditions of pedagogy, the relation between pedagogy and politics, the nature of pedagogical experience, and the practical forms of pedagogical action.¹

¹ See <http://www.maxvanmanen.com/the-tact-of-teaching-the-meaning-of-pedagogical-thoughtfulness/>.

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