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When Being Wrong Leads to More Empathy and Better Teaching

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Abstract: *The author reflects on his mistakes and growth as a teacher over the past 30 years and how his experiences in focusing on the soft skills of human engagement have led to deeper and more meaningful relationships with colleagues, students, and strangers.*

Introduction

“However disorienting, difficult, or humbling our mistakes might be, it is ultimately wrongness, not rightness, that can teach us who we are.”

Kathryn Schulz, author of *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*

The fall of 1987 was a pivotal year in my life when I entered the ESL classroom as a teacher for the first time. Now, over three decades later, I look back on my evolution as a teacher and human being, and I realize that my focus on students and the profession has shifted in ways that I had never imagined. More specifically, although much of what teachers do and learn in their field focuses on the objective and measurable skills of language proficiency, the more intangible soft skills of empathetic listening, collaboration, compassion, mutual respect, and human connection seem to take a backseat to other seemingly more-pressing language needs. This is certainly unfortunate. For me personally, the last five years have been the most fruitful in helping me better connect with my students and colleagues by embracing the need for soft-skills development, something generally not emphasized in teacher training to any measurable degree. That said, a growing body of research explains how transformative such education can be in the classroom (Borda, 2016; Borda, 2018; Feshbach, & Feshbach, 2009; Krznaric, 2015; Meyers, Rowell, Wells, & Smith, 2019; Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010).



Journal Cover

Normally speaking, teachers enjoy looking back on their careers by highlighting and lauding the accomplishments of a long career. However, I have found that reflecting on my own mistakes, and what I have learned from them, can be a deeply vulnerable, but fulfilling process from which growth can flourish. With this in mind, I would like to highlight three of the greatest mistakes that I have made in the profession and explain how these lessons have shaped how I interact with colleagues, students, and the world as a whole.

Mistake #1: We are Often Blind to Our Mistakes and Shortcomings

“Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others.”

- Attributed to Jonathan Swift, essayist, poet, and author

One of the most influential studies of human cognition and inattention blindness was done in 1999 at Harvard University. A professor and a graduate student conducted an experiment to determine to what degree people are unaware of how unaware they really are of what is happening in their immediate surroundings (Chabris, 2011; Simons & Chabris, 1999). These researchers produced a video with two teams of three players each, one in white shirts and the other in black. In the video, each team passes the ball to other members of their team, and those watching the video are asked to count the number of passes. In the middle of the short video, a woman dressed up in a gorilla suit enters from the right of the screen, pauses in the middle to face the camera, pounds on her chest, and then walks off to the left. The gorilla appears in the video for nine seconds. Yet, to the surprise of the researchers and the participants in the study, only about half of the people saw the gorilla, and the participants in the study were even more surprised when they were told what they had missed. The results of the study are so profound because they reveal that we often miss so much of what happens around us, and we do not even realize it (inattention blindness). In fact, we often think that we perceive the world as it really is in our daily lives, and we often look for evidence that simply confirms our current understandings of the world (confirmation bias). This blindness can lead to some invalid assumptions and problematic outcomes in all aspects of our lives. I cannot count the times that my belief in the accuracy of my senses and knowledge has led me on roads to less favorable outcomes. One example might illustrate the point.

In the summer of 2002, I was invited to be a part of a team of teachers going to Nanjing, China, to provide teacher training to about 120 Chinese English teachers working in public schools. We were asked to speak on different teaching methodologies and approaches that could enhance classroom instruction in that region of the country. For my part, I gave presentations on educational technology, student-centered learning, cross-cultural awareness, and language assessment. The first week passed without sensing any problematic issues, but a chink in my instructional armor appeared when we visited a local public school with this group of educators. I noticed that the classrooms were small, especially for the number of students in each class. Without trying to offend me, a couple of teachers frankly stated that some of my teaching suggestions would probably not work within the context of their classes. Specifically, they said that I was suggesting ideas for pair work and speaking assessment that could

be done in small classes of 10-15 students, but would almost be impossible if a teacher had classes with 40-50 students. Multiply that by five classes a day, and I could see how a teaching approach used in one context may not produce the same results elsewhere. Furthermore, different educational expectations can affect institutional decisions, and the teachers said that some of my activities would not be well received by school administrators because my approaches did not follow traditional instructional approaches (e.g., a more teacher-centered approach) that were the standard in many cases. It took me time to fully internalize what they were saying because I still could not fully see the “gorilla” in the room.¹

During my career, the blinders of my own limited experience have kept me at times from seeing the many manifestations of that elusive gorilla. I have held on to certain educational philosophies or cultural assumptions with an iron grip far longer than their shelf life. However, as I have come to accept my blindness, I have tried to replace personal hubris with an openness to learning. I am just more attentive to new gorillas that might creep into the walls of my own consciousness and classroom. Furthermore, as an international speaker, I avoid the tendency of parachuting into a new environment, giving short, inspirational pep talks to teachers in the trenches, and being quickly airlifted out without being aware of the needs of those on the ground. A constant search for the gorillas lurking among us should keep us looking beyond the certitude of our current beliefs and should help us be more open to learning in all facets of our lives.

Mistake #2: We Hide Our Mistakes at All Cost, Limiting True Authenticity and Growth

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity.”

— Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

Although recognizing personal blindness was a significant step in my career, owning up to it more openly has taken more time. My teaching career has certainly traversed the highs and lows of the classroom over more than three decades, and during that time, there have been periods when I wanted more than anything to become the illustrious and perfect teacher that every student wanted to have. However, when teachers like me struggle to meet their own expectations, or the expectations sought after by those around them, we tend to shield ourselves and pretend everything is marching along smoothly rather than fully acknowledge our imperfections. Such behavior is sometimes

¹ In an earlier version of the article, I also shared this story, but left it out for space and conciseness. However, I have added it back in as footnote to illustrate another example of the point I was making:

“In 2000, I was invited to participate in teacher training workshops in Saudi Arabia as part of the English Language Specialist Program with the US State Department. In some of my sessions in both Jeddah and Riyadh, I explained the instructional possibilities of using the Internet in improving language and critical-thinking skills. Ironically, I was using old overhead transparencies to illustrate my points, and it was not until a few days into the workshops that one teacher raised his hand and politely stated, with some humor, that I should return to Saudi Arabia in the next millennium when my ideas would be practical. Other teachers readily agreed. In other words, few schools in which these teachers were working had any significant or dependable Internet connections, and I was simply suggesting ideas that were not feasible or relevant to them at that time. It took me time to fully internalize what they were saying because I could not fully see the “gorilla” in the room. I felt somewhat embarrassed that I had made faulty assumptions about their working conditions. In the end, it revealed my disconnect to their immediate needs, and I was simply imposing my view of the idea through the lens of my own experience.”

triggered by the fear of being viewed in a negative light, and thus, we avoid the vulnerability of disclosing such information to others at all costs. Such an approach stifles authenticity and greater human connection with others around us. In the end, we unfortunately walk right past other people every day who share the same fears and concerns—never finding each other---because we all shield our secrets from unneeded shame.

Such stories of hiding our fears are often more pervasive than we think. Having given presentations and workshops around the world on this topic, it is rather commonplace to hear teachers privately wish that they were more understood by their colleagues and families. A few years ago, I gave a plenary address at an international language convention, and in the context of my presentation on understanding others, I spoke on the death of our son, Josh, by suicide. My point of mentioning his life in the presentation was to emphasize that we often make assumptions on the outward behaviors of our students while often missing cues of their daily emotional struggles. It was the first time I had opened up on this topic to such a large audience. I felt my voice quivering, and I fought back the emotion, but I experienced the deep impulse to share and be vulnerable to my own pain. In fact, I simply wanted to send up a proverbial flare in the night to signal to those struggling that they were not alone. Immediately after I ended my plenary address, I experienced one of the most heartwarming experiences of my career: a line of teachers quickly formed at the front of the convention hall to visit with me. With deep emotion and tears, some of them thanked me for my candidness and then shared their own personal struggles beyond the workplace.

Since that time, teachers from many parts of the world have shared with me very personal and vulnerable stories of death, cancer, divorce, abuse, unwarranted shame, and mental illness that they often had kept very private for fear of being viewed as broken, weak, or imperfect. However, it has been my experience that when people find opportunities to share their sacred stories with others, deeper emotional connection takes place.

Mistake #3: We Make Silent and Erroneous Assumptions that Create Barriers to Deeper Human Connection

“Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection.”

— Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

“Human connections are deeply nurtured in the field of shared story.”

- Jean Houston, author

Imagine this scenario: You notice a student who is glued to her phone throughout your class, feverishly texting away to some unknown entity. You ask the student to put the phone away in her bag, but it creeps back into her hands a few minutes later. Frustrated, you single out the student and make a hasty comment, suggesting the student should stop texting the love of her life and focus on the class instead. Then, the

student bursts into tears and runs out of the room. You mutter under your breath: “Students, these days. They don’t have a life without a phone glued to their hands. Ah, a little embarrassment doesn’t hurt.”

That is when your hasty conclusion crumbles. You are called to the main office, and the principal informs you that the student had just found out that her mother had been diagnosed with cancer and was frantically texting her brother for more details. Her father had died in a car accident a few months earlier, and the emotional trauma of losing them both and your insensitive reaction were pushing her over the proverbial cliff. It then dawns on you on how misguided your assumptions have been toward this student.

For me personally, I have made enough gaffes to learn how hasty generalizations and beliefs can impact our responses and judgment. A couple of years after our son died, I had a student who was beaming with anticipation at the upcoming birth of his son. Thus, I looked forward to hearing more about the exciting day once he returned from the vacation break. Two weeks later, I saw the student walking down the hall, and I congratulated the man on being a father. With a somewhat downtrodden look and a trembling voice, the man said that the baby had died. I started to express my deepest condolences, and I was about to say that I understood how he must feel. Fortunately, I caught myself from finishing that sentence because I realized I had absolutely no idea on the depth of his pain. The faulty assumption that the pain of losing my son was equal to his own would have done nothing to validate the grief and loss that he was experiencing. Unfortunately, it is a human, yet faulty, tendency for us to use competing sympathies in our vain attempts to show that we somehow understand the agony of others, but it is almost impossible to do so because each loss is so unique and personal. However, when we set aside our own assumptions about others, we can develop the radical empathy that is needed to sit in another’s pain and understand their struggle.

Moving Forward

Over the last few years, I have presented at conferences in which the overarching themes have focused on advances teaching methodologies and technology at the relative exclusion of the soft skills of empathy and relationship building. However, instead of using catchphrases at conference events such as “Teaching 3.0,” perhaps we would better off focusing on the subtler elements that are at the core of our humanity. Personally, I have learned that when we suspend judgment, listen carefully with our ears and heart, and sit with people in their often private and painful experiences that we call life, we are able to forge greater human connections so desperately lacking in families, schools, and communities. This is my hope.

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