

CHAPTER ONE

IDENTITY AND PEDAGOGY

Getting Ready

It is a Tuesday morning at the end of August (hot, already the temperature in 80s at 9 A.M.), and soon to be the first meeting of my course Education 153: Literacy in the Content Areas. Sitting in my office (chilly, the air supercooled), rattling my papers, shifting their paper-clipped stacks into order, gathering enough 5×7 index cards for free-standing name plates, I imagine the room where I will teach, Peabody 311, large and bright, with movable tables that we'll arrange in a square around which we can all sit comfortably. Eyes closed, I visualize the near future.

Apart from the furniture, the other contents of this third-floor room will be a useful distraction for the students during the few extra minutes I stall, waiting for stragglers, before beginning. The room's wall shelves spill untidily with leftover out-of-date textbooks, partial sets of basal readers, and antiquated, cast off, audio-visual equipment, including filmstrip projectors that no one uses anymore. They're a novelty. Amid the litter of a different sort of educational past as a backdrop, we will enact performances of our potential teaching futures. And so standing there during those few wasted moments, I will be anxious. Inside, in the silence that precedes the words, I'll hear my pulse pounding. The easy beats I'll count slowly, not wanting to start too soon, too loudly, too urgently. In that moment of almost beginning, knowing what will surely come of working with these twenty-six college juniors, I am extremely happy.

That is what I dream as I sit expectantly in the office. My hands are calm now. There are ten minutes left before I climb two flights of stairs. The photocopied papers, in crosshatched piles, are ready to go. If I could see outside (the office is windowless), I'd spy the new students crossing the quad, heading north toward the building, or getting off the bus at the corner by the Carolina Inn,

students who have high hopes that my class will act as a powerful agent to transform them into teachers.

After four years of this ritual anticipation, I now understand that students enter the room with expectations and desires that differ significantly from my own sense of what we will do and learn in the course. Because my students and I share the same goal—for them to be teachers—it was not obvious when I began teaching this course (required for all students in the secondary teacher education program), that our views of how their teaching identities were to come about differed so radically. In fact, the very notion that identities construction is the goal is something they'll discover rather than anything I can count on them knowing in any direct way at the semester's start.

They are waiting when I enter the room promptly at 9:30. In the midst of rearranging the tables and chairs, I recognize a handful of students from my other classes, Richard Lambert and Elizabeth Tavey from "English Grammar," Lauren Elkins and Donna Rogers from "Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing." And sitting with them are Howard Dempsey and Michaela Morris, two new faces, students I will meet in a few minutes, though they're obviously English majors since they sit with the others.¹ Students unconsciously cluster together by academic discipline on that first day.² Without preamble, but after I introduce myself, pronounce my unpronounceable name, we begin: "Take out a piece of paper and something to write with. Now we'll write for about five minutes or so about why you're in this class—what you expect, want, or need. And after we write, then we'll talk." Every semester it's always the same. The business of staking out the territory—sharing their goals and desires, generating a steady stream of questions that I keep on turning back to the class to answer (to gauge what they know or don't know as fast as possible)—takes up most of the hour and fifteen minutes of class time. In the last five minutes, I rush to pass out the syllabus, much of which they've unknowingly intuited during the productive and engaged conversation we've just had. A few students trail me back to the office with more questions. Good, I think, persistent. With a lot to say. They'll make it as teachers.

Insisting on Identity

When they arrive in my classes, however, these students are not yet teachers. They have expressed the desire to become teachers by enrolling in a teacher education program, and I have undertaken the job of helping them get there.

But what does this goal entail? What are the implications for students? Furthermore, what educational experiences will foster the transition from student to teacher? As I stated at the beginning of this book, becoming a teacher involves the construction of a person's identity. In regard to the individuals portrayed here, this involves the transformation of their identities over time. They began the program thinking of themselves as "students" (an identity category made salient by their status as undergraduates), but by the end of the program they ought to identify themselves primarily as "teachers." My aim as their teacher is to create a curriculum that promotes this identity development. But before moving onto pedagogical issues, I'd like to define what I mean by identity and describe in theoretical terms what the process of identity development looks like. In subsequent chapters, these assertions and theories about identity will be explained, critiqued, and modified as my students tell their stories.

Here is my claim: becoming a teacher means that an individual must adopt an identity as such. I take this strong position—insisting on identity—because the process of teaching, at once so complicated and deep, involves the self. One way of approaching this task—that of imagining themselves differently—is to ask students to develop personal theories of action—how they might act if they were teachers. Experienced teachers develop theories of action (which Gail McCutcheon describes as "sets of beliefs, images, and constructs" about people, learning, and knowledge) through practice (1992, 191). Encouraging students to create these action theories before they've had the opportunity to practice in the field has several benefits. First, they realize that teaching is complicated and that it is a generative process. Second, they are able to feel how theory and practice are yoked together. Without much effort, they can see why they must link the methods they adapt to their beliefs. Finally, proposing theories of action forces students to integrate the whole range of variables involved in any teaching situation rather than operating from one perspective alone.

Teaching is a complex and delicate act. It demands that teachers analyze the situation, consider the variables of students, texts, knowledge, abilities, and goals to formulate an approach to teaching, and then to carry it out—every day, minute to minute, within the ever-shifting context of the classroom. It requires having empathy for students, a knowledge of one's field, a sense of how learning occurs, the ability to generate a practice out of an idea, and the power to evaluate instantaneously whether it's going well or needs adjusting. Moreover, teaching depends on the teacher's capacity to constantly think ahead, to follow hunches, and usually, on top of all this, to perform convincingly for an audience, sometimes lecturing but always being the leader, directing activities and

managing time efficiently. To do all this well, one must inhabit the classroom as if it is the most natural place in the world. One must be tolerant of the bureaucratic and otherwise ethically compromised situation of the teacher within a school. These abilities suggest that teaching demands nothing less than identity to accomplish these tasks; this is more than just playing a role.

In her work with prospective teachers, Deborah Britzman (1991) describes the qualitative difference between achieving an identity in contrast to playing a role: "The newly arrived teacher learns early on that whereas role can be assigned, the taking up of an identity is a constant and tricky social negotiation" (54). Roles are flimsy and superficial, transitory and easily adopted or discarded. They seem to be whole and complete, like a ready-made set of clothes that one can put on before class and take off after. I wouldn't be a very good teacher if I felt I was playing a role (and neither, I believe, would my students). Identities require the commitment of self to the enterprise in a way that acting out a role does not. A teacher must rise to the occasion time after time; the self goes on the line every day.

Defining Identity

Identity is our understanding of who we are and of who we think other people are. Reciprocally, it also encompasses other people's understanding of themselves and others (which includes us). Theoretically, the concept of identity involves two notions: similarity and difference. So identities are the ways we relate to and distinguish individuals (and groups) in their social relations with other individuals or groups.

Of course identities can never be unified or fixed; they are always in flux, always multiple and continually under construction. Yet this doesn't mean that selves don't exist or are unrecognizable; there are moments and conditions of coalescence. First, we have real physical bodies and we often experience our consciousness as unitary and existing inside the body. Second, others react to and recognize us as individuals, not only by how we look but also by who we are depending on the context. So while identities are constructed through social interaction, identities (realized as the "I" of the self) are attached to individuals and their physical bodies. Furthermore, no one has only a single identity. Every person is composed of multiple, often conflicting, identities, which exist in volatile states of construction or reconstruction, reformation or erosion, addition or expansion. The bottom line is that no matter what the context, we are continually engaged in becoming something or someone.³ So how do identities develop?

The Role of Discourse

Individuals are constituted subjects; their identities are produced through participation in discourse. As active participants in a variety of discourses, individuals have agency to shape selves. On the other hand, discourses (and all other participating individuals) affect the development of those identities. Identities then are the result of dynamic interplay between discursive processes that are internal (to the individual) and external (involving everyone else). The sociologist Richard Jenkins describes identity as “a practical accomplishment, a process” the direct result of the “dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition” (1996, 25). In concrete terms, this means that students are making themselves into teachers, for example, by taking education courses, and that students are being made into teachers by virtue of the effect these courses have on them. It is the interplay of internal and external forces in the midst of social interaction that allows for the construction of identities.

By discourse I am referring to the “ways in which language functions in specific social or institutional contexts and on the social and ideological relations which are constructed in and through language” (Williams 1983, 39). Discourse, which is manifested through language, consists of a system of beliefs, attitudes, and values that exist within particular social and cultural practices. Engaging in these language practices (such as conversing, analyzing, writing reports) shapes an individual’s identity. Discourses are powerfully constructive of identities because they are inherently ideological. Many discourses are multiple and simultaneous; at any one time an individual can be involved in many different discourses. Discourses are not only various; they are also hierarchical. Sometimes participation in one discourse conflicts with or counteracts membership in another. In some instances, individuals have the opportunity to choose between competing discourses. These choices have significant ramifications in terms of identity. In addition, some discourses carry greater social value and prestige compared with others. Thus, identity development depends on social interaction through engagement in multiple discourses.

The concept of identity then has several dimensions, one aspect having to do with a single person—individual identity—and the other with groups—collective identity (Jenkins 1996). For instance, being a teacher is certainly an identity I would claim for myself. Inside, I believe I am a teacher. Fortunately, in my daily life at the university, others—students, staff, and colleagues—also see and react to me as a teacher. Both these pressures—from the inside out and from the outside in—act in concert to build and sustain my identity as a

teacher. Others make me even as I'm in the act of making myself. Thus, Jenkins suggests that the entity we refer to as our "self" is an "ongoing, and, in practice, simultaneous synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others" or, in other words, "the internal-external dialectic of identification [is] the process whereby all identities—individual and collective—are constituted" (25). Both dimensions of identity evolve as prospective teachers go through the teacher education program. In describing the identity development of the students who are the center of this book, I will show how certain contexts and practices (for instance, composing a philosophy of teaching) promote the individual dimension while other situations and persons (for instance, the teaching practicum) contributes to the collective aspect of a teaching identity.

If my job is to help others *become* teachers, and if I regard being a teacher as an identity, then I have to understand how identities are formed so that I can create through my teaching in a conducive atmosphere. I am acutely self-conscious that discourse is simultaneously a set of practices to be taught, a medium of instruction, and the very material substance out of which identities arise. Given that the internal and external dialectical processes of identification construct identities, then what would an effective teacher education program look like? What kind of pedagogy could we employ at the university that would in fact promote these identification processes?

The Secondary Teacher Education Program

At UNC Chapel Hill, the program to certify high school teachers consists of a series of six courses taken during a student's junior and senior years of undergraduate study in the School of Education.⁴ In addition, at the same time, students are completing an academic major in an appropriate field such as mathematics or English. Besides a semester-long teaching practicum (in everyday speech referred to as "student teaching"), in their senior year students take courses in learning theory and adolescent development, in social foundations of education, and in methods, which includes a course called Literacy in the Content Areas. It was the initial and continuing challenge of teaching this course that was my original impetus for writing this book.

The purpose of the literacy course is to introduce future high school teachers to concepts about learning and literacy along with techniques and methods for enhancing literacy in their students no matter what the subject area, whether it be mathematics, English, or biology. (The rationale for the course—designed long before I started teaching it—grew out of theoretical

and practical concerns similar to those underlying the writing-across-the curriculum movement.) Literacy was very broadly defined to include traditional conceptions—reading and writing—and extends to encompass broader notions such as computer literacy, cultural literacy, content literacy (strategies to acquire knowledge in a discipline), and literate thinking (the ability to think analytically about information). With this knowledge, for example, students were supposed to integrate literacy-enhancing activities and practices into a month-long unit of study in their discipline that included daily lesson plans (a course project).

When I first taught the course some six years ago, I assumed students would be receptive to knowledge and methods they could *use* as teachers. (All the students enrolled in this class are undergraduate Education majors, mostly juniors, who will be certified high school teachers by the time of college graduation.) But I discovered that students had difficulty connecting to information or focusing on methods because they were grappling with the whole notion of *becoming* teachers in the first place. In response to their reactions, I began slowly to recast this course, focusing more on the process of teaching, subsuming the content and methods as means not ends, with the result that students learned more. On course evaluations, they rated these process-oriented activities as more “relevant,” “satisfying,” and “interesting” compared with the ratings of activities by their peers in prior semesters.

When I began to reflect about how and why I was changing my approach in the course, the answer pointed in the direction of identity (something I called “self” at first). It seemed that knowing information, techniques, or strategies that enabled students to “pass” as teachers was not enough to calm their fears or to lessen their anxieties about who they were at the moment and how long it would be before they felt they were (as they often put it) “truly teachers.” Besides this course in the School of Education, I was also regularly teaching two others required for the English education majors: English 31: Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing, and English 36: English Grammar. This meant that I became well acquainted with the English education majors in particular, many of whom took all three courses with me (although other faculty also offered them). I noticed how dramatically students changed their attitudes and ideas about teaching from one course to another. This longitudinal contact enabled me to see more clearly the dilemmas and issues that preoccupied them as their education progressed.

With an eye toward improving my teaching, I decided to take a closer look. This resulted in the design of a formal study based on observations and interviews that would entail studying a small group of students while they were enrolled in the teacher education program and following them for at least

one year after graduation. In the spring of 1996, I solicited students who were English-education majors to participate in the study.⁵ Six agreed. Of this group, by the time of graduation, Rick and Lauren had taken three of my courses, Donna and Elizabeth two, while Howard and Michaela had taken only one—the literacy course—which they all took together that spring.⁶ (The participants will be reintroduced in detailed profiles in Chapter Two.)

The Idea of Pedagogy

At the time I began the study, it was clear that no amount of methods, tactics, or everyday support and encouragement (“You’ll do just fine!”) would be forceful enough to resolve my students’ questions about who they were and who they were going to become—questions of identity. Furthermore, certain aspects of their “selves” (as they described them, such as being a Christian or being gay), affected, influenced, interacted with, and conflicted with their attempts to become a teacher, to develop a professional identity.

During the three years of working with prospective teachers, I had become increasingly intrigued with the process of identities construction and wondered whether one pedagogy or another might create classroom climates where identities could flourish. Preparing teachers was a significantly different long-term goal for me as an instructor compared to previous courses I had taught at other institutions, for instance, where I attempted to make students better writers. Though I didn’t know exactly what I was searching for, it was during my first semester of teaching courses for education majors that I started closely attending to how I taught my classes.

While I reflected on both the good and bad days, it was invariably the classes that did not go as well as I had hoped that absorbed my attention. No matter the thousands of hours spent satisfactorily teaching, one poor class made me question my abilities to pull off whatever activities I had planned and compelled me rethink the convictions that lay at the heart of my practice. Some days were mentally easier to fix than others. Sometimes with small, practical adjustments in mind for next time (like tweaking the groups to capitalize on heterogeneity or writing in class every fifteen minutes or so to trace how opinions coalesce) I would finally believe that things might go better tomorrow. However, on particularly knotty days, my critiques lasted longer and went farther. The bad day I would evaluate in light of the week or month—how’s it going generally? I might consider broader goals—what was the point of group work? It was a neat idea, but did it affect the class the way I had imagined it would? I tried more experiments and simultaneously invited extra feedback “in the moment” from students through short reaction pieces written in class.

Mainly, though, I kept asking students what they wanted more of and why, all the while keeping track of my reactions to their requests. Which ones did I resist? On what topics did I agree? What happened when I talked about my responses to their requests in class? After a lot of analysis I discovered something.

At the crux of large and small defeats lies the impulse to theorize, to reflect on what happened and to make provisions for changing or adjusting things in the future. I had been involved in the secondary teacher education program for about a year before the real and impossible reason students were taking my classes surfaced. They were soon to be in classrooms teaching and they had to learn to become teachers. I inquired about other courses. "Oh, you're not supposed to worry about that," one of my colleagues told me outright, "Just make sure they know about jigsaw grouping before they get to my class."

Nevertheless, I continued to be much engaged with my students' concerns even though paying serious attention to pedagogy seemed neither easy nor attractive as a line of research to many faculty (and was perhaps even dangerous pursuit for an untenured professor). As bell hooks remarks in *Teaching to Transgress*, "Most of us are not inclined to see discussion of pedagogy as central to our academic work and intellectual growth" (1994, 204). For me, it was a powerful draw, that process of thinking theoretically, inventing activities, and trying them out the next time in class. In short order, things changed. In my classes students were talking and writing more, which I regarded as a positive turn. More often than not the designated seventy-five minutes sped by. There were even occasions when no one noticed that time was up for the day; we just kept on rolling. Once two other faculty members curious about my teaching (I talked about nothing else in the hallways) casually dropped in to check out one of my classes but no one (including me) noticed because we were so involved with each other (that day—working in small groups, sharing and critiquing writing-to-learn activities designed the night before). Afterward, I was teased, but not unkindly, about my intense involvement.

Over time, after I reflected on what worked and what didn't in my classes, and in response to the reactions I received from students, I came to believe that pedagogy, when it's good, means everything. In the broadest terms, good pedagogy means putting into practice one's theories about learning and teaching. It requires teachers to conceive of and to structure their classrooms as social settings that promote interaction and to invent activities that invite students' deepest engagement. Pedagogy is absolutely not synonymous with methods, a collection of decontextualized practices described as a series of steps that can be handed from one teacher to another like so many tools in a kit. Mariolina Salvatori, in a book that traces its history, defines pedagogy as "an always already interconnected theory and practice of knowing, that in order to be effective must 'make manifest' its own theory and practice by continuously

reflecting on and deconstructing it” (1996, 7). The best pedagogy gets its shape and force from its theoretical roots: a teacher puts what she knows into practice while considering the material conditions and needs of her students. Then begins the cycle of reflection and reconception. Teaching is an act that once started is never over.

Proposing a Pedagogy

As a matter of course, I keep an informal record of what works and what doesn't in my classes so I can revise assignments and activities in subsequent semesters based on students' reactions. These notes were especially important during the first several years of teaching new courses in teacher education. One project that appeared frequently in my notes (and went through many iterations as a result) involved students writing their philosophies of teaching. It was a project that started on the very first day (though students did not at first perceive that activities such as focused-freewriting would turn into something as formal as a philosophy) and was finished on the day of the final exam. One innovation that made a huge improvement was my stipulation that anything they proposed in their philosophy had to be explicitly connected and apparent in their integrated units designed to teach specific content, e.g. American literature. Or, to imagine the task another way, I insisted that their instructional designs couldn't just be a collection of neat activities no matter how clever or appealing. Instead, everything they planned had to be motivated by a rationale, and there had to be a logic to the progression of the unit from one activity, one day, one week to the next. Doing a good job meant that a person reading someone's instructional plans should be able to intuit the philosophical beliefs of the teacher who designed it.

As I mentioned, this interweaving of activities throughout the semester improved the basic quality of both unit designs and teaching philosophies in general, but it had even more significant outcomes. Many of these prospective teachers developed a sense that there are such things as overarching principles of learning, development, and pedagogy. Furthermore they realized that once understood, these principles could be reliably called upon to figure out what to teach and how to teach it—no matter what the conditions, the characteristics of the students, or the nature of the academic content. Those students who caught on to this idea and the process became more confident and better at sizing up the formidable task of teaching during the practicum the following semester. And later, after enough time had passed for some students to have begun teaching, when they returned for a visit, I was able to see that the idea of the overarching principle—ones they had devised

personally and individually—was something they held on to because it had actually helped them to teach.

But my understanding of what was going on with my teaching is the result of hindsight, the product of a great deal of note-taking and written reflection; I wanted to know what worked and why. These were the questions that mattered. The folders of teaching notes grew. Then one day, because of a teaching award, I was asked to write a description of the literacy course and what amounted to a teaching philosophy. This context forced self-conscious analysis (something else I learned). It was in the act of doing almost the same task I had devised for my students that I became aware of underlying theoretical principles and their power, about those I was relying on and why. When I read back through my notes, the connections between activities and their origin in a guiding principle became apparent. What I had previously done unconsciously could now be more widely applied, and the process itself could be made explicit and offered to students. A whole world opened: I could create many different open-ended structures based on a single theoretical idea (i.e., that certain contexts engender articulation). Each contained the latent possibility of encouraging students to learn whatever they needed in order to become teachers.

The six students who participated in this study (in addition to those students who enrolled in my classes and who by virtue of their presence affected my thinking) provide both evidence and testimony for what I have learned.⁷ Thus, I end this book with a proposal that describes a set of principles (ten in all) that, taken together, constitute a pedagogy for identities construction. They include discourse richness and openness, dialogue and a dialogic curriculum, collaboration, deliberation, reflexivity, theorizing in practice, agency, recursive representation, authority, and enactment.

The principles of pedagogy comprise two categories: structural principles (the first five) and performative principles (the last five). Principles such as “dialogue” or “collaboration” refer to the way the social environment of the classroom is structured, designed or arranged, as well as to the nature of interactions that occur there. Principles such as “agency” and “authority” refer to individuals and their actions or performances as well as to the implications of action in particular social settings. For instance, we can promote our students’ sense of themselves as teachers in classrooms where the mode of interaction is dialogic (as opposed to monologic) and where agency is valued, i.e., students’ participation is meaningful and their behavior has consequences.

All principles depend on the theoretical notion that discourses themselves and everyday discursive practices are what construct selves and fashion identities. Obviously, the concepts are not my inventions. In proposing this pedagogy, I have assembled a collection of well-known ideas or theories and

suggested their usefulness for teachers whose goal is to develop their students' identities. Although the pedagogy has its roots in my work with prospective teachers, it has broad applications. These principles can be used by any teacher in postsecondary education to derive practices for teaching in the service of whatever identities are at issue, whether that be historian, writer, competent citizen, or teacher. Moreover, since developing identities or becoming persons who are active and effective agents is the real point of a college education, this pedagogy may appeal directly to college and university faculty in all disciplines.

The flexibility of this pedagogy lends it great power. The principles are entirely open-ended. They concern the process of teaching and are meant to generate the overall structure and the interactional dynamics of classroom life, not to describe curriculum per se or define academic course content. Teachers may build an individualized pedagogy around one or more principles, any of which are transformative. Combining several principles (all ten are not necessary) intensifies and magnifies their effects.

For now, however, my explanation and development of this pedagogy must remain necessarily abstract with the promise of satisfying all curiosities about theory by the end of the book. Instead, I would like to refocus attention on the heart of the matter. What happens to students who enter a teacher education program with the goal of becoming a teacher?

REFLECTIONS

Rapture

Hurrying in front of Greenlaw, the English department building, to cross the quad, get to my car after a quick trip in to check mail, fax a draft to a colleague, and pick up some library books left inadvertently on my desk, I see Jason, a student from last spring a year ago, who has just finished student teaching (high school English), now finally a graduating senior. "Hey, Dr. Danielewicz," he calls out. I stop, check my long steps, shake my shoulders to relieve the weight of my bag of books. He opens his arms, saying "Can I give you a hug." "Sure," and I hug him back. "How's it going this semester? Everyone has really missed you, since you're not teaching, especially grammar." "Yeah, I know. Sorry. And I'm afraid I won't be teaching next year since I'll be director of the writing program." "You're not teaching at all?" he asks. "Well, no, I'll be teaching some class, but I don't yet know what. We're changing the secondary program entirely so there's no more Ed 153." "Oh," he says, "That's too bad. It was such a great class."

I flashback to Jason in class on a day when students designed “writing centers” for their peers. He’s sitting in the back of the room, in a small circle of desks, three others with him, and he’s got them holding tight to a small branch he’s brought to class, their eyes closed, while he reads aloud—nature poems by Frost, essays by Thoreau. Afterward, the students write about how their sensory experience interacted with their interpretations of the literature Jason has read to them. The little group in their concentrated activity did appear to transcend at least place (a dirty, dingy, cluttered room, full of leftover books, odd chairs and tables) if not time, physical bodies, philosophical biases, and whatever else.

Suddenly I realize Jason is standing there expectantly, waiting for me to say something. “What’s that you’re wearing?” I ask, pointing to a scrap of dark purple ribbon, folded into a loop with tails, pinned to his shirt. “Oh, that’s to show solidarity. It’s Women’s Week and there will be a march and rally tonight.” Jason’s shirt is tie-dyed, his long hair is caught up in a big, round crocheted cap that sags in the back like a tired, rainbow-colored chef’s poof. The hat rims his face, top to bottom; the prominence of his forehead, so unobstructed, reminds me of a baby’s face, how, looking at an infant, we are struck by the fact that a person’s eyes do occupy the midposition, not upper third, of their face, halfway between chin and hairline. He looks vulnerable.

I wonder how he made it through student teaching. I wonder if I was a good teacher. I wonder if the class helped him to be a teacher, or whether it was just fun relative to the other required courses, or whether he learned anything of significance. I think about hugging him, how easily he asked and how comfortably I complied, about how many students I’ve hugged (mostly at graduation), about the crowd of his friends who stand a few feet away on the upper terrace watching us. In their jeans, braids, hats, and beads, they’re unlike the majority of other UNC students, those who look “straight” or “preppy,” though most students do not come from prep schools or from privileged families. To signify their aspirations perhaps, they wear clothes that come from catalogs, J. Crew or Tweeds, and name brand polo shirts, Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren. In this respect, Jason was a minority student in my class. But he liked the class, and so did the others. I want to know why.

What kind of a teacher am I? Why am I different? What do they see in me? Student evaluations done for institutional purposes are not very revealing on this subject. My own appraisal of what comes through in my teaching goes something like this: I am a romantic, prone to fusions of thought and feeling, to rapture even, certain there is more to life than has been presented, even though such details and situations as I can apprehend appear perfectly solid and without anything missing. The poet Adrienne Rich says that “sensual vitality is essential to the struggle for life”; this truth I live. My classroom is not

immune from my personality, nor from the characters of my students who diversely and deliberately inhabit its space.

When I walk into class, what's real—the chairs and tables, the students themselves—is not what occupies my attention. Rather I'm drawn by what has yet to happen, about what might happen once things are stirred into motion. On good days, I lose myself in the action, listening to what students are saying, joining a small group designing a lesson, revising the second activity of the day since students are engrossed still in the first. I imagine that what we are doing now might someday be happening then, in another classroom, theirs, each of them teachers. I foresee what is conceivable. Not in reality, for I am no psychic, but in theory. Because, more than anything else, the whole time I'm there, I act as if I am seeing possibilities. This imaginary envisioning energizes me and my students, bringing to life the time and place of the classroom.