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The Paradox of Exemplary Practice

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Exemplary teaching is paradoxical. What is it like, in such a complex activity as teaching, to “get it *right*?” How can we learn from study of theory and practice, from observation of others and reflection on our own teaching, to become and remain an exemplary teacher? For classroom practice to serve as an example of excellent teaching, what occurs must be observable and describable. Yet to identify all the elements of even a single teacher’s skillful teaching, for even a single day, would be a mammoth undertaking. Moreover, once those elements were captured they would not represent in detail the classroom practice of other teachers, nor would they be replicated on subsequent days by the teacher originally observed. Excellence in teaching is not attained through training in a packaged set of behaviors. How can we learn? From study, observation, and reflection — and from the desire and energy to become and remain an exemplary teacher. The articles that we have chosen for our themed issue illustrate the blending of sound theory and good practice in different facets of language arts.

John Beach describes a method of structuring a reading program to encourage higher level thinking through comparing alternative versions of a similar text. His ideas weave together the important strands of attention to multicultural literature and use of “text sets,” collections of reading material which are similar in theme. Marjorie Wynn offers a wealth of possibilities for developing depth in vocabulary learning. Her suggestions incorporate important

learning strategy such as semantic mapping, and are applicable in both content area learning and literature study. Like other articles in this issue, Wynn's contribution presents alternatives to dull, inadequate and superficial instructional methods which unfortunately remain all too common. Swafford and Paulos show us exemplary technique and exemplary teaching simultaneously in a detailed description of a skilled teacher's use of a Structured Listening Activity. Their article, like the others, implicitly stresses the importance of time in the learning process — not time consumed in dull repetition but time *allowed* for students to explore, enjoy, and master new learning. Smith and Herring demonstrate the value of linking fields which have traditionally been separated. They provide a theoretical rationale for using drama in instruction and a practical structure for doing so. To conclude the set of articles on exemplary teaching, we chose an article by Johns and VanLeirsburg on the topic of assessment both for the information the authors provide about the development of the portfolio method and as a reminder that assessment is an integral part of good teaching. To remain bound to rigid methods of testing is to risk narrowing our teaching to fit the molds of the tests. Our issue's final article is focused on an exemplary teacher. In discussing exemplary teaching during the preparation of this issue we have become aware that it is a characteristic of excellent teachers with many years experience that their teaching has changed dramatically across the years. Such teachers tend to be remorseful about not having known earlier what they know now. Eventually they come to accept that each year they will know more, make new mistakes, and make new progress. Although good teaching cannot be packaged we can see it — fluid, lively, welcoming. Through study, observation and reflection we can strive for such excellence in ourselves and applaud it in others.