

Language Teaching Awareness

A guide to exploring beliefs
and practices

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1 Exploring our teaching

Jerry G. Gebhard
Robert Oprandy

If the teacher agrees to submerge himself into the system, if he consents to being defined by others' views of what he is supposed to be, he gives up his freedom to see, to understand, and to signify for himself. If he is immersed and impermeable, he can hardly stir others to define themselves as individual. If, on the other hand, he is willing . . . to create a new perspective on what he has habitually considered real, his teaching may become the project of a person vitally open to his students and the world. . . . He will be continuously engaged in interpreting a reality forever new; he will feel more alive than he ever has before.

—M. Greene (1973: 270)

Have you ever discovered something new in a place with which you are very familiar? Perhaps a secret compartment in a desk you have used for years? Or, in an attic box, love letters written by an ancestor or photos of family members from past generations? An out-of-the-way alley or street in a city where you have lived for years? Whatever it is, what was it like to make this unexpected discovery? Were you surprised? Delighted? Perhaps a little sad? Why do you think you never saw this thing before?

In this book we invite you to explore a familiar place – classrooms – and the interaction within them, their pulse. We invite you to share in the excitement, fun, and challenge of discovery and rediscovery of your teaching beliefs and practices and to find things in your teaching and classroom interaction that have been hidden from view. We invite experienced and inexperienced teachers alike. If you are an experienced teacher, you likely have explored aspects of your teaching already. We will show you how to go beyond your usual ways of looking. If inexperienced as a teacher, you are not new to classroom life. After all, you have participated in classrooms as a student since you were very young. You have probably spent thousands of hours observing classroom behavior from the unique position of the student. As such, we invite you to rediscover classroom life from a different perspective, that of the teacher, so that you might have opportunities to become aware of new things in a very familiar place.

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Of course, an exploration may not merely be of some *thing* that is new, but also of an insight about yourself, about others, or about the bigger context in which our teaching lives are situated. About climbing Mount Everest, Thomas Hornbein wrote, “at times I wondered if I had not come a long way only to find that what I really sought was something I had left behind” (in Krakauer 1997: 51). When we explore teaching, we simultaneously probe ourselves and the larger meaning of our endeavor. Although we will stay close to the classroom in what we cover in these pages, we occasionally will stray into the more personal as well as the sociopolitical realms.

To begin this journey of discovery and rediscovery, in this chapter we offer our answers to the following questions:

- What do we mean by exploration of teaching?
- What beliefs and assumptions underlie exploration of teaching?
- How can we go beyond superficial awareness?

While addressing these questions, we also highlight several distinctive features of our exploratory approach to teacher awareness.

What do we mean by exploration of teaching?

The central reason to explore is to gain awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices, or, as Fanselow puts it, to see teaching differently (1988: 114). In assuming the role of teacher as explorer, we carry out such activities as collecting and studying taped descriptions of our own teaching through self-observation, as well as observing in other teachers’ classrooms. We also work on action research projects, talk with colleagues about teaching, write in teaching journals, and reflect on and relate personal experience and beliefs to our teaching. How to carry out such explorations is central to this book.

Before providing guidelines for how to explore, as we do in Chapter 2, we first address the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our exploratory approach to developing awareness of teaching.

What beliefs and assumptions underlie exploration of teaching?

We build our approach to exploration around nine beliefs and assumptions:

1. Taking responsibility for our own teaching
2. The need for others

3. Description over prescription
4. A nonjudgmental stance
5. Attention to language and behavior
6. Avenues to awareness through exploration
7. Personal connections to teaching
8. Attention to process
9. A beginner's mind

Taking responsibility for our own teaching

As you read our assumptions underlying our approach to exploration, notice that we use the first person plural *we* to include not only you, but also ourselves as explorers. One reason for doing this is that we genuinely like to explore teaching beliefs and practices and prefer not to distinguish ourselves from other teachers in this regard. Perhaps more experienced than most of our readers, especially considering our combined half century of teaching, we are every bit as much learners as you are. In fact, the activity of writing our ideas, constructing what we think is a coherent text, and then discussing it with each other has forced us to internalize our learning of the ideas in this book at a very deep level. Much of what we have learned in our co-construction of knowledge is evident not only in what appears in these pages, but also in what we chose to modify or leave out of earlier drafts of the book.

A second reason for using the first person plural is our belief that each of us has to take responsibility for our own teaching. The desire to explore must come from within each of us. When we turn John Donne's *Meditation XVII* upside down, as Lou Forsdale (1981) does, we have "Every person is an island, isolated from all others in his or her self, forever physically separated after the umbilical cord is cut" (p. 92).

Not dismissing Donne, who wrote in 1624 that "No man is an island, entire of itself," Forsdale goes on to say, "The anxiety, the loneliness of the isolation moves us to create bridges between our islands . . . transitory bridges, pathways of signals, that carry delicate freight of meaning" (ibid.). We believe, then, that we must, all of us islands, take responsibility for our own teaching. Nevertheless, we must also reach out to others in the process.

The need for others

Exploration cannot be done in a vacuum. As Fanselow (1997) suggests, seeking to explore by ourselves, alone, "is like trying to use a pair of scissors with only one blade" (p. 166). In other words, and as Edge explains

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I want to investigate . . . my own teaching. I can't do that without understanding it, and I can't understand it on my own . . . [I] need other people: colleagues and students. By cooperating with others, we can come to understand our own experience and opinions. We can also enrich them with the understandings and experiences of others. (1992: 4)

Another reason to explore something with others is the joy of seeing it through another person's perceptual filter, one who has a fresh take on it. A former student once told one of the authors, Robert Oprandy, of her young son's first visit to Washington, D.C. They looked down the mall from the Lincoln Memorial at the Washington Monument. When she told her son that was the next place they would visit, he stared at the vertical height of the obelisk and whined in a somewhat scared voice, "I don't want to go into space!" Seeing the monument as a spaceship, the boy gave a fresh perspective that made sense when seen through his eyes. Undoubtedly, he had seen TV and photographic images of spacecraft liftoffs. Perhaps he and his mother had earlier visited the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution and images of its spacecraft and airplanes were fresh in his mind.

In our teacher education programs, we relish having novice teachers mixed in with experienced ones. Fresher observations and thoughts about classroom practices and teaching theories rubbing up against the reality checks provided by more experienced visions of teaching make for rich discussions and more topics and questions to explore. Differing perspectives provide choices.

Others help us to explore our own teaching through the consideration of such choices. Fanselow explains:

The need I have for others to enable me to travel roads on my own at first seems to be paradoxical, if not contradictory. But I feel I need others to have experiences with so I can make choices. The insights, knowledge, and advice of others provides me with choices as well as stimulation. With choices I can compare. (1997: 166)

In writing this introductory chapter together, for example, each of us had to be responsible for our own thinking. At the same time, though, we had the need for our cowriter to attach himself to our thoughts and words and bridge the gap between our styles of writing, the relationship we are trying to establish with you the reader, and the ideas we wish to communicate to you.

Description over prescription

Before discussing our preference for a descriptive approach to exploring, we begin with a story that illustrates prescription:

I had taken a part-time job at a well-known language school, and as a part of that job I was expected to be open to being supervised. One day a person I had never

seen before walked in and sat down as I was in the process of teaching a reading lesson. I was trying out a few new ideas and wanted to see the consequences of not going over vocabulary before having the students read. Instead of presenting vocabulary, I was having the students read a story several times, each time working on a different task such as underlining words which described the person in the story or crossing out words they did not know. The supervisor sat in the back of the room taking notes, and I became nervous. After the class, the supervisor came over to me. She smiled and whispered that she would like to meet with me at her office after the class. At this meeting, she opened by leaning over, touching me on the arm, smiling and saying, "I hope you don't mind. I'm not one to beat around the bush." I sank a little further into my chair. She proceeded to tell me that I should always write difficult vocabulary on the board and go over it before the students read, that students should read aloud to help them with pronunciation, and that in every class there should be a discussion so that students have the chance to practice the new vocabulary. (Gebhard 1984: 502–503)

You can likely identify with the teacher's experience of being supervised. The supervisor believes that she knows the best way to teach and tells the teacher, in a prescriptive manner, how he should be teaching.

Whether it is a supervisor who is prescribing, or other teachers or even ourselves, we see several problems with the use of prescriptions. To begin with, there is little evidence that any one way of teaching is better than another in all settings. Research on the relationship between teaching and learning does offer some interesting and relevant ideas that we can try out in our teaching, but research has not, and likely never will, produce *the* methodology we should follow to be effective teachers (Kumaravadivelu 1994).

A second problem with prescriptions is that they can create confusion within teachers. Some teachers might want to experiment by trying something different just to see what happens, but they might refrain from doing so because they (or others, such as the supervisor in the story above) believe that there must be a *correct* or *best* way to teach. This quandary over exploring versus teaching in the best way could very well lead to a feeling of "half-in-half-out engagement"¹ in which the teacher has mixed feelings over conforming to someone else's preferred way of teaching and exploring his or her own way.

A third problem concerns the rights of teachers. When others tell us how we should teach, we lose the "right to be wrong."² The right to teach the way we want to is very important for teachers. If we lose this right, we may

1 This idea of "half-in-half-out engagement" is mentioned in Rardin (1977), who describes ESL students who do not feel fully accepted into a class.

2 This idea of having the right to be wrong comes from reading Rowe (1974).

lose the courage to try new ideas, to explore more than one alternative, to explore freely.

A fourth problem is that prescription can force us to comply with what those “in authority” believe we should be doing in the classroom. This does not allow us, as teachers, to become our own experts and to rely on ourselves, rather than on others, to find answers to our teaching questions.³ As a result of others making decisions for us, we also lose the chance to discover awareness of our own teaching beliefs and practices. Such experiential knowledge can liberate us and build our confidence so that we can indeed make our own teaching decisions based on our teaching context and knowledge about students, teaching, and ourselves.⁴

Rather than encourage teachers to follow prescriptions, we urge them to collect descriptions of teaching. Descriptions provide a way of portraying what happens in classrooms that can be useful to us. They can provide a mirror image for us to reflect on our own teaching, as well as to talk about teaching possibilities. If we have a detailed description of classroom interaction, we can analyze what went on in the classroom, offer interpretations about the value of what went on, and generate alternative ways we might teach specific aspects of the lesson. Throughout this book, we offer many ways to collect, analyze, and make use of descriptions of teaching. It is through descriptions, more than prescriptions, that we can gain deeper awareness of our teaching and empower ourselves to know how to make our own informed teaching decisions. We have found that descriptions are more powerful than prescriptions in fostering the spirit of exploration we seek to promote.

A nonjudgmental stance

In addition to believing that exploration is both an individual and a collaborative endeavor and that there is more value in description than prescription, we strongly believe that as teachers as explorers, we need to let go of our judgments about our own teaching or the teaching we observe because such judgments can get in the way of seeing teaching clearly. In other words,

- 3 The idea that teachers need the opportunity to become their own experts, rather than to depend on others, is not new. Jarvis (1972) was one of the first teacher educators we know of to emphasize this need. Fanselow (1977a, 1987, 1997) and Fanselow and Light (1977) have also voiced this opinion and have shown ways that this can be done.
- 4 Mehan (1979) points out that prescribing is oppressive. However, providing people with ways of looking reminds them that they are capable of acting on the world, and that these actions can transform the world.

Task Break⁵

1. Choose a topic you know a lot about. Discuss it in as descriptive a way as you can and see if your detailed descriptions help you explore some aspect of the topic in a novel way.
 2. Why do we recommend descriptions over prescriptions? Are prescriptions always wrong? Can you think of any situations inside or outside a teaching context where prescriptions might be useful?
-

judgments, whether positive (“Good job!”) or negative (“I’m not very good at teaching grammar”), can raise emotions that interfere with a focus on description.⁶ In this regard, we have found the ideas of W. Timothy Gallwey (1974, 1976) to be useful.⁷ He emphasizes that we need to let go of our human inclination to judge ourselves and our performance as either “good” or “bad.” He suggests that tennis players replace such judgmental remarks as “What a lousy serve!” and “I have a terrible backhand” with descriptions that allow the player “to see the strokes as they are” (1974: 30). For example, the player can pay attention to the spot he or she throws the ball during the serve before making contact with the racket, the direction the ball goes, and so on. Gallwey makes the point that when the judgments are gone, so are the feelings that are associated with them, feelings that can create tension and take attention away from gaining awareness of what is actually going on. The mind, he says, can be “so absorbed in the process of judgment and trying to change this ‘bad’ stroke, that [the person might] never perceive the stroke itself” (ibid., 32).

Over the years we have related Gallwey’s tennis examples to exploration of our own teaching, as well as introduced his concept of *nonjudgment* to other teachers. Our message is that, rather than make judgments about our own or others’ teaching, we prefer to explore by describing teaching, something we emphasize throughout this book.

- 5 We encourage you and other teachers you know to do the tasks on your own and then to share your ideas with one another.
- 6 Simon and Boyer (1974) first brought our attention to the effect both negative and positive judgments can have on describing teaching.
- 7 Earl Stevick (1980) was one of the first to relate Gallwey’s (1974) ideas on judgment to second language teaching. Fanselow (1987) also discusses Gallwey’s ideas on judgment.

Task Break

1. Besides the verbal use of language, list other ways we express or demonstrate judgments. Can silence be judgmental? If so, can you think of an example?
 2. Do you feel you are capable of achieving Gallwey's state of nonjudgment (*a*) in regard to your teaching, and (*b*) in other aspects of your life?
 3. Listen to conversations in everyday places. Jot down short dialogues you hear that include lines that show judgment. If needed, add intonation markers and sketch or write a description of non-verbal behaviors, for example, a facial expression that shows judgment. Analyze your descriptive notes. What did you discover?
-

Attention to language and behavior

In addition to nonjudgmental description, we see value in paying close attention to the use of language and behavior. We have listened to and participated in a multitude of conversations about teaching, and one thing that is obvious is that teachers and teacher educators often use vague words to talk about teaching.⁸ We have heard teachers say such things as “My instructions weren’t very clear,” “The students need more encouragement,” and “I like the atmosphere in the class.” We have also heard teacher supervisors say things such as “Get the students more involved,” “Show more enthusiasm,” and “Try to get the students to be more interested in the class.” As we listen, it is apparent that such language is vague and, as a result, discussions about teaching seem to be based on a great amount of miscommunication.

Words such as “encouragement,” “clear,” “atmosphere,” “enthusiasm,” and “interested” are *high-inference* words. In other words, they have different meanings for different people. For example, when one teacher hears the word “involved,” she might think of a class of students attentively listening to a teacher lecturing from the front of the room. Another teacher might think that “involved” means students talking loudly in groups and the

8 For years, Fanselow (1977a, 1987, 1997) has pointed out the vague language that teachers use to talk about teaching. His ideas have directly influenced our understanding of the problems associated with the use of general vague words to describe teaching.

teacher walking from one group to the next. A third teacher might envision students deeply engrossed in reading silently at their seats.

Task Break

Study the following lines from M. M. Bakhtin's book
The Dialogic Imagination:

“The word in language is half someone else’s. . . .
[It] is not a neutral medium that passes freely and
easily. . . . It is populated – overpopulated – with the
intentions of others” (1981: 292). What do these lines
mean to you?

Recognizing a need to have a common language that can be shared by teachers, some educators offer observation systems that can be used as a metalanguage to talk about teaching. One such system that has gained some recognition for its usefulness is Allen, Fröhlich, and Spada's (1984) COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching). The most detailed we know of is Fanselow's (1977a, 1978, 1982, 1987) FOCUS (Foci for Observing Communication Used in Settings), which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Such coding and observation systems raise awareness through the precision of the metalanguages they provide for teachers in talking about what they do. Teachers trained in the use of such systems can get beyond the vagueness of high-inference words such as “atmosphere” and “enthusiasm.” Good and Brophy concur with us when citing one of the reasons why teachers are often unaware of what happens in their classrooms: “Historically, many teacher education programs have failed to equip teachers with specific teaching techniques or with skills for labeling and analyzing classroom behavior. Too often they gave teachers global advice (e.g., teach the whole child, individualize instruction) without linking it to specific behavior” (1997: 35). They agree that “*Conceptual labels* are powerful tools in helping teachers to become aware of what they do” (ibid., 36) and cite research findings that point to instances in which teacher education programs have failed to give teachers the metalanguage for labeling and monitoring their classroom behavior. Terms such as “quarterback sneak” in U.S. football or “checkmate” in chess have unique meanings in the context of playing or discussing those games. Participants or observers have a limited understanding of those games if they do not understand such terms. Why should teaching be any different?

FOCUS, for example, provides a common language to talk about teaching. Such a specific shared language can make communication among educators easier because it facilitates the sharing of meaning. Without this, teachers and their supervisors have to play internal guessing games about the vague words usually used to talk about teaching. Take, for example, the following statement in FOCUS terms: “I see a pattern in my *reacting* moves to their *responses* with ‘very good,’ even when a *response* misses the mark.” It is less likely that miscommunication will take place when this precise metalanguage is used rather than vague statements such as “I seem to dominate the class.” Also, in the former case the conversants are focused on describing what is happening, whereas in the latter example, a more judgmental tone creeps into the conversation.

Such specific descriptions not only make communication easier. They also allow us to describe teaching in such a way that we may more easily generate alternatives in our teaching. The supervisor working with the teacher in the example above might suggest or brainstorm with the teacher the following alternatives: “You could change the *source* of the *solicits* from yourself to the students by having them write down questions to ask you and each other”; “You could *react* to the student *responses* by being silent to see if other students react verbally.” The idea here is to use a metalanguage to talk about teaching rather than to use general statements and words. Going beyond general words provides a means for teachers to increase comprehension (to be “on the same page,” so to speak) and to have a language through which to generate teaching alternatives. Another important element here is in generating alternatives. The words “You could” are not usually meant as directives or as better ways to teach. They are, instead, meant as alternatives worth exploring for the sake of learning more about classroom dynamics. (We go into the use of FOCUS and how to generate alternative teaching behaviors in more detail in Chapter 3.)

We also recognize that teachers (with or without their supervisors) often follow a particular pattern of discourse when talking about teaching. We discuss this in Chapter 6, where we introduce the idea of how teachers (and teacher-supervisor pairs) can explore other ways than the usual ones when they converse about teaching. An example of three teachers breaking the mold (to some extent) is the subject of Chapter 8.

One important ingredient in changing the nature of the discourse is the role that listening plays. In paying attention to communication, teachers and supervisors need to consider how crucial listening is in opening up the conversational space (Edge 1992; Oprandy 1994b; Rardin, Tranel, Green, and Tirone 1988).

Rardin et al. emphasize how essential listening, or what they call *understanding*, means in relation to communication:

It is not only the basis of a sound interpersonal communication process but also of human belonging, which is essential to a learning community. A sense of secure belonging, regardless of one's difference from others or inadequacies, is the "glue" of the teaching-learning relationship. It is what holds the relationship together and gives it life and meaning. (1988: 53)

Establishing an understanding relationship is central in creating the kind of learning community in which learners are recognized as knowers in their own right and in which their unique learning process is acknowledged. "By genuinely becoming learners of them, the teacher conveys a deep regard for them as persons" (ibid., 22), not just as learners. This enables both teachers and students or teachers and their supervisors to explore one another's contributions to their co-construction of knowledge.

Avenues to awareness through exploration

In this section we address the following four *avenues to awareness*, which suggest different ways to explore our teaching:

1. problem solving
2. seeing what happens by
 - a) trying the opposite or
 - b) adapting random teaching behaviors
3. seeing what is by
 - a) contrasting what we do with what we think we do or
 - b) considering what we believe in light of what we do, and
4. clarifying our feelings

The first of these is a heavily traveled route; the others are roads less traveled. We encourage you to try different routes from time to time in expanding your awareness of teaching.

To focus your attention on *exploring through problem solving*, please imagine that you teach an 8 A.M. class and many of the students consistently come late to class. This presents a problem of trying to understand what causes the students' behavior. Are the students partying too much and cannot get out of bed in the morning? Are they studying late because they have too much homework? Don't they see the value of the class? Then, you try to solve the problem. You might have a heart-to-heart talk with the tardy students to let them know how you feel and discover why they come to class late. Based on what you find out, you change some aspect of the class or your behavior and see what happens.

Such a problem-solving process is a normal part of teaching. Certainly, each of us gains a certain amount of awareness about our teaching beliefs and practices as we work out problems. Besides this common avenue to

awareness are at least three others, ones that most teachers we have worked with find very useful, even fun.

One not-so-usual avenue to awareness is to *explore simply to see what happens*. To do this, Fanselow (1987, 1992a, 1997) suggests we try the opposite to our usual *modus operandi*. For example, if we are aware that we say “very good” after most student responses, we can be silent. If we find we give our instructions verbally, we can try writing them down for students to read. If we always teach from the front of the classroom, we can try teaching from the back. The idea is to discover what we normally do and to try the opposite to see what happens.

Another way to explore, adapted from Fanselow, is to see what happens by adapting random teaching behaviors. This can be done by writing down different teaching behaviors on slips of paper, including behaviors that we do not normally use. The idea is to select one or two of these slips of paper randomly and to adapt our teaching to include the behaviors written on them. Just for fun, it is also possible to select several slips of paper and to design an entire lesson based on what is written on them. Besides being fun and tapping our imagination and creativity, this can lead to some surprising discoveries. One way to select behaviors is to use categories from an observation system such as FOCUS. The categories and subcategories are rich with possibilities. Of course, it is also possible to use nontechnical words, such as “students ask questions to teacher,” “students ask each other questions,” “silence,” “overhead projector,” “candle with lights out,” “bottles,” “lesson content about students’ lives.”

In addition to exploring simply to see what happens, another avenue to awareness is *exploring to see what is*. This is at least a two-lane avenue to explore. One is *exploring what we actually do* in our teaching *as opposed to what we think we are doing*. To accomplish this, we need to become aware of what we think we are doing by keeping a record, perhaps writing in a journal. We then need to collect descriptions of our teaching relevant to the areas of our teaching under study. For example, if a teacher thinks that she has designed group work activities in which students are spending a lot of time working on the task, she could check this by tape-recording students during group work. (The trick is to get natural interaction, with students not doing things differently because of the tape recorder.) By taping and analyzing several groups interacting over the tasks the teacher gave them, she can determine if what she thinks is going on is indeed occurring.

A second lane to explore on the same avenue is considering *what we believe as teachers in relation to what we actually do*. Do our beliefs match our actual practices? To illustrate what we mean here, we will use a master’s thesis research project carried out by Jimenez-Aries (1992). Among

other things related to error treatment, the investigator was interested in learning about what ESL teachers who taught at the university language institute believed about error treatment in relation to how they treated errors. She interviewed two teachers to learn about their beliefs about treatment of oral errors. She also observed them teach. She discovered a variety of consistencies and inconsistencies. For example, she learned that one of the teachers believes in minimal error treatment, but in actuality, she corrected very often. She also discovered that the other teacher, who said she believed in treating errors as soon as they occur, as long as the treatment is not disruptive, consistently treated errors as soon as they occurred. This same teacher also stated that she explored a variety of techniques, depending on the situation. In fact, however, she consistently used the same technique to treat most errors. Jimenez-Aries's study shows that much can be gained by defining our beliefs about teaching, then seeing whether or not our behavior in the classroom matches them.

Finally, we can *explore to gain emotional clarity*. By exploring our feelings, we can gain awareness about things we feel deeply about or do not really care about, or are ambivalent about. This affective side of teaching is often neglected. Our feelings about things can affect our behavior, so we see a need to explore the emotional side of ourselves, including how we feel about ourselves, the students, teaching, and more.

We see personal journals (as opposed to dialogue journals that are read by others) as particularly suited for this type of exploration. Private journals are a place we can express our feelings without the threat of having to bring them out into full view. And, such exploration of feelings, coupled with other ways to explore, such as self-observation, reading, and talk with other teachers, can raise awareness of links between our personal and our professional lives (discussed in Chapter 7). It is through such exploration of feelings, for example, that some teachers discover a strong belief while writing in their journal after reading Jersild's (1955) classic *When Teachers Face Themselves*. Of the connections they make, Jersild says: "A teacher cannot make much headway in understanding others or in helping others to understand themselves unless he is endeavoring to understand himself" (p. 14).

Personal connections to teaching

Another distinguishing feature of the exploratory approach to teaching awareness is having teachers connect who they are (becoming) as teachers with who they are. We recognize that we all have unique connections to make, given the diverse contexts we live out at work and elsewhere. As such,

we feel we can greatly benefit from formulating *connecting questions*, that is, questions that connect our professional teacher persona with our personal, out-of-school selves. We might, for example, think about how we label students and people in general – and then explore whether a tendency to do so in class carries over to those we relate to in nonschool settings and vice versa. Or we might consider simpler, easier-to-see connections – for example, who and what we can bring into class from the outside community that will engage our students. Another area to explore is what we notice when we study or just pick up new skills and knowledge in a variety of subject areas (carpentry, dance, aerobics routines, and so on) that have lessons for us as teachers.

These links between who we are as people and as teachers are rarely dealt with in teacher education programs. We feel that they should assume more importance in the lives of those of us who want to gain awareness of our teaching. Teachers' contexts – especially given how mobile so many of us are at this time in history – change quite often, and at times dramatically. As a result, the same may be true of our connecting questions.

Personal connections to teaching allow teachers to relate anything in their life experiences to teaching, thus encouraging explorations well beyond the teaching act itself. The central aim is to foster reflective exploration that makes teaching come alive in whatever we do and wherever we go. Such personal exploration may go further in the long run in opening up awareness of our teaching than mastery of the latest techniques and methods of language teaching. After all, teaching fads come and go, but teachers remain in their classrooms, facing new challenges and students to work with every time they begin a new class.

Attention to process

We see value in teachers being attentive to the process of exploration. It is through understanding the process of exploration that we know how to explore. Also, by practicing exploration we deepen as well as expand our understanding of the process. Attention to the process of exploration is a key to continuing our professional development. Without a process to follow, we cannot be systematic in our efforts to gain awareness of our teaching, and, as a consequence, we will likely end up gaining this or that glimpse of our teaching practices and beliefs without being able to gain any real depth.

Throughout this guide, we provide several processes through which we can gain awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices. For example, in

Chapter 3 we show a process of observation adapted from Fanselow (1988), which includes how we can observe, analyze, and interpret our teaching. In Chapter 4 we adapt ideas from Crookes (1993), van Lier (1993), Wallace (1998), and others to show how to use action research as a way to explore teaching. In Chapter 5, adapting ideas from Bailey (1990) and others, we show how to use a teaching journal to process our teaching.

We want to emphasize, however, that although each of these processes is different in some ways, our adaptation of them includes important salient characteristics related to exploration of teaching. We feel that these processes contribute to the development of an exploratory approach to teaching when they are grounded in the assumptions about exploration we sketch out in this chapter. As we mentioned earlier, these include an understanding that we are each responsible for gaining awareness of our own teaching, but at the same time, we still need to collaborate with others; that we study descriptions of teaching, rather than follow prescriptions; that we pay attention to language and behavior; and that we consciously follow different avenues to exploration.

A beginner's mind

We feel that it is important for teachers to explore, as much as possible, with a beginner's mind (Suzuki: 1970). This means that we try to begin our conversations, observations, conferences, and other teacher education activities without preconceived ideas about what we think should be going on in the classroom. We agree with Fanselow (personal communication), who illustrates how he wants to approach his communications with other teachers from a beginner's mind:

What level is the class? Don't tell me. What is the goal of the lesson? Don't tell me. What is the type of activity you are going to use and what content are you teaching? Don't tell me. Let me try to hear what the students say and what you say. And let me try to see some things you and the students do. Let me not try to think of comprehension questions, or focused listening, or warm-up, or role play. Let me try to see and hear what communications are taking place and what communications seem not to be taking place.

The point is put another way by the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki:

When you listen to someone, you should give up all your preconceived ideas and your subjective opinions; you should just listen to him, just observe what his way is. We put very little emphasis on right and wrong or good and bad. We just see things as they are with him, and accept them. (1970: 87)

How can we go beyond superficial awareness?

The four concentric circles shown in Figure 1.1 illustrate the central thrusts of this book. The chief aim is for each of us – and the colleagues we choose to work with – to gain a heightened awareness of who we are as teachers. (The inseparability of who we are as teachers and as people is indicated in the illustration by parentheses around “teacher.”) Achieving this aim requires a greater than superficial awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices. Such a level of awareness is fostered by our attention to exploratory processes, which is what most of the chapters emphasize. The assumptions underlying exploration, as explained in this chapter, provide a ground-

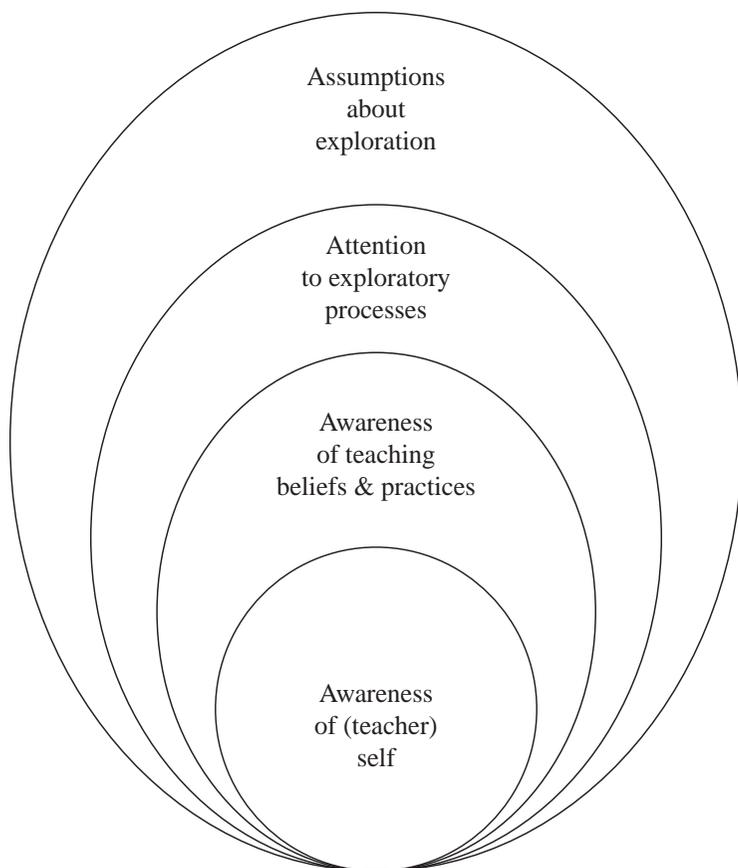


Figure 1.1

ing or backdrop for being more systematically attentive to exploring and being more aware of our teaching.

Jon Krakauer, mountain climber and author of *Into Thin Air*, describes the essence of exploring:

I dreamed of ascending Everest myself one day; for more than a decade it remained a burning ambition. By the time I was in my early twenties climbing had become the focus of my existence to the exclusion of almost everything else. Achieving the summit of a mountain was tangible, immutable, concrete. The incumbent hazards lent the activity a seriousness of purpose that was sorely missing from the rest of my life. I thrilled in the fresh perspective that came from tipping the ordinary plane of existence on end. (1997:23)

Teaching has been a major focus of our existence, and one full of hazards as well. How receptive will classes be to the activities planned? Will personal energies and interpersonal chemistry allow for the unfolding of events intended in our lesson plans? Will the arrangements we make for students to receive, work with, and construct knowledge be sufficient, and will we be flexible enough to move the group closer to our goals and their needs? Every time we walk into a classroom to teach there is a fresh perspective similar to what Krakauer finds on mountains, “tipping the ordinary plane of existence on end.” Our commitment to teaching remains very much alive, even after our combined half century of teaching, because there is so much more to explore.