

Reading and Reflection: Educators in Dialogue with Reflective Teacher Narratives

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In her thoughtful narrative essay, Cara Furman demonstrates the power of stories as transformative of practice. Furman uses her own story of her early years as a classroom teacher, woven with a narrative by Vivian Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, to demonstrate the claims she makes about the role that texts she designates as reflective teacher narratives (RTNs) play in the development of a teacher's practical wisdom. Within the essay, Furman writes her own RTN, using her own experiences to show the importance of developing practical wisdom.

Furman begins with the argument that one goal of teacher education should be to teach practical wisdom rather than to prescribe a discrete set of best practices to solve classroom problems. She defines practical wisdom as the ability to “respond thoughtfully to complex circumstances” that require consideration of multiple factors at once, including children's and teachers' locations within their communities, cultures, and classrooms, and teachers' beliefs about what constitutes good teaching. Furman's definition of practical wisdom draws on readings of Aristotle's texts on ethics. One in particular that she cites by Robert Smith notes that contemporary readings of Aristotle may “borrow from Aristotle where he is insightful.”¹ Furman, too, takes this approach to Aristotle's work, and, as I will later describe, she takes this approach to Paley's work as well. Thus, with Smith's best wishes, Furman contends that practical wisdom comprises both *phronesis* and craft. This is an important piece of her argument, since it allows her to talk about teaching methods and a mastery of content, or *techne*, and the moral elements of teaching as deeply connected. She argues that the practice of teaching is often a series of many moral decisions that are meted out through common activities and daily decisions. She writes, “What may seem like small acts lead up to an ethical approach to the world.”

This definition sets the stage for her discussion of Paley's RTN *You Can't Say You Can't Play* as a text that Furman, as an elementary school teacher, used to shape her own practical wisdom. Through her description of Paley's work and her own teaching, she expands on her both her claims that RTNs are one way to develop practical wisdom and that practical wisdom is essential to teaching well. Furman uses the story of her reading Paley's book to show how reading RTNs, in their particularity, becomes a springboard for meditations on bigger ethical ideas. *You Can't Say You Can't Play* is a particular story of a kindergarten teacher and her students. Readers like Furman use the text to join Paley in an exploration of the contours of exclusion in elementary school as well as a discussion of the impact of rules on groups. Through that text, Furman, as a new teacher, has the opportunity to explore these issues by proxy and then in her own classroom. Through Furman's essay, we see Paley's RTN fold into her own teacher narrative, and, just as she and Smith do with Aristotle's work, she borrows from Paley “where she is insightful.”

As a novice teacher, Furman describes her deep connection to the project Paley undertakes in *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. She took up Paley's inquiry herself, and, although she didn't institute the rule in her classroom, she used Paley's work as a guide to thinking through questions of inclusion and classroom management through rules. Reading *You Can't Say You Can't Play* launched me on an intellectual journey," she writes. Building upon the author's questions, she talked with friends about the book over dinner. Her development of practical wisdom takes place through a series of interconnected moments. She teaches, reads, thinks, discusses with friends and eventually writes this essay, modeling Paley's own practices.

What Furman describes here seems to me a dialectic with Paley's text; her reading of the text is a *practice*. Engagement with *You Can't Say You Can't Play* becomes part of her teaching practice in the same fluid manner that she describes Paley's thought process about her kindergartners as she runs, showers, and prepares to give a talk. More than just reading a book about a teacher's life, engagement with RTNs can lead to hermeneutic work, where the reader is *doing* understanding, practicing *with* a text.² In his work on hermeneutics, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between a work and a text. A work, he notes, "can be held in the hand, but the text is held in language ... the metaphor of the text is that of a *network*."³ Through the process of making meaning with the text, a reader becomes a participant, and the text becomes part of the readers meaning making systems. The role of reader becomes active, thoughtful and contextualized, as the reader considers both the author's and her own frames of reference. Although Furman notes her circumstances are quite different from Paley's — she teaches in an urban public school while Paley teaches in a suburban private one — the text becomes part of Furman's practice and impacts her teaching approach and philosophy. Paley became an interlocutor for Furman. Deep engagement with this text became part of her teaching, alongside discussions with students, lesson-planning, and organizing her room. In short, through this dialogue, she develops practical wisdom.

Like hermeneutic reading, the development of practical wisdom is a process that occurs through dialogue. In her recognition of her own situation and herself as a teacher through her reading of Paley, an intersubjective dialogue occurs between them.⁴ This kind of subjectivization — recognizing yourself as a subject working in conjunction with other subjects — is crucial work for teachers. While Furman's work does not directly take up this issue, I want to suggest that the kind of reading that Furman describes here engages teacher-readers in the development of self-awareness as teaching subjects.

In my own classes as a teacher educator, I often talk to students about their developing teacher identities. Although this seems like such a simple thing, in the current climate of teacher preparation, it's actually quite radical. Furman begins her essay by invoking *Teach Like a Champion* by Doug Lemov, which is styled as a handbook of best practices or rules of thumb. Furman's choice of *You Can't Say You Can't Play* seems an apt response to Lemov's text because it, too, is about rules. Yet, as Paley and Furman both learn through their inquiry, rules cannot be capriciously applied. They must be situated in a context and thoughtfully implemented.

Within communities of practice such as classrooms, rules work best when they are developed with input from all stakeholders. Furman and Paley both engage in this work with their students, and the result is more classroom harmony. But, as Furman notes, ultimately, she is developing practical wisdom, which will make her teaching sustainable.

Furman notes that the most provocative RTNs discuss challenges or problems that teachers approach both as actors and through a philosophical lens. By reading these RTNs, teachers and teacher candidates think with the author about these challenges and possible solutions or techniques that might be too risky in their own teaching environments. Reading about these RTNs is at once safe but also decentering, as it pushes the reader to think with the author about the author's challenges. RTNs may also be an occasion to introduce teacher candidates to the realities of the field that they will soon enter, one that is increasingly restrictive and regimented.

As a teacher educator, I try to make space for RTNs alongside the test preparation and assessment strategies I need to teach. I want my students to engage with authors such as Paley who can model an approach to practicing practical wisdom that they can use throughout their careers. Developing reflective practice is one way to help students continue to develop practical wisdom and also to remember that they are teaching subjects. In our current data-driven moment of standardization and absolute claims about "what works," it seems particularly important to make a space for the kind of reflective practice that reading RTNs thoughtfully demands of us, and Furman's essay reminds us of this.

1. Richard Smith, "Paths of Judgment: The Revival of Practical Wisdom," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31, no. 3 (1999): 327–340.

2. Martin Heidegger "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 1971).

3. Roland Barthes. *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 155–164.

4. For more on this, see Melissa Freeman, "Performing the Event of Understanding in Hermeneutic Conversations with Narrative Texts," *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 7, (2007): 925–944.