

## On Teacher Knowledge: A Return to Shulman

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Many would agree with the idea that “teaching . . . presumes . . . an activity whose meaning is larger than the sum of its parts,”<sup>1</sup> but this statement can be interpreted in a number of different ways. For example it might lead one to think that teaching can never be described by looking at the different components that constitute it, because teaching is a constellation of activities and knowledge — none of which can be analyzed separately without losing something in the process. But this statement also suggests that all one can ever do is look at the parts, and that a more thorough focus on many small complex pieces allows a larger goal to be realized. This is the crucial issue that Stanton Wortham explores in his essay on knowledge and action.

In his essay, Wortham revisits a conversation between Lee S. Shulman and Hugh T. Sockett on the nature of teacher knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Shulman argues that teacher education programs need to demarcate more clearly what might be considered a “body of knowledge” — a collection of teacher scholarship based on both content knowledge as well as methods, despite the obvious limitations of language. Both Sockett and Wortham reason that Shulman’s emphasis on a “body of knowledge” misrepresents the contextual nature of teacher wisdom, and the multiple ways that knowledge and action interact. Wortham argues that a dialogic approach to classroom practice shows “how deeply knowledge and action interpenetrate in the classroom,” and that knowledge-based approaches such as Shulman’s are not sufficient in and of themselves for describing the kinds of complicated social interactions that must take place in a classroom. Wortham contends that “knowledge and action cannot be disentangled as easily as Shulman suggests.”

Shulman’s work, nonetheless, should be commended as a necessary and valuable part of teacher education. Because his motivation for writing the article stems from a reaction to research-based methods that attempt to prescribe teacher behavior based on students’ success on standardized tests, he argues for a new understanding of the idea of a “body of knowledge” and expands it to include both the kinds of research and writing that are produced, as well as the kinds of skills, behaviors and practices that produce good teachers. He admits to emphasizing the idea of a “knowledge base” rather than the idea of “practice,” reasoning that “this emphasis is justified by the resoluteness with which research and policy have so blatantly ignored those aspects of teaching in the past.”<sup>3</sup> As Shulman argues, there is much to be gained by attempting to clarify what teacher knowledge is, however simplified that knowledge may initially be. Teacher knowledge will never be transparent to the observer, but avoiding the problem deprives teachers of a valuable set of guidelines from which to move beyond.

Teacher knowledge is a messy kind of wisdom involving content knowledge, learning research, and teaching techniques as well as knowledge that can only be attained in social practice or by personal experimentation. Wortham explores the

nature of teacher knowledge by focusing on the way speech works as both knowledge and action. He describes language in Bakhtinian terms as “heteroglossia” wherein “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” suggesting the multiple ways that students and teachers can position themselves in dialogic action. As Wortham puts it, “According to Bakhtin, we cannot fully understand the meaning of teachers’ and students’ utterances unless we also attend to the types of people who might make similar utterances, and to the implications of these utterances for teachers’ and students’ own interactional positions.” Wortham’s analysis shows that teaching is more than a body of knowledge or a concrete list of practices or skills, it is a way of being in relation to others.

Attaining teacher knowledge is an intricate and subtle process, and is necessarily immersed in both practice and action, none of which can be easily described. Teachers operate on many different levels when attempting to understand their students’ multiple positions, and they must also respond to the physical environment including outside distractions, speech inflection, body language, and the pace of the conversation. As Deborah Britzman notes in her work on teacher education, “for those who leave this world to enter teacher education, their first culture shock may well occur with the realization of the overwhelming complexity of the teacher’s work and the myriad ways this complexity is masked and misunderstood.”<sup>4</sup> Shulman observes that teaching seems to be “devoid of a history of practice,” in part because it is so hard to define, and so complex. Teaching is often learned over a long period of time and becomes second nature, rendering it difficult to define or articulate. To a large degree it becomes a kind of tacit knowledge: “that which is unarticulated (and perhaps unarticulatable) by the knower, [and which is] of sufficient complexity to resist statement in propositional form as rules of performances.” In addition Sockett writes, tacit knowledge finds “expression in the knower’s performance without a self-conscious awareness, but, nevertheless, [is] describable and observable by others.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas Shulman wants to articulate tacit knowledge in the fullest sense possible, Sockett and Wortham both argue that this is the wrong strategy — that teachers should not try to systematize their knowledge by isolating it from practice because something is lost in the analysis.

It is clear that tacit knowledge is an important component of teacher knowledge, but it is not obvious that it is the only component or even a major component. For example, when learning how to produce a good sound on the flute, a student can easily be overwhelmed with the complexity of the task. Teachers often use strategies of imagery such as, “think of spinning the air,” or “blowing out a candle.” Another tactic is to describe the way the mouth is held — to push the jaw forward. Other helpful hints such as relaxing the lips can go a long way toward bringing the student closer to a tone that is acceptable and pleasant to listen to, but no statement in and of itself is enough to capture the feeling of producing a well-supported tone. Indeed it may take years to attain, but all of these pieces of fragmented knowledge bring students up to a certain level. It may be that some students are better able to imitate and do not need verbal cues as much as other students, however, most students seem to benefit from this type of knowledge. At a certain point students will simply have to experiment with their own mouths to determine what works best for them — these

things can never be taught by a teacher — but this does not negate the value of learning some basic guidelines for good tone production.

A well-articulated set of guidelines for teacher practice as well as a list of well-documented research is a vital component of a well-rounded teacher education program. This type of wisdom only goes so far, however, and teachers must step beyond this kind of knowledge. To become good teachers they must learn what works best for them, and this is something that can never be learned by a set of procedures or guidelines. This is the conclusion which Wortham's argument points to, but it does not negate the value of Shulman's work. For example, in learning how to ask good discussion questions, teachers must have both a well-developed working knowledge of the discipline as well as a good handle on what students will respond to, what interests them and how to ask questions in a way that provokes them to respond, but they will never be able to ask good questions without knowing something about the material, independently of whether they have finely tuned classroom management skills. Most teacher activities seem to have a component of both knowledge and practice, but at least at the beginning, when learning how to teach, it is extremely helpful to focus on those things that can be articulated in a systematized way.

Tacit knowledge is indeed an important part of teaching. Certain aspects of teaching can only be learned in practice or by personal experimentation and are not easily described by language. But Shulman's interpretation of a body of knowledge also serves some important and crucial purposes. There are many aspects of teaching that can and should be articulated, although what those items are should constantly be re-negotiated and should never remain static. A body of knowledge such as this is meant to be a stepping stone, not a stopping point for teacher knowledge.

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1. David Hansen, "Teaching and the Sense of Vocation," *Educational Theory* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 269.

2. See Lee S. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 1 (February 1987):1-22; Hugh T. Sockett, "Has Shulman Got the Strategy Right?" *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 2 (May 1987): 209-19; Lee S. Shulman, "Sounding an Alarm: A Reply to Sockett," *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 4 (November 1987): 473-82. For a delightful conversation on the topic of teacher knowledge see D.C. Phillips, "On Teacher Knowledge: A Skeptical Dialogue," *Educational Theory* 38, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 457-66; Francis Schrag, "On Teacher Knowledge — Expanding the Dialogue," *Educational Theory* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 269-70; and D.C. Phillips, "Response to Schrag, or, He Who Laughs Last..." *Educational Theory* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 271-72. See also Nicholas C. Burbules, "Why Practice Doesn't Make Perfect: The Pragmatics of Teaching Knowledge," (Australian Teacher Education Conference Proceedings, Summer 1997), forthcoming; Robert E. Orton, "Two Problems with Teacher Knowledge," *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson.(Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994), 365-73; and Robert Ennis, "Is There a 'Knowledge Base for Teaching?'" in Thompson, *Philosophy of Education 1993*, 374-77.

3. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching," 13.

4. Deborah Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach* (New York: SUNY, 1991), 4.

5. Sockett, "Has Shulman Got the Strategy Right?" 214.