

Teaching in Response

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I propose making careful, conscious, and concerted use of the image and language of response (1) as a tool for understanding, and potentially enhancing, the practice of teaching; and (2) as a lamplight for illuminating the coincident nature of teaching as moral endeavor and intelligent action. The use of response-related language in regard to education — respond, responsive, responsibility — is not novel; it has appeared with regularity in educational literature for more than a decade. Here, I sharpen the focus a bit, offering response and its cognate ideas as a *central*, organizing device for deliberation and action in teaching in *this* time and place. In doing so, I suggest that the image of response is more accurately *descriptive* of teachers' deliberation-into-action generally than are other available images. I also maintain that the good teacher is one who recognizes the "interpret-respond" structure of action in teaching and who optimizes the possibilities inherent in that structure.

Pedagogical response-ability has three dimensions:

1. Response-ability acknowledges the matter of fact that teachers are agents who act always in *response* to other persons, external demands, and complex situations only partly of their own making.
2. Response-ability holds out as desirable an ideal of expanded and expansive *responsiveness*; that is, persons can be more or less aware of the other, more or less attentive to the other's needs and concerns, more or less able (though not necessarily required) to put aside their own interests to serve the interests of the other.
3. Response-ability encompasses and expresses accountability for one's actions as a teacher. The often used term *responsibility* suggests just this, that my actions have consequences for which I am always accountable to my community of action (my colleagues, my students, their parents, the district in which I teach, the taxpayers who support that district) because those actions ground who I am and who I will be as a teacher in that community.

The teacher who can respond, be responsive, and take responsibility is not a teacher who reacts thoughtlessly or insensitively. A reaction is more typically understood as acting back without benefit of the careful consideration that marks teaching as moral/intelligent. To focus on the image of response opens up the possibility of developing from reaction to response-ability, to minimizing thoughtless, insensitive acting back and maximizing thoughtful, sensitive, fitting answer/actions.

Thus, pedagogical response-ability may well be more than a fitting description of the way teachers actually negotiate the continuum of deliberation and action in teaching; that is, it may illuminate the foundations of the practice of teaching. I believe that it provides a vehicle both for exposing the nature of teaching as

intentionally two-sided — moral/intelligent — and for imagining the development of good teachers.

In what follows, I focus primarily on my claim that the image of response is a tool for understanding the practice of teaching. I support that claim by sharing a small slice of one teacher's practice and uncovering the layers of personal and professional circumstance needed to understand it.

MRS. M AND JIM

- Mrs. M: If you have an x and you have a y , what do you have Jim?
- Jim: You've got a point.
- Mrs. M: A point. So I've got a recipe [She points to " $y = 3x$ " written on the blackboard.] that tells me how to get every single point on the line. And the thing is all I have to do is make sure that every single y coordinate is 3 times whatever x is....So what can x be?
- Jim: Five.
- Mrs. M: What else can it be?
- Jim: Any number.
- Mrs. M: It can be any number. Why can it be any number? [She pauses as Jim looks blank.] What's a line made up of, Jim?
- Jim: All different points.
- Mrs. M: All different points. And any time you move from one point to the next what happens to your x coordinate?
- Jim: It gets moved. It changes.
- Mrs. M: It changes. So it's like you're in the driver's seat. You can make x any number you want. What number do you want it to be?
- Jim: Five. [Mrs. M points to the " y " in the equation on the board.] Fifteen.
- Mrs. M: Yes, why?
- Jim: Because five times three is fifteen.
- Mrs. M: Can you do the rest of it?
- Jim: Yeah. [$X =$] Three. [$Y =$] Nine. [$X =$] Four. [$Y =$] Twelve.
- Mrs. M: What did you just come up with?
- Jim: Points.
- Mrs. M: You know how to put them on a graph?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Mrs. M: You understand what you are doing?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Mrs. M: The rest of you, you OK with this?

This bit of teaching and learning is routine. We have a female teacher and a male student engaged in questions and answers about an algebra problem. No other students participate, but Mrs. M's question at the end referring to "the rest of you" suggests that this is not a tutoring session for Jim alone.

The pedagogical approach might be characterized as traditional in that the teacher is leading the student through solving a particular problem. The teacher questions; the student answers. When he struggles, she shifts her tack a bit, continuing a related line of questioning. Jim follows readily but initiates nothing. Mrs. M offers a way of thinking about equations as “recipes,” perhaps an odd reference for a fifteen year old male but apparently general enough for Jim to make the connection.

Can we tell from the transcript whether Mrs. M taught well or Jim learned? No. Based purely on the data available above we really do not know what’s going on here. We do not even know whether they are in a school or a classroom, or that they are, in any institutional sense, teacher and student. Still, most of us have filled in the blanks and imagined this scene in a classroom with some general sense of the tone of the interaction. We have even formed a rudimentary opinion about whether this is a “good” scene or a not-so-good one. But we have done so without justification, without knowing the circumstances to which Mrs. M is responding. By reconstructing these circumstances — by turning our interpretive attention to Mrs. M to Jim, and to the setting in which they come together, we construct a window on Mrs. M’s deliberation, identifying, layer by layer, the elements that evoke her recognition, interpretation, consideration of options and response-in-interaction.

Mrs. M

Mrs. M stands at the front of the room as the students file in for second period. Tall, slender, and friendly, she seems youthful but not young. She is a white woman with 26 years of teaching experience. She began her career right out of college and took occasional timeouts to nurture three children.

She is a mother figure, the kind of mother most teenagers would like to have — interested but not too involved, caring but not cloying, “with it” but not trying to be anything but the middle-aged mother/teacher she is. She has a soft spot for any child who is in danger of being left out and she knows it. She never considered a career other than teaching. But teaching math? She is one of those teachers reform reports rail about, one teaching outside her field of expertise.

She was interested in coaching basketball as well as teaching when she graduated from college. A principal wanted to hire her as a coach and asked “what can you teach?” She answered honestly that she was an elementary education major. When the principal asked again what she could teach, she responded “math,” a subject she had enjoyed as a student. She became a math teacher. While she has engaged in professional development throughout her career, attending seminars and courses and reading a great deal, she has never formally studied mathematics.

When asked about her ethical commitments, she replies “A good work ethic.” The value she places on this is clear in the posters dotting the classroom (one says “ATTITUDE is more important than ABILITY”) and in her fairly constant classroom refrain. (“We both know this is something you can do, but you just haven’t done it.”)

It is clear that for this mother/teacher, algebra is a vehicle more than a destination. She says, “It’s not about algebra....it’s about walking out those doors

in three or four years and having to do something for yourself and taking care of yourself, and being able to say, “I can do whatever I need to do.” She is focused on her students’ sense of efficacy and the self-discipline that results in efficacy; math is, first and foremost, a means to that end. And that may be why no student is allowed to drop between the cracks. Mrs. M clearly views her students’ success as her responsibility. If they fail, so does she. And so she spends time with students in study halls and before and after school. She specifically mentions students who may not be able to “catch on” in class but whom she will see later.

Or maybe students must not be allowed to fail because her religious faith requires attention to “human dignity and respect.” That means loving others without being judgmental. “So in teaching, you’ve really got to be not judgmental. And you have to look for the best in those kids, the way you have to look for the best in everybody. And that’s the way you live a life. And that’s what religion is.”

Does knowing Mrs. M alter *our* understanding and evaluation of the original teaching scenario? This is a difficult question. More information opens up more possibilities. For each question answered, other questions emerge. We might interpret Mrs. M’s prolonged attention to Jim as an instantiation of her concern that each student succeed, and her sense that student success is at least partially her responsibility. We might interpret his attention and cooperation as indicative of some respect, even affection, for this older woman who so clearly values him.

Can she be a good algebra teacher if she does not *really* know mathematics? And if she can, what makes that possible? Before knowing Mrs. M, we might focus more on the construction of the math lesson. We might wonder whether she is knowledgeable enough to teach any math, even algebra, well. Knowing her and her goals, though, we look for other clues, clues about her personal influence. We might even evaluate the pedagogy not based on standards for math instruction but based on visions of adolescent development.

What role does Mrs. M’s self-understanding play in her response-ability? We suspect that after years of experience Mrs. M is not really thinking consciously about her subject matter “inadequacy” or even about her goals of self-efficacy for each student. So many prior experiences have likely resulted in habitual modes of presentation, explanation and assessment. Is she thinking at all? She must be thinking about linear equations, perhaps about the innumerable times she has taught this topic and about the ways students go astray. Given her goals, she probably *is* thinking about Jim. Who *is* Jim? What does he need?

JIM

Jim is a white, male student, fifteen years old. He is a ninth-grader. He is dressed in slacks and a golf shirt with the school logo on it. He is much like the other thirty students in the class, all dressed as neatly as adolescent males can manage and most slumped over in their chairs. His textbook and his homework are open on his desk.

Jim is in the “lower” track. This means that he is among the less academically successful students. There does not appear to be much reason for Jim to care about algebra and he probably does not. He is respectful and cooperative, if not inspired.

One might guess that Mrs. M is “OK” in his book. She seems to treat him with the same friendly respect and clear expectations that she applies to the other young men. Jim sits with the contingent near the front of the room rather than with a half dozen boys slumped more pronouncedly at the back. The “back row boys” seem less involved than those who are physically closer to the teacher.

Jim’s cooperation may be a function of Mrs. M’s ongoing interaction with him. She describes it:

Jim struggles with problems paying attention during class. Through the year, I had worked with him individually in the morning and we had an agreement that I would try to keep him on task. He has a very difficult home life and has a hard time leaving the problems behind; therefore, my way to help was to call on him in class when I thought he was wandering. This seemed to work since he started the year with grades in the 70s and finished with high 80s.

Does this information illuminate Mrs. M’s action? There are at least five items that affect our understanding and Mrs. M’s response.

1. Mrs. M has worked individually with Jim over time and Jim comes to class with homework nearly completed. Apparently, she cares about him and he is a student who does his part. She responds by continuing to invest time and attention in him; he continues to respond cooperatively to her.
2. Jim is not a student who has experienced significant academic success in any norm-referenced sense. Nonetheless, nearing the end of his freshman year, he is performing responsibly in a school subject that many students find daunting.
3. Jim is in a class with more than thirty other students. Can Mrs. M respond fully to Jim while responding to other students as well?
4. Jim and the rest of his classmates are all male. Does this matter? Does she and should *we* respond differently?
5. Jim is white. So is Mrs. M. Does he experience attention or expectations or culturally responsive teaching that non-white students do not?

Again, the more information we have, the more we potentially understand, the more complex the composition of the picture becomes. And there are still more aspects of the situation to be recognized and interpreted before responsive action is possible.

WHERE ARE THEY?

Jim and Mrs. M meet in a traditional looking classroom on the third floor of an older school building in a major urban area. Desks in rows face the front blackboard. The teacher’s desk is in the front of the room off to one side. The room seems crowded because more than forty desks take up all the available space. Old textbooks occupy shelves under the windows.

The school is an all-male Catholic school with seven hundred students. Those students are predominantly white; perhaps ten per cent of the school population is African American or Latino. The school is struggling — as are most schools, both public and parochial, in this particular area. Families with the means are getting out of the city. Many of those left cannot afford the tuition bill in a Catholic school. Still, the school has three critical factors operating in its favor: tradition, relatively small size and parental support.

Facilities are serviceable, but no more than that. Neither equipment nor texts are regularly updated and upgraded. Textbooks in Algebra I are older than the students — and do not reflect the discussion of the past two decades on standards and methods for the teaching of mathematics. White boards or other teaching devices are requested year after year but fail to make the cut in the budget process. Mrs. M does have a stock of graphing calculators for student use, but she sometimes makes the decision not to use them because she must distribute, gather and track the calculators, a process that eats into instructional time.

The faculty is mostly men, outnumbering women by a 4:1 ratio. There are a few new teachers but a lot of old timers. They are led by a Catholic priest who seems to be reading the latest in learning theory and leadership models but who has not yet found the key to unlocking a faculty that might be described as “resistant.” Long years of service at remarkably low salaries have taken a toll.

It is April, late in the school year and in the Algebra I curriculum, but it is second period, early in the school day. The class is solving systems of linear equations. Last night’s homework involved using the graphing method — generating sets of points for each equation and approximating the intersection of the two equations visually. Mrs. M is checking for understanding of basic concepts: of a point as a set of coordinates and of a line as a set of points. The linear equation “ $y = 3x$ ” is written on the blackboard.

Mrs. M: If you have an x and you have a y , what do you have Jim?

Jim: You’ve got a point.

Mrs. M: A point. So I’ve got a recipe

At this point, one might experience a kind of low-key “aha!” Mrs. M’s practice, exemplified in our brief scenario, seems to fit the circumstances. Teaching in a tradition-bound, testosterone-rich, and resource-limited environment places some perceptible boundaries on what is pedagogically possible for her. So, perhaps, does her limited experience with upper level mathematics. Still, she is a mature woman with sons of her own who knows much about the needs of adolescent males. She is an experienced teacher with well-developed and articulated goals for her students’ growth. She has developed subject matter understanding built not on the foundation of upper level mathematics but on the potential misunderstandings of adolescents. She makes it her business to know her students even when large numbers make that difficult. She stays with Jim, paying attention, insuring through the structure of her questioning and the nature of her explanations, some sense of success, of efficacy. She is pedagogically response-able.

Contemporary researchers, theorists, and reformers might wish for a different scenario — one more clearly constructivist in structure and interaction. It is a simple matter to recommend that teachers use specific instructional approaches from the comfortable spaces occupied by those who have the luxury of deliberating without the exigencies of action. But those in many instructional spaces have no such luxury. Pedagogical response-ability is not about following pedagogical prescriptions as rules; it *is* about responding fully to these externally generated principles as *one* (important) *element* in a rich pedagogical picture. Pedagogical response-ability does

not demand slavish pursuit of academic outcomes; it *does* require conscious and continual attention to personal and community goals and consequences, and responses that are at once realistic and hopeful.

Looking at a teacher's practice through the lens of pedagogical response-ability also illustrates how teachers who "know better" can be defeated in their quest for pedagogical success by a lack of resources, by students' immediate physical or emotional needs, by school climate. Used as an analytic lens, pedagogical response-ability offers guidance toward strengthening teaching efforts. Teachers who do not "know better" can identify gaps in their knowledge and fill those gaps. Teachers who know but do not do better can learn to interrogate the obstacles, both external and internal, and respond in the manner that fits not just the negative elements of limited budget and inflexible attitudes but also the positive pull of new theories and student potential. Relevant information increases the odds of acting in a way that fits all things considered.

Mrs. M is an agent. She responds every day to students who need to know algebra but really do not want to know it, to colleagues who generally do not want to change the program, to a principal who does want to change, to textbooks that support only traditional pedagogical moves, to a Mission Statement that matches fairly well with her desire to launch good young men, to state and national calls for reform in teaching, to a budget that does not provide the materials that reform strategies recommend, and to what she knows and what she does not know about math. She responds to the immediate "story" of her student(s). Is Jim awake this morning? Is his homework done? Is today the day of the big game or the day after the big break-up? And she responds in light of ongoing relationships and perceived values in the school community.

Mrs. M sifts through the sands of this situation and acts. She figures out what requires response today, what is really going on, what she might do in response, and how her responses might affect others. Sometimes she does so consciously. By her own admission, she is sometimes unconscious of the role that some factors play. This quality of being unconscious must itself be interpreted. Experts are unconscious; their attention to all relevant factors has become so habitualized that no conscious consideration is needed. But a lack of conscious awareness can also signal a space for development, for enhanced understanding, for a more fitting response in practice.

A RESPONSE MODEL

More than forty years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr, a Christian ethicist, argued for a view of moral deliberation grounded in response.¹ He was critical of the dominant models of the day, deontology (with a discover-obey-rules structure) and teleology (with a means-end-consequences structure), arguing that while these were useful, they were woefully incomplete. He offered response as an image that folded in rules and consequences, and re-placed those in a richer framework of deliberation and action that more accurately captured authentic moral deliberation. He puts it thus:

[O]ur actions are responsible not only insofar as they are reactions to interpreted actions upon us but also insofar as they are made in anticipation of answers to our answers. An agent's action is like a statement in a dialogue....Responsibility lies in the agent who stays with his

action, who accepts the consequences in the form of reactions and looks forward in a present deed to the continued interaction.²

The four elements of this view: prior action, interpretation, anticipation, and social solidarity, can be developed into an heuristic for teaching and teacher education. Pedagogical response-ability means that teachers:

1. recognize actions and conditions that have pedagogical import and require educator response;
2. interpret and evaluate the needs and desires of students, the mandate of societal and institutional expectation, the intellectual demand of “funded knowledge,” the press of one’s own personal and professional goals, the limits of one’s own energy and capability;
3. devise and evaluate alternative responses, anticipating the consequences of each in light of the life circumstances and stories of all involved and with reference to the predictions of theory and the findings of research; and
4. act with/in a particular school community, broadly construed.

All of this occurs in relation to the individual teacher-agent’s value system, usually anchored in what Niebuhr refers to as a “Center of Value” (which may or may not reside in traditional religious faith). The seemingly technical responses made to any prior action are embedded in some larger system of evaluation and self-understanding that is rarely fully conscious.

This is not to say that any particular teacher ever deliberates-into-action in a completely conscious or fully response-able way. It is to say that this pedagogical adaptation of Niebuhr’s heuristic is a practical conceptualization, providing a frame for understanding Mrs. M’s action, a guide for teachers seeking to enhance practice, and an agenda for teacher education and development. It illustrates vividly that professional development for teachers is a much more far reaching endeavor than is usually imagined. It allows teachers and interested others to consider what might otherwise be blind spots — circumstances not considered, motivations unexamined, persons ignored.

MORAL/INTELLIGENCE

I noted in the introduction that I offered pedagogical response-ability as an organizing image for thinking about teaching today. States pressure administrators who pressure teachers who pressure students for higher test scores. Educational researchers offer visions of learning that contradict much of past practice and most of present pressure. Teachers are lambasted as not quite bright enough and obviously ill-prepared. Schools are blamed for many economic and social ills. Courts caution against violating the church/state separation; politicians seek to breach those constraints. Cultural diversity is a recognized social reality and prompts competing political agendas. More than ever, teachers require *moral sensitivity*, *intelligently employed* if present pressures, principles, needs, cautions, and interests are to be appropriately measured and integrated into action. Yet little of the language and almost none of the policy of teaching today recognizes this requirement. As we look at a particular teaching scenario, we construe what we see in technical or instrumental terms. Teachers who do this limit the possibilities of their own practice. Policy

makers who fail to appreciate the moral contours and the method of intelligence implicit in teaching risk making program decisions that are unresponsive, that do not fit. The pedagogical response-ability frame highlights the presence or absence of moral sensitivity, intelligently employed by expanding the breadth of the canvas to be considered and by uncovering the moral/intelligence composition of deliberation-into-action.

I use the “moral/intelligence” locution here to convey a reality about teaching that can be read in Mrs. M’s response to Jim. When she acts intelligently (for example, by utilizing the metaphor of a recipe to explain linear equations), her actions are moral (in that she responds to Jim and what he knows and can understand). When she acts morally (for example, by caring about all students, whatever their academic prospects), her actions are intelligent (in that she provides Jim with the kind of attention he requires to master linear equations). “Moral” is not used here to convey a conventional morality; rather it suggests the experience of being moved to right response, to the action that fits. “Intelligence” is not a fixed measure of one’s cognitive capability but a quality of mind understood functionally as deliberation-into-action. That which is moral and that which is intelligent (“moral/intelligence”) originate together in action, in response, a point that John Dewey, Martin Buber and Immanuel Levinas help us see.³ All three understand human action as response and all three understand response as foundational to ethical/educational practice. The self as agent exists in relation, a relation that is intelligent (Dewey), committed (Buber), and inevitable (Levinas). Until we appreciate this point, we will not fully apprehend the moral dimensions of teaching nor secure the intelligent practice of pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

Mrs. M’s encounter with Jim is not offered as data to support an hypothesis. It stands as a generative illustration of a practical conceptualization. It is useful if it is fruitful, that is, if it sparks a (re)consideration of other ordinary pedagogical scenarios in a light that shines on moral/intelligence. Similarly, the notion of pedagogical response-ability may be judged by its “fit” and its fruitfulness. If pedagogical response-ability accurately captures the experience of teachers and if the language of response enables consideration of teaching practice as, at once, moral and intelligent, then we ought to make careful, conscious and concerted use of this image and language. For now, I suggest we try it on.

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

2. *Ibid.*, 64.

3. See, for example, John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1966); Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970); and Immanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).