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Articulating Beliefs

I preface by saying that I do want to get at some truths, whatever they may be. Setting down my beliefs is obviously a good start. But, because this is a 'process,' I might have to forgo linearity for the time being. Clarity will be a goal, of course. I can only pledge that, on my way to a set of teaching beliefs, I will do my best to get things on paper in whatever form, filter minimally, and edit like hell.

1 Nobody's going to tell you what they actually believe. People will, with full sincerity, write and pledge their beliefs. They will believe they are revealing the goodness of their soul by setting down a wonderful set of very organized beliefs. And, they may in fact be wonderful and caring people. But people are rarely aware of what their virtues truly are. What I heard in class were people describing their beliefs as aspirations. And even some good old fashion ass kissing. I heard people trying to be liked, both by themselves and by others. I am also guilty of these things. I wouldn't have jobs otherwise. And all that I have said thus far does not preclude the belief that I think **one must set down beliefs**. If you don't, you can't form goals. You must aspire. If not, you will collapse under the weight of unfulfilling days and weeks. If you don't set down your beliefs, you won't know when to quit. Sometimes a job is untenable. If you don't know what you believe in you won't know when to quit. But as leader of small groups, I must **read between the lines**. There's a belief. I want to see what a person thinks they believe, and I want to see how that jives with what they do.

2 How can one describe the way one believes *La boheme* should go? Who's going to tell you how a singer should be trained? What definitive method is one going to employ to teach an L2? I understand that believing in 'learner centeredness' is not necessarily revealing one's method. The first three queries will get you many pithy answers, and clever sounding epithets, but reveal little. In my business, people are not going to tell you what they are thinking. Ever! But I do notice that in ESL environments, people do love their jargon; 'learner centered,' 'communication language teaching,' 'beyond the sentence,' etc. One of our colleagues told us an inspiring anecdote that illustrated her 'learner centered' belief. This was furthered by using the example of her principal/boss imposing a family style approach; kids eating, the principal making sure to ask kids how they were doing. Is this learner centered? Or is this a prescriptive CLT? Is the principal imposing a specific style of learner centered teaching environment? Are teachers adhering to someone else's beliefs? My point is; I don't know! I love a good story, and I love feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. But until I see it for myself, I can't evaluate how it works, or if it works. **I am a fanatic about my students, adult or otherwise.** And I want to make sure that whatever beliefs I set down, they are the beginning of a serious investigation into the practice of teaching.

3 Yes, everybody's assignment is to set down definitive beliefs. And, in order to organize one's thoughts, one has to set down some ideas in an organized fashion. **One has to commit to a plan!** Understood, and acknowledged. I know that Yanire, Giovanna and Nergiss (just to name a few)

are going to be caring teachers. If I were to interview them for a job in a school, I would immediately see that. And this quality is one of the most important qualities I would look for in hiring teachers and colleagues. I see their intelligence, their heart, and more importantly, their hurt. Yes, maybe the most important trait a good teacher should have is the ability to suffer for students. With these three ladies, it's their shaky voices, their energy, their confusion that inspires me. Whatever they say they believe in, they can't help but be learner centered. I just hope I have some of this. I would never ever hire a person who isn't learner centered in their bones!! So though I say I do not believe in a learner centered curriculum, and though I advocate for a courses that should be subject and skill centered, I work to help students realize their goals, and, therefore, overall, (Do I dare say it?) I am learner centered. I also want toughness. I need teachers who can think on their own. I need teachers who are going to fight for their beliefs, not just cave in to mine. Teachers who are independent and yet transparent. We know how territorial things can be. There is a lot of backstabbing in these institutional environments. Teachers are trying to hold on to their turfs and reputations. I need teachers I don't have to babysit. (Are you getting that this might be one of these 'nonlinear' moments?)

4 Though I haven't yet, **I believe every teacher should write** a workbook, a book of exercises, or even a memoir. All that attempts to set down one's thoughts are useful, maybe necessary. I am aware that I can't know what I believe in until I start writing things down. Everybody's jealous of Richard Millers' books about voice. Everybody wants to write a vocal work book like William Vennard's. Manuel Garcia's manuals are inimitable and comprehensive. There is no better book than Harry Plunket Greene's 'Interpretation in Song.' He also wrote, 'Where the Bright Waters Meet' a book about fly fishing. The reason I mention this is because all the great teachers I know are artisan's of something or another, whether cabinetry or sports, drawing or cooking. My last singing teacher, who was very famous, wanted me to help him write a workbook. But in the two years I met with him (every Thursday for 3 hours), he brought not a single piece of paper, not a single written idea. Like most teachers of music he was Hopperesque: mute, socially inept, and only interested in getting back to the studio to teach. In the end, he was unable to reveal anything. And the eighty or so pages of notes I had written, he was not interested in. He was a perfect example of '**nobody's going to tell you what they actually believe.**' He would often give predigested speeches to dilettante fundraisers, filled with pithy maxims about music and opera. They loved it, and money was raised. I love him, but I could not be his promoter.

5 You can't teach people who don't want to learn. People come in and participate to get a grade, or to feel better about themselves. And you won't hold on to your job if you don't give those 'time bandits' their due. But while you're allowing these people in your class, you have to make sure you're teaching the ones who do want something worthwhile. So one of our jobs is to make sure class time is not compromised. If the 'time bandits,' get in the way, you must get rid of them. Therefore, you must have a mechanism in place prior to the semester that will facilitate this. You must get together with admin and make sure that some not too formal protocols are in place. This can be somewhat articulated in the syllabi, but some flexibility should be allowed. Each situation is idiosyncratic. And some creativity might be required. I can't stress enough the idea that you must be prepared to take action when you're teaching. Again, you need strong teachers with strong stomachs. No pushovers, please!

6 Fool them! Teach them something you think they may need rather than something they believe they need. You can't tell them to their face that what they believe they need is dead wrong. But if you're smart, if you're cagey, if you have a little amoral fiber, you may be able to teach them really useful things.

7 I have always been an ESL teacher. When I taught the part of Don Jose (in French) to a wonderful Polish tenor, I was an ESL teacher and a voice teacher. When I supervised a Korean baritone for Mannes's production of Falstaff to learn the title role, I was an ESL teacher and a vocal coach. Teaching vocal technique is teaching language. And teaching voice, or directing a scene using the English language is an ESL practice. Most voice students don't want to hear language in the same sentence with singing. It is anathema to them. They want to hear that teaching voice is teaching breath control, and doing hours of 'vocalise' to beef up their voices and to sing home run hitting high notes. And they yearn to be loved for this. They crave making animal sounds and being paid lots of money. But teaching voice is teaching a second language. The L2 is music. And the language of classical singing is a fusion of a cultural language system and a music system. If they are manifested correctly, then there should be no distinction. Just because the speech of singing is vowel to vowel (rather than the speech of consonant to consonant standard language) doesn't make it less of a language. And it certainly doesn't make it less meaning based. Anyway, animal sounds are meaningful! The example below demonstrates the typical singing students' stupidity. Yes, stupidity. (If you want political correctness don't teach in the performing arts.) This student thinks he knows better than his teacher, and claims that learning 'Italian diction' ('Diction' is a terrible word, by the way) is not technique. What she is teaching him is to sing in Italian, which is absolutely technique as much as scales and arpeggios are technique. The colors of the language are the colors of the voice. As is said in Italian, 'tone is metaphor.' The inflections of a language determine phrasing. Knowing a language is knowing where you are going to take breaths. Knowing prosody (eg pitch movement, nuclear stress) is the beginning of interpretation. If you recite a text properly, chances are you will know how to sing it. If you know the sentence you know the architecture of a phrase. Then again, music is its own language. If you treat phrases like sentences, even if you're not entirely sure you know what they mean, you will have begun to tell a story. You will begin to sing.

Example:

"My other friend is a soprano who liked her and had a few lessons but ended up hitting it off with another teacher instead. She says Mrs Fischer had good things to say and was very kind to her; she did feel her lessons would often turn into Italian diction coachings and not so technique-focused."

on Elizabeth Fischer-Monastero, Richard Miller's student

8 Words are the last thing I want interfering with my teaching. My teaching is listening based. It depends on my ears. Words take longer to manifest than my hearing. It takes longer to think something than to hear something. Thinking is a filter I do not want to encourage. This is an essential idea that will take more time to flesh out. Suffice it to say, that the goal is to get students to listen and react to listening as quickly as possible.

9 Don't burn out! Teach fewer hours if you have to. This is not easy to do. You have to give up money to do this. Clara Schumann believed that three students (probably about 1 to 1.5 hours depending) per day was the maximum one could teach with proper attentiveness. She was one of

the greatest musicians of all time. Teachers today teach 10 hours a day. They show off that they are in charge of 150 private students. And class teaching is no different. I have had my macho teaching phase. I have taught 9 to 6 hours without break, and, even 10 to 10 with a 20 min break, etc. What kills me are the private lessons. Students who come in without having done their homework, looking tired and bringing nothing to the table. I have commuted 2 hours for these jobs. Slept in a shopping mall parking lot because I couldn't keep my eyes open at the end of the day. Ate some horrible food from 7eleven. But I was raking in the bucks. And that felt good. For a while, I even did a good job. I felt like a bull. Filled with energy, indefatigable and tough as a rhino. Though I was over 55, I had more energy than my students. But two semesters of this was enough. I knew returns were diminishing. Am I a little poorer today? Maybe a smidge, but I am happier, and, hopefully, a better teacher.

10 I know I'm supposed to be a good colleague but the truth of matter is I don't feel like a good colleague because of my age and experience. I feel like I know certain things that I'm holding back. I have fun in listening to my fellow classmates and I learn something everyday, in spite of my stubbornness. Nergiss's recollection of learning English through the very difficult task of translating is particularly interesting to me. And it is something that speaks to me. **I don't think you can learn anything without a kind of brutal immersion.** I think you can learn some nice and superficial ways of entering into a society with ESL training. That is, I believe that students can come to class and become intermediate interactional participants in their newfound society. They can get themselves going enough to get a job and have a place from which to hop to the next level, whatever that may be. But I don't think they will ever become particularly proficient. I don't say this with cynicism. Any sport, or any art, whether learning the tango, or learning weightlifting, or learning to box, takes a tremendous amount of mental effort. Reprogramming the brain and re-synthesizing the mind takes protracted painful and emotional effort. I knew it was going to be difficult earning 11 credits last summer. But it is because I know my limitations that I did this. I knew that the process of being a graduate student who has to write many papers, and who has to read at an augmented pace, and who is required to take tests feeling unprepared, was going to be challenging, to say the least. I had to go through some punitive rewiring of my brain and my habits. It was not pleasant. But, as a result these intense eight weeks, as painful as they were, some new processes have taken hold, and now I feel able to work more efficiently. If you're prepared not to give up, total immersion can be a good thing. Ask any Navy Seal.