

Generative Paradox in Learner-Centered College Teaching

Douglas Reimondo Robertson

ABSTRACT: The discussion identifies six contradictions that characterize the emergent learner-centered teaching role: (a) control/flow, (b) facilitator/evaluator, (c) teacher learning/student learning, (d) subject expert/teaching expert, (e) caring for students/caring for self, and (f) individual mentor/group leader. Key concepts are presented (conflict, compartmentalized paradox, and generative paradox) which represent points on a continuum of the degree to which college teachers have successfully integrated these fundamental contradictions in the learner-centered teaching role. This article extends an ongoing discussion of integrity in learner-centered teaching by providing a conceptual paradigm and examples for developing consistently productive responses to these six fundamental contradictions in learner-centered teaching.

KEY WORDS: learner-centered college teaching; educational helping relationship; role conflict; paradox; integrity.

College teaching means different things to different people. The literature on college teaching yields an assortment of typologies that collect and organize the various approaches of professors to their teaching role (Adelson, 1962; Axelrod, 1973; Baker, Roueche, & Gillett-Karan, 1990; Mann et al., 1970; Pratt, 1989; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Ralph, 1978; Robertson, 1999b, 2000b, 2001, 2002; Sherman, Armistead, Fowler, Barksdale, & Reif, 1987). When I use the term college teaching in this article, I mean learner-centered teaching where teachers construe themselves to be facilitators of student learning as opposed to teacher-centered teaching where teachers see themselves as disseminators or imparters of knowledge. This discussion intends to further conceptualize and develop the learner-centered teaching role.

As the quip has it, "Life is full of obstacle illusions." And so is college teaching. In this article, I focus on one particular set of apparent obstacles to effective and satisfying college teaching—viz., contradictions inherent in the learner-centered teacher role. At least six contradictions in learner-centered college teaching have occurred to me (Robertson, 2003b).

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- *Control/flow*: teachers must be disciplined and in control of course content and process but also must be able to go with flow regarding both.
- *Facilitator/evaluator*: teachers must develop trusting relationships with students but also serve as proxy judges for external constituents because they must grade their students.
- *Loving the subject (teacher learning)/loving the students (student learning)*: teachers must be devoted to their own learning of the subject as master learners but also committed to their students' learning of the subject.
- *Subject expert/teaching and learning expert*: teachers must know their disciplines but also must know the learning process for a diverse array of students and how to facilitate that diverse array of learners, which usually is not their discipline.
- *Caring for students/caring for self*: teachers must be able to love both self and others (students) at the same time.
- *Individual mentor/group learning leader*: teachers must sensitively serve both the group as a whole and the individual, idiosyncratic learners within the group.

These contradictions become most evident when the two sides of the opposition compete for teachers' attention, time, and passion.

Contradictions that are fundamental to learner-centered teaching can be experienced by the college teacher as frustrating, debilitating, even paralyzing conflicts. However, these enduring, deep-seated contradictions in the learner-centered teaching role have the potential to be transformed into *generative paradoxes*, or contradictions in which both sides of the opposition are true and both sides feed rather than fight each other. Ideas such as harmony, synergy, and integration describe the dynamics between the oppositions as the contradiction is transformed from a conflict into a generative paradox.

In this article, I develop this concept of generative paradox in college teaching and contrast it with two other possible but less desirable forms which teaching contradictions may take—viz., *conflict* and *compartmentalized paradox*. Conflicts, compartmentalized paradoxes, and generative paradoxes are shown to represent points on a continuum of teacher integrity, i.e., the degree to which a college teacher has productively integrated fundamental contradictions in the teacher role (Robertson, 2003b). This discussion further develops the key concept of generative paradox by illustrating what the six teaching contradictions

identified above could look like if they were to be transformed into generative paradoxes.

Conflict and Paradox

A student of mine once wrote in a paper that his future was “fraught with opportunities.” I immediately thought of Pogo’s alert, “We are confronted with insurmountable opportunities.” “Opportunity” is usually something good. When a situation is said to be fraught with something, that something is usually bad, as in “fraught with difficulty” or “fraught with peril.” “Fraught with opportunities,” the phrase caught my ear and delighted me. The “opportunities” in the phrase are good, but the “fraught” adds the connotation that good outcomes are far from guaranteed and that things could easily get hosed up and yield bad outcomes.

I think that the phrase applies well to learner-centered college teaching, an activity with inherent contradictions. The college teacher experiences these fundamental contradictions as exhausting conflicts or as generative paradoxes depending on the degree to which the teacher is able to integrate the two sides of the contradictions and have these two sides relate productively with each other. Integrating the oppositions in contradictions has a tremendous payoff but is no small feat. Truly, college teaching is “fraught with opportunities.”

Conflict

Previously in my writing about college teaching, I have called learner-centered college teaching a “*conflicted* educational helping relationship” (Robertson, 2001–2002, 2003b). I called it an “educational helping relationship” because learner-centered college teaching focuses on facilitating student learning or helping students to learn (Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 2000a, 2001–2002, 2003b). I called it “conflicted” because I thought conflicts were inherent to this particular helping role (Robertson, 2001–2002, 2003b). My thinking was similar to Parker Palmer’s (1998, pp. 61–87), who also focused on inherent paradoxes in good teaching and their necessary tensions (also see Tiberius, Sinai, & Flak, 2002, who extend Palmer’s thinking usefully although they prefer to speak of “dilemmas” rather than “paradoxes”). Palmer evoked the concept of “suffering” as a necessary capacity of good teachers who

must hold “in the teacher’s heart” paradox’s tension and endure until a “larger love” arrives (Palmer, pp. 83–87). Following a similar line of thought regarding pedagogy and paradox, Palmer used the language of tension and suffering, and I spoke of conflict and coping. *Coping* with inherent conflicts seemed to me at the time to be a requirement of the helping profession called learner-centered college teaching (Robertson 2001–2002, 2003b).

My language was wrong, however. More profoundly, my thinking was wrong. The word “conflict” comes from the Latin word *confligere*, to strike together or fight, and is defined as a “clash, competition, or mutual interference of opposing or incompatible forces or qualities (as ideas, interests, wills): . . . an emotional state characterized by indecision, restlessness, uncertainty, and tension resulting from incompatible inner needs or drives of comparable intensity” (s.v., Webster, 1966). The word “cope” derives from the Latin word *colaphus*, blow with the fist, which in turn comes from the Greek word *kolaphos*, buffet, and means “to maintain a contest or combat . . . on even terms or with success . . . to face or encounter and to find necessary expedients to overcome problems and difficulties” (s.v., Webster, 1966). Although learner-centered teaching is not always a serene endeavor, it is not inherently about beating into submission incompatible antagonisms within the role of teacher. This language and thinking did not capture my experience of learner-centered teaching when it functions well. College teaching is an *educational helping relationship*. However, it is not necessarily a *conflicted* relationship; and we can do much better than merely to *cope* with, or suffer and endure (Palmer, 1998), its contradictions.

Paradox

When the college teacher experiences contradictions that are fundamental to the teaching role as conflicts, it generally indicates that the teacher has not integrated well the two sides of those contradictions (Robertson, 2003b). I say “integrated *well*” because integration exists in degrees and can be thought of as a continuum ranging from no integration at all to complete integration to form a new whole from two parts (Robertson, 1988, 2003b). The teacher’s lack of integration is experienced as tension or, on a grander scale, an inner war. I came to see that the degree to which the opposing sides of these deep-seated contradictions were brought into synergistic relationship became a way of defining learner-centered teaching integrity, or put more simply,

the degree to which the learner-centered teacher “has it together” (Robertson, 2003b).

I believe that we can still speak of a dominant American cultural perspective, notwithstanding the complex, cultural pluralism evident in postmodern American culture. Conflict is probably the typical default mode for experiencing these teaching contradictions in part because the dominant American cultural perspective has an imbedded preference for logical thought. When immersed in this dominant cultural perspective, one usually struggles with thinking in paradoxes, that is, thinking with both sides of a contradiction being true.

Paradoxes are irrational. The roots of the word “paradox” mean beside or beyond thought (s.v., Webster, 1966). Within a worldview dominated by rationality, being irrational should end all claim to legitimacy. Admitted irrationality . . . why then, the discussion is over. End of story. Paradoxes and those who think in them are seen as inscrutable, or beyond examination and understanding. Aristotle taught us that things have to be p or not p , the only two logical options. However, paradox teaches us that p and not p are both true. Rationally, we struggle with this proposition.

Intuitively (intuition being paradox’s most likely conduit to human understanding), we know that going forward holding both sides of a contradiction as valid is not merely a proposition but what feels like a living truth, something that our lived experience compels us to do. Chemist turned philosopher Michael Polanyi called the kind of knowledge that we can put in words and think about in verbal symbols “articulate knowledge” and the kind of knowledge that we know but cannot say “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1962). Tacitly, we know that apparent antagonisms can both be true and do, in fact, coexist.

In cultures dominated by rationality, articulate knowledge and reason tend to have the upper hand over tacit knowledge and intuition. For example, American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald (1945, p. 69) wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” This statement is telling in at least two ways. First, the need to be able “to hold two opposed ideas in the mind” is implied to be a necessity, a fact of life, a challenge that is out there to be faced: both sides of a contradiction are in fact sometimes true and need to be held by the mind simultaneously. Second, the fact that Fitzgerald asserts that you have to be a “first-rate intelligence” to avoid becoming paralyzed by thinking in paradoxes indicates how difficult and rare he thinks it is to overcome logic and rationality and do so.

Wedded oppositions, such as those that characterize learner-centered teaching, probably tend to be experienced as irony rather than paradox in a rationality-dominated culture (e.g., Roberts, 2002). With paradox, two opposing propositions are true, simultaneously. With irony, one proposition (not both) is implied to be true (or more true) in contrast to the other proposition, or one proposition is of greater importance than the other proposition and therefore more worthy. Furthermore, with irony, this favored proposition is the one that appearance favors least. With irony, one proposition should prevail over the other, but with the ironical twist, the facade favors the less worthy proposition. With paradox, both propositions win; with irony, a winner and a loser exist. For example, it is ironical that students value teachers whom they can trust with their psychological comfort, yet they learn most deeply from teachers who disrupt that psychological comfort by challenging the students' worldview. In contrast, it is paradoxical that students trust their psychological comfort with certain teachers who premeditatedly deconstruct the students' worldviews. In the case of irony, deep learning comes at the expense of teacher trust; in the case of paradox, deep learning and teacher trust can go hand in hand. American culture may be passing through an "age of irony" where irony as a way of thinking and of expressing thought constitutes an informing force of the American *Zeitgeist*. Being a rationality-dominated culture, an "age of paradox" is unlikely but not out of the question should the American population develop a critical mass of Fitzgerald's "first-rate intelligences."

"There is nothing certain, but the uncertain," an old saw advises us. If the proposition is true, then it is also false. It is true and false at the same time. Logically, we think that we have a problem. Intuitively, we understand that we do not. In an intuitive mode of knowing, a statement being simultaneously true and false causes no problem but instead may express wisdom.

The most productive response to the fundamental contradictions in the learner-centered teaching role is to transform them into paradoxes—things that appear to be incompatible but in fact are not. In order to do this regularly, we need to have a positive attitude toward paradox (for specific strategies regarding self-directed growth, see Robertson, 1988, 2003a, 2003c). Here are a few suggestions which may help to develop such an attitude.

- We need to appreciate or value paradox; facility with paradox is the sign of a "first-rate intelligence."
- We need to resist the impulse to try to resolve paradoxes; they just are, and we should get over it.

- We need to look beyond Aristotle's dualistic logical premise; p or not p is just part of the story.
- We need to listen and give credence to things that we know but cannot say; paradoxes are usually known best intuitively.
- We need to tolerate, even enjoy, ambiguity which often accompanies paradoxes; they are not neat and precise.

In contrast to experiencing oppositions as conflicts, the teacher can transform contradictions that accompany the learner-centered teaching role into at least two kinds of paradoxes: (a) compartmentalized paradoxes, or (b) generative paradoxes. Actually, these two categories of paradox complete a continuum of integration regarding teaching contradictions.

Conflicts. With conflicts, the integration is low or nonexistent; and the two sides of the contradiction fight each other. For example, in the control/flow contradiction, my need to do both may be at war with each other; and I may simply pick one to stick with at the expense of the other. I may decide not to attempt to go with the flow and instead to maintain tight classroom control and adherence to a schedule no matter what.

Compartmentalized paradoxes. With compartmentalized paradoxes, the two sides of a teaching contradiction are not bellicose to each other within the teacher's head, but instead, they co-exist by taking turns. They do not feed each other, but at least they do not fight each other. The teacher engages in "hat talk," as in, "Now I am putting on my control hat, and now, I am putting on my go-with-the-flow hat." Different kinds of teaching and learning activities require different things from the teacher: for instance, a good lecture often requires a different kind of teacher persona (in charge, in control, providing structure and direction for the topic and the session) than the teacher persona required to facilitate an effective experiential exercise (sensitive, empathic, and devoted to the participants' individual and group processes). In compartmentalized paradoxes, the teacher goes from one persona to the next, but the two do not seem well connected—more like changing channels than watching one integrated program.

Generative paradoxes. With generative paradoxes, the two sides of the contradiction feed each other. They are related in a mutually beneficial way. The teacher achieves a win/win relationship among them. Also, rather than existing in a discrete fashion, as in "hat" changing where I operate from one persona or another but not both simultaneously (or in close temporal proximity), with generative paradox the two sides of the contradiction may operate simultaneously,

or nearly so. For example, when giving a lecture, teachers may be presenting a topic in an orderly fashion. Nonetheless, when a fertile discussion develops among participants during the course of the lecture, the teachers may go with that particular flow as long as it is producing valuable student learning that relates to the topic even if that learning is not on the teachers' lecture outline or perhaps even in the syllabus, say for instance, a valuable attitudinal development regarding the larger professional field of the course. Often, the lecture is enhanced by this combination of structure and spontaneity, each feeding the other. The demands to be disciplined and to go with the flow are integrated within the teacher allowing the two sides of the contradiction to interact in a mutually productive, synergizing way.

Transforming Teaching Contradictions into Generative Paradoxes

As a way of developing the concept of generative paradox further, I continue with examples for each of the other five common teacher contradictions.

Facilitator/Evaluator

Recall that in the facilitator/evaluator contradiction the teacher must try to develop the specific learner within that learner's idiosyncratic context while also judging that learner according to external frames of reference that are not necessarily the learner's. An example of transforming this contradiction into a generative paradox might involve inviting the students into the teachers' paradox. Teachers could bring to light the two roles and the tension between them as a part of their introduction to the course. I always include an explanation of my teaching philosophy at the beginning of each course so that the students do not have to guess about it. Also, I hope that doing so will stimulate students to develop their own philosophies of teaching and learning. As the teacher, I have a lot of authority in the course like it or not, which sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't, and the students deserve to know my frame of reference for the exercise of that authority. Besides that, from a practical point of view, students behave much more constructively in class if I end the suspense early about my basic approach. An ever-present learning objective in all of my courses is to encourage students to become more proficient as self-directed, lifelong

learners, something which benefits from students becoming teachers in the course. Also, regardless of course topic, I am interested in promoting the students' critical thinking and cognitive development. I want them to be able to identify and evaluate deep perspectives, including their own, which is something that William Perry would call achieving the developmental positions of "commitment in relativism" (Perry, 1970). I can invite students into the paradox by asking them what they think of my solutions to the problem of evaluating their learning on behalf of external agencies (i.e., my grading system) and how they would solve the evaluation problem if they were I (by what criteria, based on what performance, and according to what rationale). Asking students to enter into my evaluator role serves the agenda of my facilitator role, which is the other side of this particular teaching contradiction. The outcome is a generative paradox—each side of the opposition relating to the other in a harmonious and productive way.

*Loving the Subject (Teacher Learning)/Loving
the Students (Student Learning)*

Another teaching contradiction involves the fact that most college and university teachers go into this profession at least partly because of a deep love of their subject. For many college teachers getting paid to continue learning a particular subject is a dream come true. Teachers' love of subject and of their own learning of that subject exists simultaneously with a professional responsibility (and we hope, an authentic desire) to love the students and their learning of the subject. As with sibling rivalry, the two loves compete for the teacher's attention, time, and passion. In the interest of achieving harmony, I can take the obvious step of carefully examining my scholarship for ways to incorporate it into my courses so that my learning is feeding the students' learning. This scholarly yield might involve content, but also it might involve the process of knowing itself. I may be able to work into my courses not only findings from my scholarship but also learning about the process of doing scholarship that benefits the students as they learn to do scholarship themselves. The proverb advises us, "Give someone a fish, and you feed them for a day; teach someone to fish, and you feed them for a lifetime." Teaching students the discipline of scholarship is the equivalent of teaching them to fish. Also, I can come to see that helping students to learn a subject actually feeds my learning of that subject. "To teach is to learn twice," the saying instructs us. When I teach something, even something that I think

that I know inside and out, I almost always deepen my understanding of it. Having to explain old familiar ideas and patterns in new ways and creating new phrases, metaphors, and examples often illuminates for me a nuance to the idea, a hole in my understanding of it, or a new element to that idea's relationship to another idea. I believe that in most cases if I cannot explain something to both my 9-year-old daughter and a colleague, then I probably do not understand that idea very well. Also, I learn about my scholarship (my own learning of the subject) by seeing it through the eyes of my students, visions that are naive to the assumptive world of my discipline. These lines of thought help me to see how teacher learning and student learning can contribute to each other's development. In so doing, their contradiction becomes a generative paradox.

Subject Expert / Teaching and Learning Expert

Related to the previous teaching contradiction is the one related to the pressure on learner-centered teachers to add to their subject specialty a familiarity with the scholarship on teaching and learning (what learning is and how to help it to happen more effectively). These two subject interests (the teachers' home disciplines and the scholarship of teaching and learning) compete for whatever time teachers carve out for their own scholarship. A possible win/win solution is to become involved in contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning within one's discipline (Robertson, 2002). Teachers are still connected to their subjects, but they focus their scholarship on the teaching and learning of those subjects. They might even bring these teaching and learning questions to their students and enlist their participation in designing and conducting scholarly projects regarding teaching and learning in their courses. This particular approach would not only create synergies within a contradiction but also across contradictions, as the previous contradiction (teacher learning/student learning) would also be served.

Caring for Students / Caring for Self

Over the years, I have observed in myself and in some of my colleagues the use of learner-centered rhetoric, such as "caring for students," as a way to feel better about ourselves. Ultimately, however, it was all about us. Self absorption is sneaky sometimes. Also, I have

observed myself and colleagues going well beyond any reasonable call of duty to respond to the needs and wants of students (no matter how whacky) with behavior which could only be called selfless and which contributed to professionally-related depression or “burnout” as it is commonly known. Selflessness is unhealthy sometimes. I have come to the conclusion that I need to care for myself and for my students simultaneously. These three positions—focusing on the welfare of self while neglecting attention to the other, focusing on the welfare of the other while neglecting attention to self, and focusing on self and other simultaneously—are precisely the three positions that Carol Gilligan discerned in her study of abortion decisions among pregnant women, which then became the positions in her developmental model of the ethic of caring in women (Gilligan, 1982). Achieving generative paradox for the caring for students/caring for self contradiction suggests the need for the teacher to have achieved this third developmental position. To move toward generative paradox, I am helped by remembering my larger, ever-present objective to encourage students to learn to develop themselves holistically (not just intellectually). To a large extent, what we teach is who we are, as Parker Palmer has so eloquently and compellingly pointed out (Palmer, 1998). Therefore, if I want students to learn to develop holistically and to live a healthy, balanced life, I need to model it. If I want students to learn to love themselves while also loving others, I need to model it. Caring for my students at the expense of my health, my family, and my general welfare, is not the kind of teaching that I want to provide. Neither is caring for myself at the expense of my students. I need to model doing both together. Also, from a practical perspective, I need to keep myself fresh in order to serve my students, just as in an airline emergency, the parent needs to put on the oxygen mask before the children in order to optimize the chances that the children will be cared for. Setting appropriate boundaries with student demands helps them learn to take necessary responsibility. Doing scholarship that rejuvenates me, in addition to my teaching, may contribute to the course content as well as model healthy balance. These kinds of measures are just a few ways to achieve generative paradox regarding the caring for students/caring for self contradiction.

Individual Mentor/Group Learning Leader

Finally, learner-centered teaching requires teachers to facilitate individual students who learn at different rates and in different ways

while also serving as the learning leader for the group. Teachers need to be able to move on even though not every one “has got it,” without leaving anyone behind permanently. One way of achieving a win/win solution to this contradictory demand relates to my previous comments regarding the ways in which helping students to learn the teacher’s subject can actually promote the teacher’s further learning of that subject. The same dynamic can be true among students. In fulfillment of their group learning leader responsibility, teachers can design group projects in which meaningful incentives exist for students to teach each other and to learn from each other as the groups move along accomplishing the overall agenda and objectives stated on the syllabus. In this way, we have, metaphorically speaking, majority rule along with the individual protections from majority rule that the Bill of Rights provides, a kind of generative paradox that accommodates the individual and the community simultaneously.

Conclusion

Through a character in his story, “Inside and Outside,” Hermann Hesse (1972) perceptively observed,

[T]he distinction between inside and outside is habitual to our thinking, but not necessary. Our mind is capable of passing beyond the dividing line we have drawn for it. Beyond the pairs of opposites of which the world consists, other, new insights begin (p. 263).

Similarly, beyond the apparent contradictions of learner-centered teaching, in the domain of generative paradox, “other, new insights begin.” These insights are powerful, almost magical in their ability to create energy and learning among teachers and students alike. With practice, reflection, and in dialog with our colleagues, we become more adept at paradoxical thinking in our teaching and reap the benefits of these insights from “beyond the pairs of opposites,” as Hesse phrased it. Most of us have received, not chosen, the limiting habit of thinking in logical dualisms. Often, thinking paradoxically requires a choice on our parts. For many of us, it goes against our grain. I believe that paradoxical thinking is a habit worth choosing. I hope that this essay has contributed to you feeling the same. As William Blake put it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790/1963), “Without Contraries there is no progression” (p. 3).

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