

Considerations for Using the Reflective Process Beginning with Incidents of “Teaching at its Best”

Patricia O’Connell Killen, Ph.D.

Professor Emerita, Religion, Pacific Lutheran University

Introduction

If you are planning to convene a conversation back at your home institution and are considering leading reflection on incidents of “teaching at its best,” or, are contemplating facilitating students in reflection on incidents of “learning at its best,” you might find it helpful to learn a bit more about the deep structure for the process we used for this grant project. To that end, I have prepared this document in four parts: 1) a gloss on the assignment you received to prepare teaching incidents; 2) a gloss on the one-page description of the process we distributed and worked through in San Antonio; 3) some thoughts on prompts for helping students identify experiences of “learning at its best”; and 4) a bullet list of “bottom lines” for facilitating this kind of shared group reflection. In this document I have included the most relevant material from the assignment and the one-pager that we distributed in San Antonio in text boxes.

If you have questions about anything in this document or want consultation on something as you develop the design you intend to use at your institution, I am happy to be in conversation. I can be available via email, phone, or a zoom call.

If you convene a group at your home institution, please keep notes regarding your design you used and what occurred. They will be helpful for the virtual gathering.

I. Gloss on the Assignment for Preparing Incidents for the “Teaching at its Best” Process:

By way of reminder, here is the assignment for preparing incidents of “Teaching at its Best” from **Resource 1**.

Assignment: Incidents of “Teaching at its Best”

During our gathering, we want our conversations to be grounded in actual experience and practice of teaching. To help assure that, we are asking that each of you reflect on your teaching experience to date and prepare two short written descriptions of “teaching at its best.”

Think back over your teaching experience. Identify two different incidents from your experience as a teacher that, when you recall each one, elicits an appreciative, positive response, perhaps a sense of gratitude, possibly even a smile. Each should be an incident of teaching during which you, your students, and the material were aligned, the energy in the classroom flowed, and students’ learning was palpable. The incidents can be from a physically proximate or a virtual teaching setting. They can be from a classroom, field experience, study abroad, civic engagement, or other teaching setting. The incidents could be highs or lows, times of serendipitous insight, or times when your students and you together engaged a tough conundrum or thorny issue. What matters is that each incident involve you, students, and material, and that when you recall the incident, you would tag it “teaching at its best.”

For each of the incidents, please write a two-paragraph summary. In the first paragraph, please provide a bit of context for the incident and then describe it concretely – “who” did “what,” “when,” “where,” “how,” “to what end.” Speak to how you saw the students evidencing that they were learning. Describe the incident so that we might be in the moment with your students and you. In the second paragraph, in a couple sentences respond to the question: What made this an incident of “teaching at its best”?

We will be working from these reflections, so please pick incidents that you are willing and able to share with colleagues. Also, please refrain from over thinking this assignment. There is no “right” or “wrong” response, there is your teaching experience. And, seriously, only two paragraphs per incident, no missives.

Alternatives in the Assignment

1. It is not necessary to ask participants to prepare two incidents. One is enough, especially if there will not be sufficient time to share both. But do ask that they write them out for themselves.
2. The question: “What makes this an incident of ‘teaching at its best’?” is important to the reflective process for reasons noted later in this document. The question can be introduced as part of the assignment, which is what we did for the San Antonio gathering. Or a facilitator might, depending on various factors, choose to wait and introduce it when the group gathers. I describe two different ways to do that on the bottom of page 3 and top of page 4.

Why Begin with a Concrete Incident?

The *sine qua non* for the entire reflective process we used in San Antonio is beginning by **being present within a concrete incident of teaching**. That is why we composed the assignment for retrieving and writing out your incidents as we did. As the assignment sheet notes, for any incident, you want to re- compose the space, to be present within the scene again, to describe who did what, when, where, and how, such that both the presenter and conversation partners can stand within the narrative.

Why insist on this specificity? First, because a concrete incident, just a snippet, a paragraph from your rich teaching life is a manageable starting point for reflection on pedagogy in the way that a general question or problem or large theme are not. Secondly, a concrete incident makes it possible for presenters and colleagues to reflect from **within** actual practice. That is the standpoint from which surprising and significant insights arise.

When we begin reflecting from **within** rather than from a stance of **standing aside** from our practice, our reflection retains affective connection to the incident. That connection infuses the reflection with an energy that is different from the kind of energy that operates when we stand aside from our practice and lead with our well-developed critical, analytical eye. The affective connection to our practice is pivotal to noticing our deepest aspirations and commitments, as teachers, some of which we may well not yet have put into words.

I would assert that beginning from **within** increases the odds of our reflection moving deeper, rather than broader. To put it another way, when we begin with a concrete incident, we are tilted toward discovery of multiple layers and dimensions of meaning and toward seeing deeper connections and wholeness. When we begin with a claim or a question, we tend to be tilted toward making distinctions in the service of analysis by way of comprehensive categorization, organization and systematization. Both are important ways of thinking but they are not interchangeable. Our default as academics tends toward the second and hence our comfort with critique and evaluation of the relative quality of arguments.

However, taking that approach to our own teaching is not always the best way to “see” the art, skill and insight we embody in our work with students, its coherence, and its rootedness in us as human beings with our passions, commitments, and aspirations. Reflecting from **within** a concrete incident increases the odds of probing deeper meanings and discovering previously unnoticed coherence as well.

II. Gloss on the Process for Reflection on Incidents of “Teaching at Its Best”

By way of reminder, here is the process for reflection from **Resource 2**.

Process for Reflection on Incidents of “Teaching at Its Best”

Orientation

This reflective process is deliberately anchored in your actual teaching practice, in pedagogy as expressed in your own teaching and your students’ encounter with it. During the process it will be important to remain close to the concrete scene, to be true to the dynamics of teaching and learning in the incident as it is shared. The reflective process is designed to help us do a close reading or thick description of each incident and to avoid prematurely pivoting into broader conversation about what teaching and learning “should be” or what any one of us might “wish I had done

differently." The premise of this reflective process is that remaining close to the ground of actual incidents of teaching at its best provides a fruitful, focused entry into the pivotal question of our gathering: *Whether key theological themes from one's institution's faith heritage are present explicitly or implicitly in pedagogy, albeit perhaps unacknowledged. Is theology embedded in pedagogy? If so, how?* [Note: In adapting this reflective process to other settings and purposes, one can substitute the question "What key values and commitments from the institution's mission and vision are present implicitly or explicitly in one's pedagogy?"]

Structure

We will move through this reflective process in two different rounds. In round one, you will share and reflect on one of your incidents with a colleague from a sister denominational/heritage institution. For round two we will share as a single group of presenters and listeners.

Process

1. **Presenter:** Select and narrate one of your incidents of teaching at its best. The goal is to describe the incident so that your listener/s can be in the scene with you. (*up to 5 minutes*)
2. **Listener:** Bring an attentive, curious, and nonjudgmental presence to your listening. Listen in a way that allows you to see, feel, smell, sense the scene with its unfolding action. Stay close to the narrative.
3. **Listener:** When the presenter has finished presenting, ask any necessary clarifying questions that help you be present in and to the incident (*up to 2 minutes*).
4. **Listener:** Once you have a concrete sense of the incident, jot down your thoughts related to the following: (*up to 2 minutes*)
 - a. What are the practices, the behaviors of the faculty member and student/s in the incident?
 - b. What seem to be the values embedded in the incident?
 - c. What theological themes, if any, seem present? E.g., view of the human person, the nature of community, how learning, change, transformation occur, the fundamental human conundrum.
 - d. What sensibilities, themes, or emphases that you associate with the theology of your particular strand of Christianity come to mind, if any?
 - e. Other observations, thoughts?
5. **Presenter:** Share with the listener the statement that you composed about what made this incident one of "teaching at its best." (*2 minutes*)
6. **Listener:** Share the thoughts you noted down. (*up to 3 minutes*)

7. **Listener and Presenter:** Engage in conversation about the incident. (5 minutes)
 - a. What do you both see and hear in it by way of teaching practices, values, theological themes, denominational/heritage sensibilities?
 - b. Is theology present in the pedagogy? How?

Reverse roles and go through the process again.

8. After sharing both incidents, discuss:
 - a. What are the similarities and differences between the two incidents, especially in terms of teaching practices, values, theological themes, denominational/heritage sensibilities?
 - b. Did you find faith heritage to be present in your own pedagogy? In your colleague’s pedagogy?
 - i. If so, how is it present?
 - ii. If so, in what directions does its presence nudge your imagination around teaching and learning?
 - c. What is emerging from your conversation?

Flexibility and Non-negotiables in the Process

The reflective process can work with the sharing of only one incident of “teaching at its best.” It is not necessary for it to be gone through twice, one in breakout pairs and once in full group. It can as easily just be done in the group, if the group is small enough and there is sufficient time. If not, you can do it in breakout groups. If you use pairs or breakout groups, provide a guide sheet with clear instructions for how and what to share and how and when to respond. If you do the process as a single group, some of what was written on the handout as “orientation” can be presented verbally. Still, sharing a guide sheet is helpful to participants.

The categories under #4 of the process in the text box are important. They guide listeners by providing a structure for mining the meaning of the incidents. In San Antonio we went from actual practice and behaviors to values and theological themes. The frame of levels for listening can be revised. For example, and especially if you are working with a group across disciplines, you might consider moving from: practices and behaviors to values and commitments, to the larger purpose or imaginative horizon toward which the teaching incident points in its fullness. What matters most is that you use categories for listening that help participants move more deeply into the narrative and not out from it.

The #5 instruction is worded for the reflective process when responding to the question “What makes this an incident of ‘teaching at its best?’” has been included in the initial assignment. If for some reason you choose to introduce the question at the group gathering instead, you have choices about how to do it. I have used two different strategies for that, which I provide here by way of examples:

- The facilitator asks the question, “What made this an incident of ‘teaching at its best?’” of each presenter after he/she/they has narrated their incident and other

participants have shared back to the presenter what they heard in the incident. I record the responses so that the group can converse about them after all have shared their incidents, heard from their colleagues, and have answered the question.

- On occasion I have introduced the question through a “writing for thinking” sentence completion exercise. After all participants have shared their incidents and heard from their colleagues, I ask the group to reread their incidents and, during a minute of silence, to complete the sentence: “This is an incident of teaching at its best because . . .” four to six times. (Multiple responses can lead to a fuller, more encompassing answer to the question.) Then, I ask each participant, in turn, to share their response to the question. After hearing from all participants, we converse about what we have heard – the range of responses, common themes, etc. I have found the sentence completion approach to work best with groups of participants who already share a great deal in common.

It is important to include the question “What makes this an incident of ‘teaching at its best?’” or a similar question in the reflective process. I explain why in the next section.

The Portal or Pivot Question

The question, “What made the incident one of “teaching at its best?” is a portal or pivot question. It functions as a pivot between probing the dimensions and layers of meaning embodied in an incident and mined using a set of categories for listening (e.g. actions, values, themes, sensibilities in #4 in text box), to beginning to synthesize those meanings and generalize from them in ways that are relevant to future teaching. The portal question focuses attention, invite further reflection. The pivot or portal question also helps provide contours to the group’s reflective space.

If you recall from San Antonio, I pushed when responses to this question shaded into answers to a different question, namely, “What made the strategy you employed in the incident work?” The answer to that question takes the reflection in a very different direction, moving a group much more quickly from standing in the narrative to standing outside the narrative, and so away from questions of depth to questions of analysis of a particular incident, often done in light of various theories of learning. The second direction can be fruitful for different purposes, for example when one is facilitating a faculty learning community aimed at increasing participants’ range and refinement of pedagogical skills.

III. Prompts for Eliciting Incidents of “Learning at its Best” from Students

What I have described so far about composing the assignment for incidents of “teaching at its best,” and about the reflective process, translate to the creation of the prompts and the process used for preparing and reflecting on incidents of “learning at its best.” I won’t repeat the information on why incidents need to be a paragraph and presented from within that I included in glossing the assignment for faculty. I do encourage you, though to ask students to write out the incidents for themselves.

Some prompts I have used with students in different contexts to help them find a starting point for reflection on their learning, which I share here by way of example, are:

1. Retrieve a time from your education so far when you realized you had learned something that you could not unlearn, even if you wanted to. Describe that experience as concretely as possible in a paragraph. What was the context? Who, did what, when, where, and how? Help us be in that moment of dawning understanding with you.
2. Retrieve a time from your education thus far when you learned something that surprised you, shifted your perspective on yourself, an issue, and/or the world, and that has continued to make a lasting difference in your life. Describe that experience as concretely as possible in a paragraph. What was the context? Who, did what, when, where, and how? Help us be in that moment of dawning understanding with you.
3. Retrieve a time from your education thus far when you became so absorbed in a class session or assignment or other activity that time seemed to stop, you felt alive and energized, and experienced deep gladness in the experience. Set the scene and help us be in that space with you.

I have never used with students the direct prompt: “Retrieve from your education thus far a learning experience that you would describe as “learning at its best.” I think it could work well with upper-class students but were I working with first- or second-year students, ages 18-20, I would be inclined to employ a more directive prompt. My reason: first- and second-year students are still developing a clear sense of boundaries between themselves and the faculty member and the material. Hence, they may not yet have achieved the psycho-social-intellectual maturity to handle the more wide- open prompt in a way that would yield incidents for the reflection session that would lead to fruitful outcomes. I saw the developmental difference in the departmental course evaluations I read for decades as a chair. A persistent pattern emerged: first- and second-year students tended to judge faculty by whether they felt affirmed by them, while juniors and seniors shared more refined observations about course design, structure, assignments, etc. Then, in my last administrative position, I dealt with first-year students who judged faculty and their learning experiences in terms of an internal personal anxiety meter. Many held a strong conviction that no faculty member should subject them to any situation in which they might feel anxious (e.g., a challenging assignment, a comprehensive final exam). Those convictions strongly influenced what students considered learning to be.

If you do use the wide-open prompt, I would love to hear how you framed it and what arose from the reflective process.

IV. “Bottom Lines” for Setting Up and Facilitating Reflection on Concrete Incidents of Teaching or Learning at Its Best

- Goes without saying that the group needs norms, ground rules, and psychologically spacious time frames. Reflection is not a “rush” activity.

- The facilitator creates the container, keeps the process within bounds to move it forward and holds the space of hospitality for gracious discovery.
- The prompt for retrieval of an experience needs to be clear. The same holds for instructions for how to prepare it for sharing. Aim for a concrete, manageable slice of experience, a paragraph, a narrative that allows the presenter and listeners to re-enter the incident, to see, hear, feel it. Ask them to write it out for themselves. Writing helps participants get to a concrete incident.
- Provide some guidance on how participants should narrate when presenting in the group.
- Provide listeners guidance on what to listen for during the process (e.g., #4 on process page). Give guidance that leads participants to move more deeply into the incident, not from the incident to other incidents in the lives of either the presenter or listeners. The latter moves the conversation too quickly to the broad and the general and so it will lose the energy that comes from remaining close to the concrete narrative.
- Develop a pivot or portal question that directs attention more deeply toward the incident’s layers of meaning and then toward synthesizing deeper meanings. E.g., “What made this an incident of ‘teaching at its best?’” “What made this an incident of ‘learning at its best?’”
- Create space for articulating and gathering meanings.
- Before the close, ask the all-important “So what?” question. The “So what?” question invites participants to bring together for themselves a synthesis of whatever has emerged for them during the reflection, including significance and relevance. Provide space, even one minute, for participants to capture what has emerged from the reflection. Otherwise, important insights and topics for further musing will easily be forgotten in the press of daily life. (Consciousness can be lazy and insights that invite new possibilities or change quickly lost.) Posing of the “So what?” question can be done in a variety of ways. What matters here is inviting participants to write down what they have noticed, learned, want to think about further, want to ponder doing differently, etc. It is an invitation to participants to take something away with them.

Patricia O’Connell Killen | killenpo@plu.edu
July 13, 2021