Practical rationality: a self-investigation

BARBARA A. MORGAN

The topic of practical rationality has a history of debate and discussion in educational scholarship. Green’s (1976) call to expand the notion of teachers’ competence to include the ability to understand and alter the practical arguments of students, and Fenstermacher’s (1986) distinction between ‘knowledge production’ and ‘knowledge use’ opened a profitable discussion among those concerned with moral aspects of teaching which shows no sign of waning. It is an important discussion for it involves questions regarding the purpose and desired ends of education, and requires educators in all spheres of schooling to ask the moral question ‘How do I decide what is right to do?’

I was introduced to this discussion while in the dual roles of classroom teacher and graduate student. As this dual role is becoming more common, it is perhaps worthy of some discussion, for those of us who study and perform teaching simultaneously often experience the separation of theory and practice quite dramatically, growing to understand the value of thoughtful scholarship, yet facing the daily difficulty of enacting that scholarship in classrooms.

This paper is an attempt to illustrate the process of eliciting and reconstructing a practical argument when one person fulfils both dialogical roles. Drawing from the work of Fenstermacher and Richardson (1993) these roles are referred to as ‘Other’ and ‘Teacher’ and the introspective text has been divided into two sections labelled ‘teacher’s voice’ and ‘other’s voice’. Following Audi (1982: 32) the practical reasoning sections are written in first person. In his words, ‘clearly the standard and most interesting cases are first-person tokenings of practical arguments’.

This investigation took place over a six-month period in a 4th grade class of a US urban elementary school with a diverse enrolment of Anglo, African-American and Hispanic students. (I had taught in public school for five years but was in my first year teaching at this school.)

In selecting a place to begin an inquiry into practical reasoning, several criteria were used. First, the practice should be frequently used and non-trivial. Second, the practice should be one about which there was some conflict (to be my own dialogic partner I needed to be of at least two minds),
and third the practice should not be idiosyncratic, but should be of interest to other teachers. The practice selected was the use of detention for students who did not finish book reports.

The teaching problem

Teacher’s voice

This practice was one about which I had felt discomfort for some time. The discomfort came to a head when my students linked ‘detention’ with reading during a pre-writing brainstorming we were doing about school. Students participated in the activity by offering thoughts that occurred to them on hearing the word ‘school’. One student shouted out ‘reading’, another followed with ‘book reports’, then several said ‘detention’. In the writing that followed no one wrote of reading or of book reports but many wrote of detention. Disturbed by this juxtaposition, I cancelled book report detention for one month. Three-quarters of the class did not do the required reading or complete their book reports. After reinstating detention almost all my students completed their work. It was at this point that I decided to try and be my own Other, forming a practical argument about this practice with the purpose of better understanding my own reasoning and also illustrating some aspects of the process.

I began by brainstorming, trying to surface my thoughts surrounding this action, then forming an argument using those thoughts. Looking at that argument I attempted to justify the empirical premises with evidence from my classroom practice. Part of this process is presented below.

Brainstorming:
- Students should read whole books of their own choosing.
- Improving reading at the intermediate level happens when students read more.
- Reading time in school should be spent reading.
- Students who read for pleasure do better in school.
- Left to their own devices, some students will not read and this is unacceptable.
- To coerce students into reading undermines the reading for pleasure aspect.
- Students view punishment and reading as paired activities.
- Students given detention read more books.
- When detentions are not given the class as a whole reads less.

After generating these ‘chunks’ of thought, I attempted to place them in a coherent order, as follows.

Initial argument:
1. Being able to read is important to the welfare of every student and I must therefore teach every student to read.
2. Reading whole books of the student’s choosing improves the student’s reading ability and encourages him/her to read more.
3. If students are not held accountable for their reading some will not read.
4. Reading more makes reading better.
5. If students don’t choose to read they cannot experience pleasure in reading.
6. Because they do not read more they do not read better.
7. I must therefore intervene (see [1]).
8. Giving detentions makes students read more.
9. Giving detentions undermines students’ pleasure in reading and the students may therefore not read more (follows from [2]).
10. Back to (5).
11. I still hold to (7) and must seek a different intervention.

As I faced my emerging practical argument and looked for evidence I realized that I needed to know more about the thinking of my students, both individually and as a group. I therefore turned to my class, expressed my dilemma and tried to unearth the reasons students were not turning in book reports. I asked, ‘What’s hard, is it writing the book reports or reading the books?’ ‘Reading the books.’ ‘Is four books a month too much?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Are you reading 20 minutes every night?’ ‘Yes’ (I don’t completely believe this). ‘Do you need more class time to read?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘And would you use the time for reading?’ ‘Yes’ (a little doubt on this point as well). ‘Can everybody read three books?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘And you’ll all have book reports in on time?’ ‘Yes.’

This discussion led me to believe that students were not finishing work because they needed more time to complete it. Giving detention was one way of providing more time but there were other, less punitive ways that this need could be satisfied. I added one half hour of reading time at the end of the day, most students did take advantage of the time, and all but seven turned in their book reports by the due date. I was then faced with the following situation: it is lunch time on the day after the book reports are due. Seven students didn’t turn in their book reports.

I gave seven students detention but was now pretty well convinced that this was not what I wanted to do. While forming the practical argument had not offered a cure for my dilemma it had formalized the dilemma to a point I was now finding intolerable. That discomfort was relatively slight with five of the seven students who quickly finished their work and went out to play, but it was extreme with the two remaining students (Bill and Marie) who did not finish and who, I feared, would be kept in at lunch break for an extended period of time. I realized that a cost was also operating here. To lose one or two lunch breaks in one month is a small cost and easily balanced with the benefit of reading gains. But to lose every break in a month is too high a cost as it could easily prove to have long-term destructive effects.

Fenstermacher (1987: 416) argues that practical argument ‘begins with the expression of desired end-states... such as seeking to develop a sense of honesty, fair-mindedness, and mutual regard in the learner’, and Pendlebury (1990: 174) writes of the need to expand the view of practical rationality to
include 'constituent-to-end' as well as 'means-to-ends' reasoning. In her words:

...there are two crucially different kinds of relationship between an end and what conduces to an end. In the first, the relationship between an end, y and that which conduces to the end, x, is a causal one: x is the means for bringing about y. In the second, the relationship between x and y is constitutive: the existence of x counts as a partial or total realization of the end, y.

Both means-to-end and constituent-to-end reasoning can be seen in the brainstorming and initial argument sections presented earlier. The question of how to get the students to 'read more' could be dealt with using means-to-end reasoning, but inserting the additional goals of helping students 'read better' and 'read for pleasure' requires a shift toward constituent-to-end reasoning. The example presented above can be seen as what Pendlebury (1990: 176) calls a 'hard case' requiring a high degree of 'situational appreciation ... because if a practitioner is wrong in her identification of the salient features of a case, the result will be inappropriate or misguided action, regardless of the internal coherence of the argument she may give in support of her actions'. The reasoning presented in the next section can be seen as an attempt to identify 'the salient features of a case'.

Also interesting is the use of students as Other. As the teacher asks the students individually and as a group whether or not her perception of the situation is accurate she is asking them to perform the elicitation role-of the other which is, 'to help the teacher frame the basis for his action' (Fenstermacher and Richardson 1993). The students are not, however, full-fledged others in this instance, for the teacher still controls the dialogue and asks the students only for affirmation or negation of her own premises.

**The reconstruction**

*Teacher's voice*

Returning home, I again worked through the practical argument and found I still believed premise (9) (Giving detentions undermines students' pleasure in reading and the students may therefore not read more). I decided to talk with Bill and Marie in order to check my thinking and arrive at some other possibilities. I told them to come in during detention time, and started the conversation with 'It's my impression that when I give you two detention you read and when I don't you don't. Is that right?' Smiles and nods. 'So I'm not mistaken there?' Smiles, shaking heads, looking at one another. 'You see I have a problem because I want you to read but I do not want to keep you in detention for the rest of the year.' We all laugh. 'Help me think of some other things that we can do.'

One interesting aspect of this interaction is that all three participants avoided some easy ways out of the dilemma. An obvious answer for the students would be to lie about the amount of reading they had done and fake the book reports. Both students faithfully avoided this option. I could choose to ignore the fact that these two were not reading. Both students are passive and quiet. They are never disruptive and, in fact, try to become as invisible as possible. They often seem surprised at how I keep after them—pestering, nagging, asking questions, trying to negotiate solutions.
During the conversation I had with Bill and Marie we made several modifications in our reading plan. We set goals for the week and marked them clearly (but in pencil) in the books. I also urged them to support one another and remind the other if he or she started to drift. We agreed to meet the next day (Friday) and again on Monday.

**Background of the students**

Bill’s reluctance to read was obvious from the start of the year. Early in the year I talked with him, offering possible reasons for this problem almost in a true/false manner. I got him alone during a quiet moment and began, ‘I’m trying to figure out why you’re having trouble getting through that book. Is it that there are a lot of words that you don’t understand?’ A shake of the head. ‘Is it that you understand the words but when you get to the bottom of the page you don’t understand what it meant?’ Another shake of the head. ‘So you understand what you read.’ Nod. ‘Is it that you start to read and all of a sudden you just notice that your mind has drifted off someplace and you’re not reading any more?’ Big smile and a nod. We then discussed ways of avoiding distractions and I went away to think some more.

Marie’s difficulties were more recent and generalized. During the first quarter of the year she was rarely absent and generally finished work. At the end of that quarter the principal of our school with whom this student had an extremely close relationship was killed in a traffic accident. The second quarter showed this student’s absentee rate tripling. When she did attend she complained frequently of stomach-aches and headaches. I asked her if she wasn’t reading because she just didn’t feel well, and when she answered ‘Yes’ I offered her extra time to finish and decided that I needed to have lunch with her and see if I could help. I also realized that the student might just need time to grieve and that her reading would pick up when her physical and emotional health improved.

*Other’s voice*

Audi (1982:27) writes, ‘one could express a practical argument enthymematically; thus, one need not produce, for each of its propositions, a token of some sentence expressing it’. Because this teacher was forced overtly to express her thoughts such ‘sentence tokens’ were in fact necessary and that overt expression of thought interacted with her thinking and her practice. I found that I could not overtly investigate the reasoning behind a practice without affecting that practice. What follows is an example of the interaction between reconstruction of a practical argument and change in practice.

**Change in practice: continuation of the reconstruction**

*Teacher’s voice*

The interaction of the practical argument process and my teaching practice became obvious to me at this point in time. I had just finished writing about Marie the night before, and she was on my mind. School had been in session
for about 30 minutes when the health clerk came to my room saying that Marie was in the nurse’s office and wanted to see me. The health clerk also told me that members of Marie’s extended family had recently moved into her home and that Marie was feeling a great deal of stress. The health clerk took over my class, and I went to talk with Marie.

Marie was lying on the nurse’s cot, so sad she looked boneless. I rubbed her arm and began to talk with her. The interaction was quite different than if I had been soliciting her premises (see Green 1976) for I wanted to offer comfort and gain information so that I could decide what to do. When I mentioned the principal’s death Marie cried saying she missed her and that she missed her grandmother who died about the same time. I said I’d heard that some other people had moved into her house and Marie told me about her 19-year-old cousin and his 18-year-old girlfriend who had two children under two and another due in a few months. She talked of the lack of privacy and the absorption of mother’s time and energy by this young family. Finally I asked about her health and found that she had had repeated strep infections and her doctor was considering removing her tonsils. I was even more convinced that this student did not have a reading problem and would require actions outside the realm of reading instruction.

This situational knowledge led me to the following practical arguments about what to do about these students.

**Bill:**
- This student can read.
- This student does not choose to read voluntarily.
- This student likes some books that he has read.
- This student is easily distracted when reading.
- It is 9:30 in the morning and I am saying ‘Go to special places and read’.

Therefore I...
- watch him closely;
- touch his book occasionally as I walk by;
- quickly move students who distract him;
- make sure the book he is reading interests him;
- set specific reading goals with him and meet with him frequently.

**Marie:**
- This student can read.
- This student completed assignments during the first quarter.
- At the end of the first quarter our principal died.
- This student was strongly affected by this death.
- This student is still grieving.
- This student has had strep throat repeatedly.
- Five people from this student’s extended family have moved into her home.

Therefore I...
- comfort this student;
- suggest that she talk to the nurse and the counsellor;
- tell her she may come in to the classroom before and after school.
Reflections on the process: coming together

I began this investigation with the assumption that I would be taking the roles of Teacher and Other, but during the investigation I realized that I was taking three roles, not two. I was 'other', 'teacher-being-studied' and 'teacher-teaching'. 'Teacher-being-studied' was not a real entity, but rather a construction which 'Other' used to illustrate the process of practical argument. The unusual feature of this case was that 'teacher-teaching' was not content to allow 'Other's' construction to stand unchallenged. While other would have liked cleaner arguments less packed in story, teacher-teaching insisted on some complications which were inconvenient but true. Such conflicts were intensified by the fact that none of the parties involved in this process could ever be rid of one another—all were in a sense watching over each other's shoulder. If all had been equal partners in the mental space I might very well have experienced intellectual gridlock, but the role of teacher-teaching was the strongest, and even though Other always wanted to investigate thinking, teacher-teaching often took a 'Gone with the Wind' approach saying, 'I'll think about that tomorrow'.

The process also reminded me of some differences between the performance of teaching and the use of a formal analytical model to think about teaching. Two differences seem most important. First, there's a certain single-mindedness required in formalizing thought which does not fit well with the complex and contradictory world of teaching. Second, such formal tools require a freeze-frame approach to time which often conflicts with the fluid and ever changing real time in which teachers make decisions.

Teacher's voice

When I teach I rarely act from only one reason and I rarely perform a single action in response to a set of premises. Instead things cluster. For example looking at Bill as teacher-teaching, the following cluster of thoughts occurs.

Silent child—even his laughter doesn't come out. Never finished journal entries e.g. 'I wish I didn't have to go to school but if I said that my mother would...'

Family. Everyone says 'Oh you've got a xxxx! [member of that family]'. There are expectations that he will fight, not do well in school.

Other children. Half the girls have a crush on him. Athletic child. Often has a caged look.

Docile child. Stopped by a teacher's voice during a home run. Difficult to get him to set a goal, supply an alternative.

Actions:

Reading actions (presented above).

Make him a kindergarten helper (this produced one of the only self-initiated sentences I've ever heard from him: 'Mr X wants us to come in at 1:00').

Make him big brother to the biggest little terror in kindergarten.

Correct the grapevine. Repeatedly say 'I don't know about the rest but Bill is a wonderful student. He's gentle and smart. He's one of my favourites.'
Discourage conversation about student’s family and try to focus attention on student himself.

Begin to think and talk about the handoff. Who should have him in 5th grade?

Tell Bill (responding in his journal and talking to him) that I’m interested in what he has to say and would like him to finish some of his journal entries.

Watch him and think. Continue trying to figure out why he concentrates well in non-reading activities. Why does he read so slowly?

Another difficulty I experienced with the framework of practical argument was finding a place for my sense of contradiction. Often I would create a practical argument and be immediately struck with its opposite. For example when I spoke of Bill as a ‘docile child’ I remembered times when he was anything but docile. When I wrote of his tendency to drift I remembered the intense look on his face as he played the computer game *Fraction Munchers* for 40 minutes without looking up. While I usually found some possibility for common ground (often the recognition of a situational difference) I was also struck by how little teacher-teaching needed to articulate these contradictions in order to function in her classroom.

It is difficult for me to maintain a sense of history or future when I am in the middle of a practical argument. Practical arguments are tightly framed and end on a definite note – ‘Therefore I...’ and yet teaching practice changes continually. Again this was a bigger problem for me as Other than for teacher-teaching.

An example of this conflict arose as I thought (once again) that I had finished this paper. While I had changed the paper because of developments in the life of Marie, I felt I was in good shape in my writing about Bill. I had written of Bill’s difficulties in reading, provided the group of ‘thought clusters’ outlined above, and was about to make some concluding statements when Bill became very ill and was hospitalized with what was thought to be a heart ailment. I visited him in the hospital, saw him in the context of his large and loving family and realized that much of what I thought about this child was in error. As I asked questions and heard the answers supplied by older siblings, as I sat by his bed with his mother being shown his rash (much to his dismay I think) I had entirely different thoughts about Bill. Bill may be silent because he is the youngest of a large family in which everyone talks for him. What appears to be inattention to school by Bill’s mother is due to the overwhelming nature of being a single mother of a large family, not to a lack of caring.

At this point in time my practical argument can be represented as follows:

1. Being able to read is important to the welfare of every student and I must teach every student to read.
2. Reading whole books of the student’s choosing improves the student’s ability to read.
3. Students require supervised time at school to read.
4. If students are not held accountable for their reading some will not read.
5. Not all students can be held accountable in the same way.
6. Bill and Marie require more supervision than other students in reading. Therefore I

(a) Add 30 minutes of silent reading time at the end of the day.
(b) Set daily and weekly reading goals with Bill and Marie.
(c) Continue to monitor the reading of all students and modify actions as needed.

Other’s voice

It should be noted that the ‘differences between the performance of teaching and the use of a formal analytical model to think about teaching’ which the teacher mentions above are not unknown to philosophers concerned with practical rationality. Wiggins (1980: 233) writes:

No theory, if it is to recapitulate or reconstruct practical reasoning even as well as mathematical logic recapitulates or reconstructs the actual experience of conducting or exploring deductive argument, can treat the concerns which an agent brings to any situation as forming a closed, complete, consistent system. For it is of the essence of these concerns to make competing and inconsistent claims. (This is a mark not of irrationality but of rationality in the face of the plurality of ends and the plurality of human goods.) The weight of the claims represented by these concerns is not necessarily fixed in advance. Nor need the concerns be hierarchically ordered. Indeed, a man’s reflection on a new situation that confronts him may disrupt such order and fixity as had previously existed, and bring a change in his evolving conception of the point... or the several or many, points of living or acting.

The complexity and contradiction involved in teaching do not call for a rejection of practical rationality but do require what Pendlebury (1990: 178) refers to as a ‘neo-Aristotelian conception of practical reason’. This conception includes a rich understanding of situational appreciation and deliberation, and takes into account constituent-to-end reasoning as well as means–end reasoning. It should be realized, however, that even this broader conception of practical rationality will not completely explain the complexity of teaching practice.

Conclusion

As I began this section I realized that a fourth role had emerged—that of ‘Writer’, and that while both teacher-teaching and the Other had learned a great deal from their encounter, if some benefit was to be gained by anyone else I needed to pull back even further and try to communicate with an audience outside of myself.

The tension which exists between the rigorous philosophical form of practical argument and the day-to-day practice of teaching is a useful one. The demands of teaching are complex, and teachers must be able to manage competing and at times mutually exclusive goals. That very complexity, however, can cause one to lose one’s sense of meaning and reason. The use of a rigorous analytical model to reflect on teaching action then serves as a way...
to maintain some elevation and perspective, but no analytical framework can completely encompass the complexity of teaching performed. The ill fit between teaching practice and formal models of teaching can be mutually beneficial, pushing the teacher to make explicit certain reasoning about actions in order that such reasoning can become vulnerable to change, and challenging formal models to deal with the practice of day-to-day teaching.

References


