

# Knowledge Building as Developing Personal Wisdom in a High School English Class

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## Introduction

Wisdom has a rich and varied meaning in religion and philosophy, but little is known about how people experience wisdom personally in the context of their own lives. Nor do we know much about efforts to teach for wisdom in secular contexts. It is in fact completely unknown whether teachers think it is possible to teach for wisdom as part of their regular teaching practice.

As part of an international project studying personal wisdom, we have conducted interviews with expert and novice teachers about what wisdom means for them and whether they can teach for wisdom in a high school English class. There have been a few attempts to measure personal or autobiographical wisdom, for example Bluck and Gluck (2004) gathered autobiographical interviews from Germans of 3 three age groups about moments when they felt they were wise, and Shih-Ying (2008) interviewed participants in Taiwan who had been nominated as wise about their life experience. However, these studies have relied on content analysis of these interviews, or classifying of isolated episodes, and have not examined how people might be encouraged to become more wise, or whether they think they might teach in ways that allow students to become wiser.

This paper considers whether expert and novice teachers differ in their beliefs about whether the standard English curriculum can help students learn about life, or more generally learn to be wise. Not all teachers believe wisdom can be taught or fostered, but expert teachers are expected to have greater and more refined knowledge about teaching and how to foster knowledge-building in their students.

## Method

Fifteen expert and 15 novice teachers were given three frequently used on senior high school English curricula (a scene from *Macbeth*, the opening of Bertrand Russell's autobiography, and the poem *Bushed*). Expert teachers had at least 10 years experience and were nominated by their principles as being exemplary teachers. Novice teachers were nominated by their Curriculum and Instruction teachers as having been exemplary in their practicum, but had not yet formally begun to teach.

Participants were asked to consider these three texts in any order they chose and to discuss how they would teach these materials in light of the following questions: 1. What do you consider the most important aspects of each text to present to your grade 12 class? 2. How would you go about teaching each text? (Please be as specific as possible.) and 3. What activity would ask the students to do to follow up on your lesson? (You need not consider evaluation here, only how you want your students to extend your input.) They were asked to make whatever notes or plans they wished, but not to show specific lesson plans. Interviews lasted about 1.5 hours and participants were met at their convenience, usually in their school setting. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

## Results & Discussion

Expert and novice teachers showed dramatic differences in how they thought the curriculum could be used to teach about life and about wisdom. One example will be

given from each group due to space considerations, but the full paper will discuss both groups more fully. The examples chosen are typical of the differences observed between the two groups of teachers.

In general, we find that novices naturally follow very closely the set exercises that they have been trained in as student teachers and through analogies with how other courses can be taught. For example, the novice teacher has this to say about teaching about life:

*I- okay.. so keeping in mind all the texts do you think that they can be used to teach about life? And how? It's a...*

P- Umm.. I think that they all.. well I think that Macbeth and Bertrand have a moral I'm not sure about um Earl Birney because again he's very you know he's very hard to read someone you know who's not strong in poetry like myself would probably not grasp the moral of what he's saying.. you know he's very nature.. nature vs. nurture and I'm not sure if what his life lesson would be in this but definitely you know.. I think Macbeth is trying to show you know.. like "don't - don't screw your family" [I- [laugh]]- and where before well.. there's so many things to happen in his life and these are the things that meant the most so definitely I think that they could teach life lessons but I'm not sure about (the Bush) one

*I- mmhmm- could you like say a little bit more about how you could use each of them to teach about life?*

P- Umm.. I might pose um well one of the things I've done in History before that could work in English is you - you come up with critical questions that drive the course.. so I might come up with you know as a class 3 general questions that drive the course and then we use this questions to - to answer - we answer these questions using the text [I- mmhmm]- so that's one way that you can do it.

As we see only one concrete teaching practice is proposed; the novice is generally struggling with how to teach this material. When considering how the texts can be used to teach for wisdom, we see that the novice although trying to answer the question really has little to say.

*I- okay.. um so now thinking about the texts again sort of bringing it back.. do you think that those 3 can be used to teach about wisdom?*

P- Umm I'm not sure about the Birney one because again I'm not sure about about the content of it; because you know when I was reading it I thought "Wow he's very- he's very into nature you know.. is this life about nature? Does he think that nature is the end all of the all? Is nature the one that guides me?" You know I wasn't sure.. these were questions that were running through my mind but definitely with the Bertrand and the Macbeth.. yes.. there's lots to be learned and there's lots to.. you know.. things that you should do you should not do.. [I-

mmhm] and especially with someone like Bertrand Russell who is a philosopher.. you know you need to do a lot of deep thinking and you might come to a higher level of wisdom after reading someone like him.

*I- mmhmm.. what about the Macbeth how would you use that to teach about wisdom?*

P- um.. I think Macbeth is - is on a journey.. he- he starts of naive but then he ends up knowing everything so maybe I would teach people to.. I would teach them to come into Macbeth with knowing nothing but then learning everything at the end sort of like Macbeth did.

In contrast to the novice teacher, the expert teacher has much more to say about how to build knowledge about life in their students through a detailed consideration of the curriculum material. Besides a wealth of ideas of what might be done in class, we see a remarkable focus on the students themselves, which this teacher admits was a hard won lesson that at first was lacking from his teaching. The main aim of the teaching practice is to get students themselves to engage the material as a way to understand other lives and ultimately their own lives. There is also a deep humility that reflects a respect for the lives of these students and a shared journey of an ongoing inquiry to understand more about life.

*I- so just thinking of a general question all three texts, do you think that you could use these three to teach uhm students about life?*

S- (laughs) What about life?

*I- Whatever that means to you!*

S- Uhm, I'm very reluctant to teach students about life, because I haven't mastered it. Uhm, when I ... you know, can I get philosophical here |I- Of course! (Laughs)| for a second? (laughs) Okay. When I became a teacher, remember I told you I, I was, I left Grad school because I was really idealistic |I-Mhml| and politically motivated and I thought teaching would be much more effective way for me to live in a consistent way with my thinking |I-Mhml| and the first school I went to, none of the kids went to university pretty much. It was kids that have very difficult lives uh came from very impoverished homes and I was shocked! And I never realized this, I mean nothing in my faculty of education prepared me in any way for teaching and certainly didn't prepare me for students that had no skills whatsoever, students who were reading at such low levels, students who could barely write a sentence and I started my first ever lesson – are you familiar with Dickens' "Hard Times?" |I-No| So, you know, Dickens – he's got a book "Hard Times," and in section, in "Hard Times" he's got a section in which he makes fun of the school system |I-Mhml| in England at the time and actually I photocopies this for my grade ten class before I ever met them, it was first day together. And of course none of them could read regular English, let alone

Victorian English, II-Mhml it was just a terrible mistake on my part because I didn't know the kids. And...but anyways I tried to have conversations that were more political, ideological etc., and they struggled even with that so incredibly because abstract thought was such an amazing challenge for them.

They, these were kids who had almost no intellectual stimulation in their life, II-Mhml and completely unprepared for abstract thought and it became pretty clear to me, pretty quickly that they needed me to help them to be successful in the small ways II-Mhml in life, above all else. They had to pick up certain skills such as, you know, arriving place, punctuality, uh speaking politely to each other and to others because in the work world, you know, these are the kind of kids who lose jobs all the time because they don't know how to communicate with the people. Uh anger control (laughs) uh and basic literacy skill that they would need for employment, for raising a family at some point. And so my teaching became *much* more skills focused, very quickly, then I ever imagined it when I was thinking of becoming a teacher.

At my *current* school, we can talk about life and stuff like that, often tangentially off the lesson, so for fun here and there what do you guys think? But even there, now my kids are really focused on being successful, getting the marks that they would need to go to the top universities, being successful when they get to the top universities, so again skills is always my biggest focus but beyond that, when we do talk about life lessons, uhm I'm more and more certain all the time that I don't know the secret II-Mhml to happiness.

And so even, I would never teach about life, I would prompt to questions that have the students examine their preconceptions II-Mhml about life, and I think that's something I try and do regularly but its always, and I would never, of course, there'd be no such thing as a right or wrong answer, II-Rightl at any point, it's simply... I still think it's very valuable to question yourself, all the time, about why you believe what you believe II-Mhml so I try and push students in that direction but I don't feel like I teach them about life. The other thing I might try and do, I guess, is try and introduce them to other lives that they know nothing about through the literature, quite possibly is a uh...you know I'm making them aware of, they come from a very limited, my current students come from a very limited perspective of what they know about the world II-Mhml so we really try and focus about learning as much as possible about different parts of the world, different classes – economic classes is very important to us – and asking, you know, how does, how do other people experience the world compared to what many of my students would often take for granted. So, that would be as close as I come to teaching about uh life.

Uhm, in terms of these particular pieces, I guess I would focus on fears, II-Mhml what is it that, I mean most of my kids aren't necessarily fearful of climbing a mountain or being in a mountain but what, you know, let's, if you want to focus on that come up with a symbol to express fears that we might have in an urban setting. II-Mhml What are the fears that you and your parents and your friends go through? Uhm, Macbeth is obviously about ambitions and what would, what are you willing to do II-Mhml to satisfy your ambition? To how easily can we be corrupted when faced with a great desire or with manipulation, such as the

way he's manipulated by his wife – to what extent could that corrupt us somehow? I suppose, how easy would that be II-Mhml and uhm... so this (laughs) II-(laughs) I would never even dream of uh teaching this as a lesson about life but if I had to teach this in terms of something about teaching life it would be what kind of sacrifices are you willing to make? What are you willing to suffer for? Is there anything you are willing to suffer for? I mean, most people today, I think, we talk about the environment and yet most people aren't even willing to walk two blocks II-Mhml or, you know, carry around their reusable bottle, right, so his kind of sacrifice is just seems so beyond the pale and we might talk about why that is: why is it that so many people hold slightly progressive or idealistic views but don't live according to them? That would be, again questions that I would come up with. II-Mhml

*I- You mentioned a bit earlier that you would want to teach them about other lives through literature, IS-YesI can you give me an example of how you would do that?*

S- Absolutely! We uh, a book that I teach uh in grade eleven is Tony Morrison's "Beloved" II-Mhml and...are you familiar with the book? II-NoI Okay, so it takes place in uhm, just, well just before and just after The Civil War II-Mhml and all the main characters are uhm Black Americans, most of them were slaves II-Mhml before The Civil War and now that the war has ended, they are free but still haunted by their, by the lives they led and by the racism that's still around uh in, uh in their communities that surrounds them. Uh, and obviously we talk about how would their experiences completely shaped who they are, how can these experiences, that are so beyond our imagination, shape who we are? Then, and we spent about three week on this novel, maybe a little more, maybe four weeks uh after which they read another novel, I have a selection of novels to choose from, but all these novels again, we deal with people who've gone through great trauma II-Mhml and great stress and uhm, this time they read them, in their own in the groups and discuss uh the issues uh with the groups and eventually write an exam in which they compare uh the experiences in the one novel to the experiences in the other novel and sort of what - and the thesis, obviously is something that can be determined by the human response to suffering, to difficulties and its more specific than that but different kinds of trauma that people can go through. II-Mhml

So, again using literature as much as possible to have us think about lives very different from our own experiences, very different from our own uh, in grade twelve right now, uh one of the things we're going to do in the next week or so is we're going to go the library and the students have to find uh books written by people from outside of North America and Western Europe. II-Mhml The concept is that these, whatever region they choose, so they'll be grouped, they'll be put into groups again but this time by region, so Africa, South America, China, Korea, sort of, Pakistan, India whatever, and uh and the reason we insist that it, it has, it can't just be a book written by a North American about a part of the world, it has to be written by people from that part of the world is because our focus is on the voices that we don't usually hear II-Mhml in our school system, because it is

important to us to, again for the kids to be aware of lives way beyond their circle of uh knowledge.

And the same is true when the expert teacher considers how to use these same texts to teach for wisdom. Although he says this is impossible, we see that his approach to wisdom does address how to engage the texts and the issues deeply and to have students develop a personal knowledge that is the hallmark of wisdom.

*I- So, if you, and I know that you mentioned that you don't read for wisdom but do you think that you could use those three texts to teach for wisdom in any way?  
[...]*

S- Yeah, I'd be pretty reluctant II-Mhml for wisdom, uh, in them. Again uh, Shakespeare, I'm very confident he's not showing us Macbeth as any sort of role model II-Mhml and, and I think, I mean Shakespeare's brilliance is in the fact that he shows us humans with all their foibles and mistakes and complexities, even somebody who feels, as intelligent as Hamlet doesn't offer any wisdom. Hamlet destroys everyone around him, II-Mhml I mean, I don't know how well you remember Hamlet – everyone ends up dead!, II-Mhml because the guy he was smart, but he spent all day just thinking about what he's going to do and he led to, if he ever, if instead of, he had no wisdom at all Hamlet! Or would he of, I mean, that's why he couldn't get himself out of the mess that uh he was in. And I think Shakespeare presents us a world in which wisdom is very rare. II-Mhml Uh, you know, kings, King Lear has no wisdom whatsoever! Destroys his own life and again and again we see that in all tragedies, not just Shakespeare tragedies. That we lack wisdom, what we have is pride and drives and complex emotions and desires that humble us II-Mhml instead of leading us to wisdom.

Uh, "Bushed" there's no wisdom here. The guy just finds out by the end that uh, as far as I can tell, that he can't face the world of nature its own. He doesn't know how to approach it, he's frightened by it and he holes himself in waiting for something. Uh, so again, if anything, in my view of, of my understanding of it, I don't know if it's what Earle Birney had in mind, but my understanding is that somehow nature and the world is far too big for us. It, we do not have the wisdom to comprehend it and in this case where he does seem to have...I'm sorry it's deceptive because I was going he seems to be so arrogant but even then he ends it with uhm, that uhm "I long to alleviate all evil but I cannot and I too suffer." Here he is, one of the great minds of his time, saying, you know, "I spent my who life trying to make this a better world for everybody," II-Mhml and he ends with (laughs) "and I failed."

No, I can't find, I can't find wisdom but to me, what I keep coming back to is letting the kids know in class "Wow, life is so complex!" II-Mhml Trying, all the best that we can hope for, is to try and understand and our situations and others better and the fact is one of the things that happens also as you teach, it's interesting, when you teach a novel, a play, over and over again for fifteen years, twenty years, every few years you realized you see it differently. II-Mhml Uh, so if, again if I have another, any other piece of wisdom is that I'm more and more

certain that there's no right answers, that I'm no, I don't even look for right answers: I look for the answers that's right for me right now. II-Mhml And I think of intellectual approaches to literature in English, most be as pleasure. Analyze the poem for pleasure! What do you get out of it? And if, what emotionally, intellectually what do you get out of it? And come back to it three years later and get something completely different out of it II-Mhml and just enjoy that process but try and be aware of how your life experiences have led you to the conclusions that you came out to, that you found at any one time. II-Mhml

### **Conclusion**

These two examples exemplify the difference in the richness with which expert teachers are able to engage in knowledge building as a way to teach for wisdom: Not in the trivial sense of conveying some specific life-lesson, but in the much more profound sense of knowing how to have students engage the English curriculum in such a way as to deepen their knowledge about life and to foster a climate that promotes the development of personal wisdom. In so doing they draw on their own life experience teaching, as well as on master narratives of what it means to be good teacher, and what it means to deeply understand English literature as a wisdom into the human condition.

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### **References**

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