

This is an excerpt from "Enabling Communities and Collaborative Responses to Teaching Demonstrations" by Janet Swenson, with Diana Mitchell  
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The full text document can be found at [http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp\\_file/7336/Red\\_Cedar.pdf?x-r=pcfile\\_d](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/7336/Red_Cedar.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d)

Background knowledge: **CRTD** means "Collaborative Responses to Teaching Demonstrations"  
This excerpt focuses on the 5 lenses that you will utilize to provide feedback on lessons you observe.

### **Lens 1: Describing Affect for Teachers and Learners**

Perhaps Parker Palmer says it best: The first lens concerns the

question about teaching that goes unasked in our national dialogue—and often goes unasked even in the places where teachers are educated and employed. But it should be asked wherever good teaching is at stake, for it honors and challenges the teacher's heart, and it invites a deeper inquiry than our traditional questions do. . . . Who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes? (1998, 4)

Palmer reminds us that conversations about affect, or feelings, are often overlooked in conversations on teaching and learning. This lens puts the spotlight on seemingly invisible cues that give students important information. Does the teacher like us? Does the teacher respect us as learners? Does the teacher care about what she is teaching? Does the teacher work to involve us in the learning and build on what we already know and have experienced? All of these cues, often evidenced in nonverbal actions, contribute in important ways to the learning that goes on in the classroom, mostly by influencing students' desire and willingness to learn. As teachers, we are not always aware of these nonverbal messages. This lens helps bring the messages to

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to 2004, this lens focused solely on the state English language arts content standards and benchmarks, which are closely reflected in the state standardized test. To reflect teacher interest and concern, particularly as reflected in the implications of the No Child Left Behind Act, we broadened this lens.

the surface and inform teachers' understanding of how their students may perceive them and their approaches.

The opening sentences of the CRTD typically identify one or more strengths teachers perceived in the demonstration. Respondents then move to the area below the first heading ("Affect") to name the feelings they experienced during the demonstration—first as the demonstrator's students, and then as the demonstrator's colleagues—and to tie these feelings to the events occurring at the time. We deliberately start with this section for two reasons: 1) participants new to the protocol usually feel confident naming their feelings, and 2) we believe that affect is too often overlooked as a critical variable in teaching successes and failures, and so it gratifies us to give it a preferential treatment.

In his teaching demonstration "Literature Shop Class: Hands-On, Visual, and Personal," 2004 RCWP participant Rick Cook brought us into conversation with Billy Collins' poem "Introduction to Poetry" (1988, 58), Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1993), and his own grandfather's World War II-era, emotionally charged letter written to the family the day after his platoon visited a death camp. Rick's demonstration prompted us to think about the things we carry, literally and metaphorically, and whether we consider these as burdens or assets. He invited us to consider not only our personal baggage, but also the ways in which our perceptions of these things we carry influence our personal stake in major national and international events. Many of us cried as we considered how we have been shaped and how we have shaped ourselves in response to our lived experiences. We imagine that if asked today, those who were in that summer's institute could readily say what they discovered about themselves that day and how it has influenced their thinking since then.

Participants expressed strong responses to Rick and his teaching, which attempts, through a range of genres and representations of lived experiences, to give students opportunities to contrast these different narratives and thus generatively complicate their understanding of war. In the collaborative letters that writing groups developed, they noted that they felt drawn in, trusted, safe, inspired, and invited, and had a "sense of ownership of the lesson." One group of respondents noted, for instance,

Your passion for this subject [war and "war wounds"] was palpable in this room. The rate at which you spoke and walked—the sense of engagement and urgency you projected were contagious. We felt our own hearts race, our pulses quicken, our breathing get faster and shallower. We sat on the edge of our seats. You helped us become passionate about your topic—identifying our own wars and war wounds and the ways these influence our perception of external wars.

In an era in which policymakers require teachers to focus on "demanding" more of students, this focus on heightening student engagement through affect is an oasis. Not all students respond to teachers who genuinely care for and about them, but for many students, it is an aphrodisiac that leads to a lifelong love of learning.

## Lens 2: Articulating Best Practice

Although participants may find it easy to articulate the genesis for affect, they find it far more challenging to identify language that clearly articulates what they consider elements of “best practice.” We describe best practices as those English language arts methods, materials, approaches, and contexts that positively affect learning and productively address problems generally acknowledged by those in the discipline to be at once fundamental and profound. Although we agree in principle with Schon’s assertions about the inherent value of reflection (as described in his 1987 text *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*), in the current political climate it no longer seems sufficient for teachers to “know in their guts” that particular approaches to teaching and learning are more apt to be successful than others. Teachers today need ready access to clear, concise, compelling explanations for why they must be allowed to continue to develop context- and child-specific approaches and materials for teaching the English language arts and other, newer literacies.

In the summer institute, during our whole-group CRTD practice session and again later in our various writing group sessions, we explain that when teacher-participants are attempting to identify best practices, they might use these two questions as a litmus test to determine whether they are focused on a practice that is specific to this lesson or on a generative approach to teaching writing:

1. Might this practice apply to many teaching demonstrations (e.g., “engages students in researching their own questions,” “begins, but does not end, with the students’ own lived experiences”)?
2. Is this practice likely to enhance the literacy learning of a highly diverse group of learners (e.g., “encourages students to identify in what contexts various language choices might be most effective,” “literature choices include widely varying community and family structures and values”)?

If teachers cannot initially name any best practices, those of us who have constructed these responses in the past prime the pump by highlighting various aspects of the teaching demonstration and naming attributes we have come to believe represent “promising practices.” (Having each taught more than thirty years and experienced fairly large shifts in our own professional understanding, we tend to be a little more circumspect about declaring these “best” practices and instead suggest, for now, that they seem highly productive.) We have also, in the past, copied and distributed Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde’s chart of best practices in the English language arts provided in their book by the same name (1998, 8).

As an example, in response to the teaching demonstration by Rick Cook that we referenced in the previous section, the participants made the following observations:

- The theme “being told is the opposite of finding out” was illustrated throughout the session. At each point, we were helped to make our own discoveries, to find our own “truths.”

- We did not have to guess about your philosophical beliefs and how they influence your teaching. From the start, you made your values and beliefs transparent to us and helped us learn to discern these in other settings with your “invisible tricks” methodology.
- Your lesson addressed several of Gardner’s multiple intelligences. You made effective use of
  - visual images (the slides)
  - kinesthetic engagement (hiding the pencils)
  - oral language (small group discussions)
  - writing (our own pieces).
- Your modeling was effective, particularly when demonstrating
  - note-taking on the poem you shared
  - writing your own poem
  - finding samples from other authors.
- You made excellent selections of highly diverse texts/authors.
- You made connections from text to self (“I Carry” to own interpretations).
- You made connections from text to world (“I Carry” to more global interpretations).
- You made connections from text to text (connecting your grandfather’s letter about his war experiences to *Maus*, for example).

### **Lens 3: The Michigan Language Arts Standards and Benchmarks**

#### **\*We will be using the NGSS and CCSS for Math as Lens 3.\***

As Tom Fox notes in *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*,

The working contexts of many teachers do not support a collective and thoughtful examination of standards. Instead, teachers often feel unsupported and see standards as another threat to their autonomy. It would be easy for an administrator or a school board to turn the standards into a remedial tool and threaten teachers with compliance. (1999, 9)

We imagined that we might address Fox’s concerns by using as another lens the Michigan content standards and benchmarks for English language found in the Michigan Department of Education’s (1996) *Michigan Curriculum Frameworks* (which bears a striking resemblance to the standards developed by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English). Many excellent teachers with whom we worked in the mid to late nineties had limited knowledge of the standards or the state standardized test (field tested in 1996 and implemented in 1997). Many RCWP teachers were introduced to these documents during their summer institute experience.

To scaffold the professional conversations pertaining to the third lens, we provide participants with the Michigan standards and benchmarks and released items from the Michigan English Language Arts standardized tests. Today, many teachers are

quite familiar with the standards and standardized tests, and, although we still include copies in their notebooks, we also include a range of other legislative and policy documents—ranging from the grade level equivalency standards and “Michigan, Yes!” (Michigan standards for school accreditation) to excerpts from *No Child Left Behind*. Our goal is to create an occasion for conversations about the specific ways in which teachers’ current approaches to teaching do or do not address the concerns that are the focus of these legislative and policy documents.

Once again, we draw an example from the responses to Rick Cook’s demonstration. One of the writing groups noted the following relationship between Rick’s work and the broader educational context:

To make AYP [Annual Yearly Progress], our students must show growth on the MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program standardized tests]. Particularly problematic for schools is the portion of the social studies test that asks students to read across and synthesize a variety of texts/genres and then create and defend a relevant argument (making what have been identified as “Core Democratic Values” part of that argument). In addition to getting low social studies test scores, many schools struggle to keep their writing scores going up [or fail to make AYP]. This demonstration is an excellent example of an approach that should help in both instances. Students are asked to read across a wide range of texts related to war (letters, excerpts from novels, poetry, comic novels, song lyrics, etc.), develop a thesis for an original poem, and then use evidence from the sources to support that creative work. The focus on poetry leads students to a closer examination of the language they use to express their thoughts, with particular attention paid to economy and symbolic language (metaphor) than they might if asked to write a more traditional persuasive essay. In addition, the sheer volume of writing you ask your students to develop (in a variety of forms) and revise after feedback should help them to score well on the tests. We found, in particular, that your demonstration was effective in addressing these content standards/benchmarks:

- CS 5, B 3: Analyze how the tensions among characters, communities, themes, and issues in literature and other texts reflect the substance of the human experience. (p.13)
- CS 8, B 4: Identify and use aspects of the craft of the speaker, writer, and illustrator to formulate and express their ideas artistically. Examples include imagery, irony, multiple points of view, complex dialogue, aesthetics, and persuasive techniques. (p.17)
- CS 9, B1: Analyze and reflect on universal themes and substantive issues from oral, visual, and written texts. Examples include human interaction with the environment, conflict and change, relationships with others, and self-discovery. (p.18)

When we developed the CRTD, we did not anticipate benefits it might have for our project as a professional development provider. Since implementing the protocol in 1995, we have tracked the most to least often addressed Michigan English Language Arts Content Standards (CS) in teachers’ demonstrations. Those most often addressed are CS 3, *Meaning and Communication in Context* (“All students will focus on meaning and communication as they listen, speak, view, read, and write in personal, social, occupational, and civic contexts”) and CS 6, *Voice* (“All students will learn to communicate information accurately and effectively and demonstrate

their expressive abilities by creating oral, written, and visual texts that enlighten and engage an audience”). By contrast, the least often addressed standards are CS 11, *Inquiry and Research* (“All students will define and investigate important issues and problems using a variety of resources, including technology, to explore and create texts”) and CS 1, *Meaning and Communication–Reading* (“All students will read and comprehend general and technical material”).<sup>3</sup>

We had not previously thought to track such data, and doing so has resulted in new avenues for inquiry: Since we readily acknowledge the importance of helping students to become proficient researchers and readers of general and technical material, how can we support teacher demonstrations that address these underrepresented areas? Does the summer institute more readily accommodate teaching demonstrations aimed at a certain subset of our state standards? If so, which ones and how? How might we (and how should we) address these underrepresented standards through the returning teacher-consultant demonstrations and/or the RCWP continuity program?

Despite the generative ways that including the standards as a lens has allowed us to analyze the opportunities participants find (or don’t find) in the summer institute, this lens continues to raise concerns for us as well. Considering the standards out of context—without examining the ways in which they are driving curriculum development, teaching, teacher licensure, student assessment, and standardized testing—suggests a neutrality and determinism we want to resist. We have managed this to a small extent by broadening the frame and making the standards only one of several policy documents that are played against the teaching demonstrations, but we also continue to look for texts such as Tom Fox’s (1999) or Susan Ohanian’s *One Size Fits Few* (1999) to make these standards and policies explicit foci for critical professional conversations.

#### **Lens 4: Extensions and Adaptations**

##### **\* We are calling this "Modifications & Adaptations"\***

The fourth lens encourages participants to identify the “core” of a teaching demonstration. Teachers analyze the appropriateness of the approach for the students with whom they work most closely, including students from varying racial and ethnic groups, from varying grade levels and disciplines, from less- and more-well-financed schools, and so forth. Having imagined how this approach might work with their own students, the teachers are encouraged to identify adaptations and extensions that would allow this approach to work as generatively as possible in alternative settings and/or for longer durations. Teachers enjoy imagining where this episode of teaching might lead, suggesting activities and outcomes that build on or go beyond the ideas or concepts addressed in it. Teachers have an amazing repertoire of practices and ready recall of texts in a wide range of genres and on an equally wide range of subjects, and they seem to enjoy this opportunity to make good use of these capacities to coconstruct alternative curricula, methods, and materials.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete version of the Michigan English Language Arts Standards, see this website: [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/MichiganCurriculumFramework\\_8172\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/MichiganCurriculumFramework_8172_7.pdf).

In response to Rick’s demonstration—which examined war through various genres and representations of individuals’ lived experiences both to study the texts and to examine the influence of genre on interpretation—participants offered these extensions or adaptations:

- Extend the study of *Maus* beyond war to genocide, intergenerational communication struggles, current world affairs.
- Invite colleagues to explore the possibilities for developing interdisciplinary units of study (using *Maus* as an example of ways to combine history, English, geography, social studies, and other subjects).
- Invite students to interview family members, neighbors, and others, regarding their memories of World War II.
- Invite students to use storyboarding as a prewriting technique.
- Invite students to do their own graphic autobiographies (though narrower in focus and shorter than *Maus*).
- Invite students to identify icons in *Maus* and then keep a list of icons they see during the day. Discuss the role of icons in American culture.
- Invite students to create a piece of writing with animal imagery that, like *Maus* and *Animal Farm*, gives animals human characteristics and also uses them symbolically.

### **Lens 5: Questions Arisen**

While we were developing this monograph, we invited teachers to reflect, mid-institute, on their experiences developing and receiving the type of feedback the CRTD process invites. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive. About half of the participants noted that the CRTD letters were one of the few occasions in their teaching careers in which colleagues focused on identifying what was “right” about their teaching. The other half, after noting the benefits of giving and receiving these close readings of approaches to teaching, asked for a section that explicitly invited them to share with any presenter the reservations that they had about any aspect of the presentation. In an attempt to avoid inviting didactic responses (“Here’s what you should have done . . .”), and in recognition of those teachers who expressed appreciation for the positive tone of the letters, we now invite teachers to raise questions that they have regarding the teaching demonstration by using “I” or “we,” referencing teaching as a shared professional endeavor, and shaping the comment as a question (“How can we keep student attention if we need to lecture for more than fifteen minutes?” “How can I truly accept the premise that often ‘less is more?’”). Such framing raises these issues as challenges to the profession, not challenges to a single teacher.

Questions addressed to Rick after his presentation included these:

- How do we assess students’ personal writing?
- What resistance might we anticipate from the community over using a “comic book” in class? (Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* has a comic-book-like style.) How might we best respond to such reactions?
  - When one lesson requires a substantial portion of a marking period, how do we judge that it is worthy of that much attention?
  - How do we make conversations about race/ethnicity and religion comfortable and meaningful for all of our students?