

## *The Water is Wide: Lessons on Teaching from a Popular Novel*

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for October 2004.)

As teachers of psychology, we rely on resources that assist in course preparation and teaching (e.g., journal articles, books, Internet discussion lists, workshops, conference presentations). Last spring, I discovered an unconventional, yet invaluable, resource: a popular novel entitled *The Water is Wide* (Conroy, 1972). This autobiographical story, which takes place in the late 1960s, describes how the author spent a year in the southeastern United States teaching disadvantaged islanders.

In the novel, Conroy, a recent college graduate, accepts a position teaching reading and writing to 6th and 7th graders. The students reside in a black community, isolated since the Civil War on a barrier island near Savannah, Georgia. Most of the Yamacraw Island citizens never visited the mainland because, at the time, there was no bridge spanning the small slip of ocean between the two land masses. Consequently, the community was isolated from the rest of Georgia.

In the wake of the civil rights movement, the board of education made only meager attempts to provide the islanders with an education, which translated into few funds for decent materials and quality teachers. In addition to low resources, there were strains of regional racism, low expectations of the students by teachers, and a lack of administrative support. Worse, previous teachers typically spent the hours of the school day applying corporal punishment to manage unruly behavior. As a result, all 18 students in Conroy’s class were illiterate and blissfully unaware of current events, such as the Vietnam War and who served as President of the United States.

The formidable water that few in this novel dared to cross serves as a literal barrier to education for the students on Yamacraw Island; a similar metaphorical barrier between teacher and students may exist in the college environment, especially in rural communities. On occasion, it might strike faculty members that the majority of their students have beliefs and world views that diverge substantially from their own. Typical students attending universities in their hometowns tend to be heavily influenced by hometown values (Kraut & Lewis, 1975). Students from rural settings, for example, may endorse values consistent with conservative political ideologies and values (Chow, 2000; Suedfeld, Steel, & Schmidt, 1995) that diverge from the more liberal views often endorsed by faculty (Lipset, 1982).

Returning to our literary example, in the face of the ostensibly impossible Yamacraw Island situation, Conroy adopts a “save the world” approach in his initial teaching efforts, with strong determination to teach students to read and write. His students seem unwilling, unprepared, and unconvinced that they can learn skills and content that do not relate to their fishing village lifestyle. After a valiant but unsuccessful effort, Conroy adapts. He changes his approach and focuses more on changing the students’ world views. He fights the

administration (and nervous parents) for permission and resources that will expose the children to a world beyond the island, one that carries with it many opportunities. This “real world” experience includes taking students trick-or-treating on the mainland (to illustrate cultural diversity and rituals of other people), to a Harlem Globetrotters game (to build students’ confidence by showing successful black men idolized by white people), and on various field trips, including a trip to Washington, DC (for history lessons and exposure to urban lifestyle).

Fortunately, disparities between the teacher and students typically are not this grand in scale. However, disparities do exist and may become evident during classroom discussions or when questions arise. For example, students enrolled in a psychopharmacology course may vehemently argue that individuals who abuse drugs do so because they are immoral or weak-willed. Therefore, it might be the goal of the teacher to get students to think critically and objectively about drug use (e.g., to understand the conditions under which drug abuse occurs, and to realize that morality and personal strength will have little to do with it). Although this conceptualization may seem straightforward to the teacher, students often are hearing this information for the first time, and as a result, may be resistant to it. The water indeed may be wide.

Nevertheless, we can learn how to bridge the water by examining young Conroy’s experiences with the Yamacraw students. Conroy illustrates that the students’ ability to relate to the teacher is only as good as their own experiences. One particular dialogue between Conroy and his students on cultural differences nicely illustrates this point: Students in his classroom humorously discuss an incident in which a neighbor of some of the students shot his pet cat for stealing food, a situation that Conroy finds shocking. In response, he spends a substantial amount of time trying to convince the children that shooting a cat for “being a cat” is cruel and unacceptable. The students argue persuasively that food is not plentiful and the cat was a possible threat to the neighbor’s viability. They also make other excellent points that he finds difficult to defend. Conroy ultimately gives up—his students are unable to relate to his view (and him to theirs).

When views diverge substantially, a teacher’s rigid endorsement rarely leads to changes in students’ perspectives. By contrast, a teacher’s awareness of this divergence and a willingness to start at a point where students can relate may lead to meaningful change. For example, in a psychopharmacology class, it might be useful for students to discuss the conditions under which individuals use or abuse drugs. Rather than immediately dismissing views that are not empirically supported or theoretically sound, it might facilitate change to work each explanation into a lecture across the semester. For example, when discussing research that shows that having few alternatives in life increases the chances of drug abuse, teachers might point out that labeling individuals in these circumstances as “immoral” adds little to the explanation of why abuse occurs.

Another lesson illustrates a primary goal of teaching—to better prepare students for the real world. Conroy abandons his goals of teaching culturally irrelevant topics, such as reading and understanding literature, and instead, focuses on a deep-seated cultural belief that water is dangerous. The children had been taught that the sea is evil and unpredictable and that they

should avoid entering the water. As a result, they were never taught to swim, a situation that could have devastating consequences for an islander. Conroy decides that teaching the skill of swimming (to those whose parents approved) would be one of the most useful skills an islander could learn.

Like Conroy, teachers sometimes place too much emphasis on content and forget another important goal of teaching: to help students acquire skills that will enable them to obtain jobs or enter into graduate school and succeed in those endeavors. Content is important, but so are skills. The budding psychology major, for example, needs skills in oral and written communication as well as skills in conducting research and analyzing data. Whenever possible, teachers should attempt to hone these skills, too.

Good teaching also entails challenges, which should be accompanied by reasonable expectations. Some teachers (such as Conroy) have ambitious goals that reach beyond the learning of content and include, for example, the expansion of their students' world views. A specific goal might be to teach tolerance of racial differences or alternative lifestyles. Although this is a noble goal, teachers should keep in mind that it is difficult to change an 18-year history during a 16-week semester. Progress and success in teaching need to be defined realistically, always remembering that one person has a limited capacity for profound impact. Perhaps students' world views may not change when they take a social psychology class, but they might be able to better understand the perspective of another group of people as a result. Teachers might be content merely to push students in the general direction of a world view change by teaching them one particular skill (e.g., perspective taking) and hoping for meaningful long-term effects.

If you are reading this essay, chances are good that you are trying to improve your teaching skills. But to what end? Conroy concludes the novel by stating, "Of the Yamacraw children I can say very little. I don't think I changed the quality of their lives significantly...For them I leave a single prayer: that the river is good to them in the crossing" (p. 242). For all of our hard work, we never know for sure if our efforts have been fruitful beyond test scores. We may assume because we hear little from the students, that nothing we have done has changed them. But consider your own experiences. How many teachers made significant impressions that influenced your academic decisions but never benefited from your positive feedback? Perhaps we can be content in knowing that we do our best to bridge the water, even if we do not know the long-term outcome. In addition, we can hope that what we teach our students is relevant and useful to their lives both inside and outside of the classroom.

#### References

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