TEACHING WITH YOUR MOUTH SHUT

DONALD L. FINKEL

FOREWORD BY

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Foreword

PETER ELBOW

This book makes me proud to have been a colleague with Don Finkel and to have taught at The Evergreen State College (overlapping with him from 1976 to 1981). The book brings us more news about teaching and learning than most books on that topic I've read in the last decades. By "news," I don't mean "the newest, latest fashion in education"—indeed there's even something bracingly "old" to this book. What I mean is that this book gives me a fresher lens or perspective on teaching and learning than I've had in a very long time.

Teaching with Your Mouth Shut is not a "one-right-way" book that peddles a single method or technique. For example, we might expect a book with this title to take a dim view of lecturing; and it mostly does. Yet Finkel is actually eloquent about how a lecture or piece of sustained "Telling" can sometimes make "teaching with your mouth shut" more effective.

But he doesn't avoid the "one-right-way" trap by hiding behind wise generalizations and broad principles. He is openhanded in often laying out specific activities in a practical fashion, and he sometimes describes the steps he went through in a class or series of classes in such a way as to invite us to adapt, imitate, or even borrow.

Finkel avoids the low road of "one-right-way" advice and the high road of mere wisdom by creating a book that is essentially an exploration or analysis of *experience* in learning and teaching. The book functions as a kind of conversation or thinking machine to help us reconsider the most central practices in our teaching. As I was reading, I kept stopping and thinking about my own planning and teaching. The more I did that, the more powerful the book became. Early in the book, Finkel asks us to stop and do a bit of reflective writing before going further. I recommend doing so—however odd it might feel. During some periods of my reading, when I rushed to "get the ideas," I missed out on some of the insights the book later gave me when I came back to those sections less hurried.

When people talk about the importance of experience in learning, they usually imply a dichotomy between experiential learning and "mere" books,

words, and concepts. Experiential learning tends to mean things like these: performing a scene, role-playing an author or character in a book, having a debate, arranging ourselves in the classroom along a line according to our "position" on some controversial issue, exploring trust and building community by closing our eyes and falling backward into the arms of classmates, going out into the woods to practice close observation or listening, or doing careful research on some aspect of the wetlands of Puget Sound for a whole quarter or even a year.

Nothing in Finkel's book argues against any of these activities, and I happen to be interested in the bodily and performative dimensions of learning. But the remarkable importance of this book comes from how Finkel demolishes the dichotomy between "mere" book-verbal-conceptual learning and "experiential learning." He zeros in on the task of designing activities to produce richly experiential learning that is not particularly bodily or performative. Finkel's whole book speaks to an idea I reflected on with some perplexity before I went to Evergreen or met him: "the profound fact about education is not that most of what students read means very little, but that occasionally, for some students, something read means a great deal" ("Non-disciplinary" 9). This book is about how to create the *experience* of abstract, verbal concepts-out-of-books.

Finkel is building on Piaget, Dewey, and James—and in particular on the powerful principle he quotes from Dewey that "no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another." He hangs on to this premise with a doggedness that stems, he says, from an early moment in his teaching at the University of Washington when he was lecturing on Piaget and realized that if he actually believed what he was saying, he would have to find a way to change the way he was teaching—even with large lecture classes.

For even though he insists that learning comes only from experiences—not from words in themselves, whether heard or read—he also recognizes that words are the most convenient and efficient raw material we have in schools and colleges out of which to create experiences of genuine learning. Finkel's "conceptual workshop" is the central or paradigm example he gives for how to design situations that evoke experiences out of "merely" written words. Finkel is an ingenious architect of feasible perplexities—planned "gaps" in understanding that lead to active thinking and learning. I call him an architect because he's so interested in the structures involved in creating such experiences.

Finkel shows conceptual finesse as he looks into the guts of the thinking and learning process. He reminds me of someone who can see the innards of the internal combustion engine and tell the bits and pieces of the events in-

side. One small, appealing example: he shows how to design questions to help students feel a concept better by moving "from its *meaning* to its *function.*"

We see here evidence of Finkel's careful Piagetian training. The book is very disciplined. I can feel how he's been reflecting on some of these techniques for three decades—refining these insights and testing these practices throughout a long career of teaching in two very opposite academic settings: large lecture courses at the University of Washington and small interdisciplinary seminars at Evergreen.

* * *

I want to call attention to the way Finkel gives us careful, clear thinking about issues that are often subtle, fuzzy, or vexed. Here are five examples that struck me.

1. *Student-centered teaching vs. teacher-centered teaching.* Finkel fights the good fight to bring students and the learning process to center stage and to push away the pervasive cultural model of the good teacher as the prominent, charismatic, performing professor. Yet I appreciate the way Finkel doesn't raise "student centered" as a banner—indeed he doesn't use either of the terms themselves. (The book is notable for the absence of jargon or fashionable terminology.) Most of all, he highlights a crucial truth that is sometimes obscured by the *teacher-centered* vs. *student-centered* terminology: teaching with your mouth shut in the ways he advocates requires lots of strong, unhidden authority, lots of planning and control of what you want to make happen, and deep understanding of the concepts that you want to get students to experience. If I were trying to find the most flat-footed title for this book, I might choose, *How to Think Through, Design, and Take Control of What You Want to Teach So That Your Students Actually Experience It.*
2. *Power vs. authority.* I sometimes get impatient when academic writers tease out fine theoretical distinctions, but I found myself grateful for the way Finkel showed the practical importance in the classroom of the difference between the teacher's power and the teacher's authority.
3. *Plato and Rousseau.* Among the numerous "Most Wanted Criminal" posters on academic walls these days, Plato and Rousseau are prominent. It's amazing how many current ills in society and education have been laid at their feet. I found Finkel's brief but carefully sympathetic readings of sections in Plato and Rousseau to be helpful and interesting—and a much needed correction.
4. *A psychoanalytic lens on teaching and learning.* This is not the central focus or theme in Finkel's book. (Piaget is central—a figure who also

turns up on some "Most Wanted" posters.) But Finkel deftly derives some useful insights from the psychoanalytic concept of *transference,* and good insights as well about the relationship between conceptual, academic learning and *character.* These insights are a good counterpoint to his Piagetian emphasis on cognition. The whole book, by the way, provides a moving counterpoint to Jane Tompkins's rhetorical use of blurted confessions and slipped decorum. Finkel's is a book of enormous decorum and control.

5. *Teacher as silent observer, as speaker, and as writer.* Given the title of the book, we shouldn't be surprised at interesting insights about silence (for instance about harnessing parables for their ellipses and non-saying; or harnessing the literal silence of a teacher in a discussion). But I'm struck with Finkel's fruitful preoccupation with a teacher's use of words and language. Finkel heightens the role of *teacher as writer:* writing out directions for conceptual workshops and writing response letters and other documents for students. And he is intriguing on the differences between the teacher as speaker and the teacher as writer. (I admired, by the way, Finkel's useful insights on helping students with their own writing.)

* * *

As I was reading this book I kept being struck by Finkel's own writing—admiring a quiet power I found difficult to describe. Let me reflect a bit on Finkel's *voice* or *presence* here.

My first impulse was to call it a nonpartisan or dispassionate voice, but as soon as I said that to myself it felt wrong. For of course the voice *is* partisan: it embodies a deep commitment to attitudes and behaviors that are largely neglected in education. Yet I think most readers will respond to a quality of quiet reflectiveness in the way he articulates a strongly felt point of view without investing it with "spin" or, in a sense, even with feeling. One seems deeply respected as a reader—as though listening to someone who is himself willing to listen.

The closest thing to feeling or "spin" is a kind of *stubbornness* I often feel in Finkel's insistence on putting things plainly, bluntly, and without embellishment. I feel an unbudging insistence on that simple premise from Dewey in all its *literalness:* "No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another." Many educational reformers and radicals invoke this premise but few really hew to it as Finkel does. I also feel a stubborn literalness when he insists that his goal with "mere words" is to produce "significant change in human behavior."

It's a quiet voice, and yet I hear a resonance. Perhaps I'm influenced here by actually hearing Don's voice as I read off the page. Though I haven't seen

him in many years, I have spoken with him on the phone a few times. He has a quiet, unhurried, deep voice. Yet I don't think I'm just being fooled by acoustic memory. Finkel has somehow managed to embed this voice quality *into* his words on the page. (Of course this matter of "voice in writing" is a mysterious and subjective affair—but it's one that I keep exploring; see my Introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing.*) For example, he maintains a kind of unhurried or relaxed directness of syntax and wording. We get some sense of reflectiveness or silence behind his words—as though he waited somewhat before speaking. His nonextreme voice tempts us to forget that this is an extreme book.

A quiet resonance also comes, I think, from a quality of discipline, order, and structure. When we try to teach with our mouth shut, the classroom conversation often wanders—or so it often happens with me. And of course Dewey is almost indelibly associated with "loose" pedagogy. But this book and the voice that speaks it is the opposite of loose. That's why the book doesn't *feel* "radical." The quality of order and discipline here is a useful antidote to half-baked or watered-down uses of Dewey.

I sense yet another dimension lying behind Finkel's voice or ethos: his deep commitment to reason, freedom, democracy, and character—goals that he manages to defend unblushingly yet utterly without naivete. I'm worried when I say this that readers will conclude that the book is corny; *corny* is the last adjective in the world to use for this book.

Let me give two examples of his matter-of-fact voice quietly telling us what is actually hard to believe.

1. He talks about the student entering the conversation with the teacher "not in a student role but as an equal." This is a wild idea to assert unless it's just a kind of sloganeering pep talk to project a generous spirit for teachers. But Finkel means it literally, and his sober and careful argument for this difficult-to-defend assertion is a good example of his point of view and of how his mind works. He acknowledges that it is indeed difficult and rare for a student to enter into conversation with the teacher as an equal. Yet he stubbornly and shrewdly argues that doing so is possible and is a goal we ought to adopt, and he suggests concrete ways to increase the chances of its happening.
2. Similarly, after he describes a perplexing problem used in teaching a concept, he says that the student has as much chance as the teacher to solve it. When I first read this assertion, again I resisted it as a kind of pious or politically correct generosity toward students. "Yeah, yeah. Students are smart. I know." (The funny thing is I actually *do* believe that all students are genuinely smart. Yet still I resisted just a bit.) "Yes," I said to myself, "this problem is a puzzle for the teacher; but

surely—speaking carefully, as Finkel tends to do—the teacher has a significantly *better* chance of solving it because of training, etc. etc. etc." Yet as I read on, I saw that he meant it literally and I had to acknowledge the strength of his careful analysis.

Is this book utopian? (Is that an indictment?) Like three other books I think of as I reflect on this one (Fishman and McCarthy; O'Reilley; Roskelly and Ronald), Finkel insists on high goals here—goals that he acknowledges no one could reach every day or even with every student over a semester. Yet the book is deeply immersed in the realities of institutional teaching and of actual teachers and students as we experience them.

Don didn't learn or work out everything in this book at Evergreen. (When Don arrived at Evergreen in 1976, I was excited to read some of the seed insights behind this book in a pamphlet he wrote with a colleague from the University of Washington—designed particularly for teachers of large lecture courses.) Nevertheless, as Don eloquently says here, Evergreen played a big role. Much of the intellectual and pedagogical richness in this book derives from Don's having taught so long in a community of fellow faculty members and students who take learning and teaching so seriously. Among the seven colleges or universities where I've taught, I've never felt such a palpable and pervasive attentiveness to the complexities of teaching and learning as I felt at Evergreen. Don wrote more about Evergreen in another book, *Educating for Freedom: The Paradox of Pedagogy* (Rutgers University Press, 1995).

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Preface

In this book I argue that our culture's image of "the great professor" is destructively narrow. The traditional "great teacher" inspires his students through eloquent, passionate speaking. He teaches by *Telling*. I use my title phrase to move beyond this restrictive notion of good teaching. Each chapter of this book illustrates a different way a teacher can teach with his mouth shut. Together, the chapters fold together to present a coherent view of teaching and learning, one that is deeply democratic in its implications.

This book is for anyone interested in education. High school and college teachers will find many approaches to teaching they may wish to try out or adapt. But the book is not intended as a manual for teachers. It aims to provoke *reflection* on the many ways teaching can be organized. It attempts to engage its readers in a conversation about education. Thus, its purpose is not so much to reform education as it is to provoke fruitful dialogue about teaching and learning among people who have a stake in education: teachers, students, parents, school administrators, policymakers, graduate students, and citizens who care about the quality of education in their nation. In addition, those who have to instruct, train, or teach as part of their job will find food for thought here. And so too will those who have had a high school or college education and wish to reflect on how that education shaped—or failed to shape—them.

Although I have kept this book fairly free of theory, the practices recounted were all shaped under the influence of philosophy and psychology. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget was my earliest and most profound influence. After him, my thinking has been guided by John Dewey, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the figure of Socrates as depicted in Plato's Socratic dialogues. I have also been strongly influenced by the psychoanalytic concept of transference as formulated by Freud, the vision of "political action" articulated by Hannah Arendt, the literacy programs of Paulo Freire, and the critique of schooling elaborated by Ivan Illich. The bibliographic note at the end includes the pertinent books by these authors.

Some readers may find it paradoxical that I attempt to undermine the notion of "teaching as Telling" by writing a book. I confront this paradox directly in Chapter 9, Conclusion. In brief, I have not written this book to change the way people think by Telling them what to think. Even if it were desirable, I do not believe you can change people's thinking this way. On the contrary, I have written it to attempt to engage you, my readers, in a conversation about education. If you reflect on what you read and formulate a response to the book, your thinking about education may change significantly. Thus, this book (or any book) does not teach through Telling. It only provides material for your mind to work over and work through.

To this end, I would urge you to read the book slowly. Don't rush through it looking for "answers" or "techniques." The book's many examples and scenes, though they are grounded in actual teaching practice, are best taken as thought-experiments. Take the time to project yourself into the situations described, and try to imagine their impact on you, as either student or teacher.

In an attempt to help make your reading of this book a reflective experience and not a didactic one, I have provided an exercise at the end: a series of questions that can be answered individually or taken as a basis for group discussion. Either way, these questions will provoke you to reflect on the book's implications and on the connections between your own educational experience and the book's central ideas. Reflecting on these questions should be considered integral to a "reading" of this book.

One of the readers of the manuscript of *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* addressed the book's potential impact on its audience in these words:

> Of course the book is not to be taken whole cloth and used as the blueprint for educational reform. Most readers will understand this. But what is less obvious is that a conversation, or inquiry, about these ideas and practices that erupts into real classrooms could be exactly what education needs.

These words capture my hope for this book: that it will spark "a conversation . . . that erupts into real classrooms." Such a conversation would be one more example of how learning can proceed in the absence of Telling.

Acknowledgements

Driving north along the Hood Canal on Washington State Highway 101 on our way to an Evergreen College faculty retreat, my colleague Pete Sinclair and I stopped at what looked like a log cabin for lunch. Over a tasty meal, I discussed with him my several concerns and confusions about how to make the most of the sabbatical year I was anticipating the following autumn. In one or two succinct sentences, he gave me the impetus I needed to decide to write this book. He also had sage suggestions for creating the proper environment for writing it. For this advice, I thank him most gratefully.

As I finished the first draft of each chapter, I needed someone to read it to give me some sense of what I had produced. My wife, Susan Finkel, despite a busy schedule, performed this task happily, giving me not only many helpful suggestions, but also encouragement and moral support. She was at my side in more ways than I can mention from the start of this project to its finish, and without her love and help, the book would not have been completed.

I thank the following friends, colleagues, and students, who read the entire manuscript and provided me copious intelligent responses that helped me immeasurably through the stages of revision: Paul Dry, Peter Elbow, my sister Leslie Gabosh, Nancy Koppelman, Carlin Llorente, Lisa Max, Mitchell Max, Pete Sinclair, Barbara Smith, Ted Steege, and Adam Ward. In addition, my sister Gail Calder gave me useful suggestions for Chapter 1. Finally, I want to single out Mark Weisberg for time spent above and beyond the call of friendship in providing invaluable criticism and suggestions.

Stephen Monk of the University of Washington collaborated with me in developing the idea of the conceptual workshop discussed in Chapter 6 and together we devised the sequence of questions called "the Canary Problem," based on a puzzle included in James L. Adams's *Conceptual Blockbusting* (2nd ed., 1979. New York: Norton).

The ideas discussed in Chapter 8 were developed by my colleague Bill Arney and me through several years of teaching and writing together. They are more fully elaborated in our book *Educating for Freedom: The Paradox of Pedagogy* (1995. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press). Bill has been

an important colleague to me in many ways, above all in my development as an author.

I would also like to thank Sherry Walton for suggesting Heinemann as a publisher and for putting me in contact with Lois Bridges, my editor. I am grateful to Lois for her efforts in getting this book approved for publication and for removing potential obstacles that could have delayed its publication.

I had two teachers in college who not only gave me the lion's share of my education, but also sparked me to start thinking about how good teachers teach. The fact that they taught so differently was a piece of great good fortune. They are Harry Berger, Jr., and Richard J. Bernstein.

Finally, I would like to thank the faculty, staff, and students of The Evergreen State College who have provided a setting for what I have found to be a perfect vocation for myself. Above all, I thank the specific colleagues I have taught with and the specific students I have worked with. You know who you are.

TEACHING WITH YOUR MOUTH SHUT

This book is dedicated to
Zoe, David, Daniel, and Benjamin, my children,
and to Susan, my wife.

Contents

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Teaching with Your Mouth Shut

"What Do You Do?"

Meeting new people at parties, I inevitably face the question: "What do you do?" Since I am on the faculty of a liberal arts college, I could identify myself as a "professor." But I choose to take the question literally and answer by specifying an activity: I always say, "I teach college."

But if the conversation proceeds any further, I usually get uncomfortable and try to change the topic. Most people have a set of ready-made assumptions about what a teacher does. A teacher talks, tells, explains, lectures, instructs, professes. Teaching is something you do with your mouth open, your voice intoning.

This last phrase evokes an image of a boring teacher, but we think of "good teaching" simply as the artful, captivating version of the same activity (talking, telling, explaining . . .). Hence, we always hear that a teacher is like an actor, and a good class like a good theatrical performance.

Most of us *do* remember fondly those brilliant teacher/actors we may have had. After hearing their stirring lectures, we left their classrooms inspired, moved. But did we learn anything? What was left of this experience five years later? These questions usually don't get asked. Because we were touched, we felt confident that we had learned. A passionate teacher told us intellectually exciting things about her subject and we followed her line of thinking. Surely we now know something we didn't know before. Isn't this what learning consists of? In what else could it consist? What other shapes could teaching take?