Reflective Teaching: Situating Our Stories

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This paper combines the research tradition of the literature review and the literary device of flashbacks, in the form of vignettes, to examine the notion of reflective teaching. The paper answers four questions: (1) What is reflective teaching? (2) How is reflective teaching different from what we've always done? (3) How is reflective teaching different from action research? and (4) Why is reflective teaching worth doing? Examples from the author's professional history are used to illustrate three conceptions of teaching (Freeman, 1996): teaching as doing (the behavioral view), teaching as thinking and doing (the cognitive view), and teaching as knowing what to do (the interpretivist view). A case is made for the value of reflective teaching as a practice, an attitude, a way of being professional, and as a source of potentially insightful solutions to problems.

In late August, 1996, the South China Morning Post ran a story about Piers Gray, a recently deceased playwright and professor of English who had taught for many years at a prestigious university in Hong Kong. The story reported that Gray had died an untimely death, his failing health allegedly exacerbated by alcohol abuse. The author examined Gray's teaching career and his work as a playwright, and then speculated about what had led such an intelligent and apparently successful man to be so disappointed with life that he would let it go so quickly. The story quotes Gray's brother, Simon, as having said, "I don't think his colleagues appreciated him very much. And besides, the drudgery of teaching English as a second language day after day must have been crushing." (In point of fact, Piers Gray did not teach ESL, but I did not know this at the time.)

I was stunned. I stopped and reread the paragraph, thinking maybe my eyes had skipped a line, and I had missed some key information — perhaps a clause about teaching ESL being the one bright spot in Gray's life. But no.