

Remembering Our Teaching Heart in the Midst of All the Noise

*William J. Owen (Director, Centre of Teaching, Learning, and Technology,
University of Northern BC)*

Heather Smith (International Studies Program, University of Northern BC)

1. Abstract:

As administrators, teachers, and persons, we are faced with a lot of distractions and noise. For us, the classroom is our offices, boardrooms, and our traditional student-based classroom. In this essay, we explore the noises in our life and present some strategies that have helped us reduce the impact of noise and served to allow us to engage in learning – the heart of teaching. Our ability for others to learn with and from us is embodied in our ability to learn.

Key Words:

Noise, teaching, balance, conversation.

2. Introduction

How many of us have to balance administration, teaching ... and well ... life? How many of us worry about only being partially present as we multitask through our hectic and busy days? How many of us take on administrative and service-related positions with teaching and learning as central to our mandates and find that we are tackling budgets, countless emails, meeting after meeting and then wonder where the teaching went and indeed the learning – our learning? How do we find the time to embrace our own professional development on a continual and regular basis?

These are questions that we have asked ourselves and each other. Both of us have been department chairs and directors of the UNBC Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology. The questions have led us to widen our concept of the classroom from the traditional student-based learning space to include our offices, boardrooms, and hallways, and how we learn to enhance our learning and teaching in these places. These questions also speak to our struggle with administrative noise and its implications for our sense of ourselves as teachers and learners. Ultimately, in spite of the demands posed by our positions, past and present, we believe that one can filter the noise and accept the noise as part of a lived experience that is itself a type of professional development.

3. Administrative Noise:

Many of us are both teachers and administrators. Far too often we vibrate from the effect of emails, hallway conversations, demands from those senior to us, and the ever present sense that we are not publishing enough. We have been friends long enough that we can tell, without speaking, that there is a thunderstorm going on in the brain of the other. Far too often that lightning in the thunderstorm strikes at our sense of ourselves. In attempts to regain balance, we turn it all off, run away, lock the door,

ignore email, and shut ourselves off – trying to silence the noises of the storm. Too often we are indiscriminate in terms of who is silenced: friends, family, and students become the collateral damage in the face of the barrage of administrative noise.

4. Silenced Heart

Too often we worry that key parts of us are silenced in our efforts to protect ourselves from the administrative noise. Sometimes we feel that budgets, grievances, and yet another committee, have compiled to silence our teaching hearts. The teaching heart is that part of you that is fully present in the classroom because you know that the classroom is really a sacred place. As teacher/administrators, we know all too well instances where we have felt that “our heart really wasn’t in it”. Parker Palmer (1998) would say that our identity as a teacher and our integrity as a teacher are not aligned. Our teaching hearts are silenced by the emails, excessive meetings, personnel conflict, publishing demands and our heart has only so much time, space and indeed energy. We enter the classroom beleaguered and teach in a way that leaves a gnawing sense of emptiness. Sadly, our students leave knowing that our heart wasn’t really there. They can tell that we were disconnected and preoccupied. Our silenced heart meant that we were not fully present and as a result the energy of engagement so central to our teaching dissipated.

5. Silenced Head

And just as when our heart is silenced, so too are there instances when our head is silenced. For us, our head means not simply our intellect but our intuition. We believe that one of the key tools for being present in the classroom is being open to the energies of our students. Yet, just as the administrative noise leaves our heart weary it also leaves us feeling like there is a sensory overload – and so we self silence. We miss the dynamics of the class when our intuition is shut down. We miss the quiet student in the background who is struggling; we assume that the student’s silence means disengagement from today’s class. When our intuition is silenced, we teachers lose the ability to interpret the multiple meaning of silence in our classroom, some of which are central to significant learning experiences. We can also miss ourselves in this process. We lose the ability to be reflective practitioners. Our silenced intuition is not open to explore the possibility that the struggling student has other barriers to learning than us as the instructors. Too often we focus on ourselves and feel alone in our silent noise.

6. And so...

Administrative noise and teaching silences in the head and heart are relational. This is not to suggest that there is no negative noise or disabling and denying silence in the classroom, rather this is our sense of the worlds we embody in our everyday. As written here they do sound rather bleak and tormented. Without question, there are days when we are tormented about our multiple demands.

But there are lessons to be learned from all of this. The lessons are about how we filter the noise, strike the balance and find the place again where our head and heart can engage in the teaching process.

The first lesson is simply to listen to ourselves. By pausing to listen to ourselves, we begin to reestablish the reflective practice of learning, and teaching. In this reflective space, we need to understand when noise becomes too much and we need to learn to listen to the noises that matter – our hearts know. Listening to the noises that matter focuses our hearts and minds, and the other noises begin to dissipate like the morning fog in the fall. Authentic learning can begin reigniting our silenced hearts.

Second, engage in conversation. Don't become silenced by all the demands. Try not to shut those doors too often because you don't know who or what you exclude when you shut that door. Conversations with our students open windows of insight in our classrooms. Conversations with colleagues and mentors do matter – even the tough conversations. If we embrace our humanity and our struggles, rather than hide them behind constant images of competence and professionalism, we then find ourselves presented with the opportunity for professional and personal learning that comes from speaking our truths. To be an authentic teacher, we need to give ourselves permission to be an authentic person.

Finally, as we all know, we are taught by many and can learn from all aspects of our lives. Administration, teaching and research are not compartmentalized but overlapping experiences. Each feed into the other and our professional development can come from those meetings, those budget discussions, as we put forward a new but resisted initiative. We learn about ourselves and develop skills in a multitude of fora. We can integrate our experiences and create a great whole. Through each experience we then have the opportunity to reflect on our identity and integrity as teachers/administrators.

We need to be comfortable with the idea that balance may not be achieved during a day, week, or even a month – we are attuned to different noises at different points in our days. But if we listen to ourselves, engage in conversation, and connect our multiple roles by listening to the similar meanings, then we can find balance over time. Learning how to accept the constructive noises and filter those disabling noises is a dynamic process of continual professional development. Even a moderate change in our balance of daily noise begins to release the authentic teacher and learner, serving to enhance our professional development, teaching, and administrative roles. Such flow of balance from the classroom to the office and back again, allows us, and others around us, to learn more and help others engage in their learning process.

Authors' contact Information

William J. Owen
Director, Centre of Teaching, Learning, and Technology,
University of Northern BC,
3333 University Way,
Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9
owenw@unbc.ca
250-960-6657

Heather Smith
International Studies Program,
University of Northern BC,
3333 University Way,
Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9,
smith@unbc.ca
250-960-6655

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