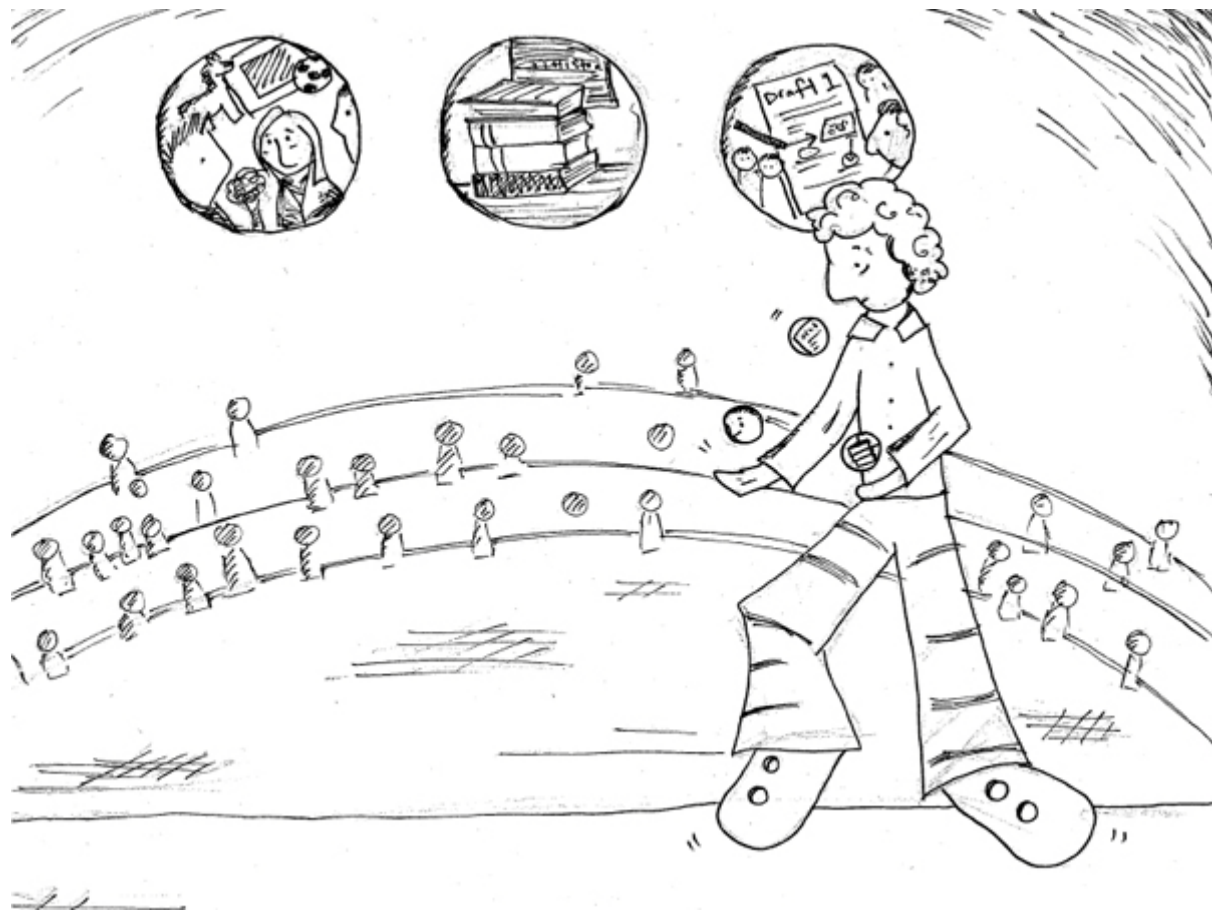


Teacher as Circus Performer



e.e.cummings wrote a play called "Him," which has one scene that where his character describes this dream, or this vision, that he's always having. And it talks about the inescapable task of balancing, of setting one thing up atop another thing, and it goes like this:

"him: But imagine a human being who balances three chairs, one on top of another, on a wire, eighty feet in air with no net underneath, and then climbs into the top chair, sits down and begins to swing."

While reflecting on the reading this week, I was reminded of this image. It is a reoccurring visualization for me as a teacher, because I often feel like a circus performer -- trying to juggle the many obligations, perform outlandish feats, or keep plates spinning -- all atop a thin high wire, above an audience of students, parents, and the administration.

My illustration this week represents the juggling act of the learning environments, described in detail in Chapter 6, and how they must be kept in perfect equilibrium, all while situated in the greater environment of the community (which may be the classroom, the school, the local neighborhood, the nation, or the world...depending).

The first ball is the Learner-Centered Environment. In my illustration, I drew students and their various interests. My drawing reflects real students I have in my classroom -- Carlos and Emily, and real influences that they have, such as the environment, horses, soccer, and music. A classroom that is Learner-Centered must take into account the diversity of experiences, knowledge, and culture that their individual students bring into the classroom every day. The teacher must attempt to meet the students where they are, acting as a bridge between all they know and all they have yet to learn.

The second ball is the Knowledge-Centered Environment. This I represent with a chalkboard full of lecture notes on history and books, books, and more books. Classrooms must be more than merely about the learner -- to ignore the wealth of knowledge and information outside of our students would be to woefully neglect to prepare them to enter adult world contexts. Nevertheless, we cannot merely focus on the knowledge, because that would not lead to real understanding.

The third ball is the Assessment-Centered Environment. This is the ball that I struggle the most to "keep in the air," if you will. Learning theories affirm that students need to have constant feedback if they are to continue to grow, learn, and understand new material. This must be *summative* and *formative*, which can be a challenge to many teachers. Students typically only get feedback on their work at the end of a project or assignment, and this does not help them understand what they know and don't know. They need teacher comments and support throughout the entire process.

All of these balls are situated, as I mentioned, within the larger context of the community. In my illustration, this is represented by the audience in the circus tent.

The author goes into great detail about how all four of these environments are necessary to achieve real learning and understanding in our classrooms, and yet, what a precarious balancing act that is to do in practice!

e.e.cummings ends his reflection on "the balancing act" with the line: *An artist, a man, a failure... must proceed.* These two words, "must proceed," are one of my many "teaching mottos." No matter how difficult it is to engage in this task daily, still, I try.

References:

Bransford, John D. et. al. "The Design of Learning Environments," Chapter 6 in *How People Learn: Body, Mind, Experience, and School*. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. 2000.

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