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## ARTICLES

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# Teaching Classroom Videorecording Analysis to Graduate Students: Strategies for Observation and Improvement

James M. Cahalan

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

Videorecording analysis can help improve the teaching of college literature and other subjects. Here, I concentrate on specific analytical strategies that I have been teaching my graduate students since 1994, and I cite my students (including their graphical charts) to illustrate what important lessons they have learned through careful study of videorecordings of their teaching. These are techniques that can be employed by those involved in college teacher training in many fields. My own focus is on teaching college literature, not only because that is my own specialty, but also because videorecording analysis has been scarcely practiced in this field and therefore is in need of study—whereas ever since about 1980, there have been dozens of publications in TESOL, English Education, and many other fields that have been based on videorecordings. Even in that large body of scholarship, however, little attention has been devoted to the training of TAs and other novice college teachers—the focus of this article.

**Keywords:** college teacher training, pedagogy, teaching of literature, videorecording

I read with great interest Erica Hamilton's article in the Winter 2012 issue about how she videorecorded her own classes in order to enhance self-reflective practice. Since 1994, in my course on teaching college literature, I have been showing graduate students how to pursue such strategies to analyze classes taught both by others and by themselves. They find this work to be very rewarding: As one of my students wrote, "I never really knew what I was doing in the classroom (in more than one sense) until I actually saw, heard, and studied what I was doing." During the same period of time, in my role as a mentor of teaching associates in our doctoral literature program, I have also encouraged our TAs to make similar use of videorecordings.<sup>1</sup> Ever since

about 1980, there have been dozens of publications based on videorecordings as a medium for analyzing many aspects of teaching strategies and classroom interactions, in TESOL and (as in the case of Hamilton's article) secondary English Education—the fields that have taken the lead—and also in many other disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Hamilton's commendable focus

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five-minute video clips are similar to—though not nearly as systematic and extensive as—the "microteaching" use of videorecordings that Millis and Samojlowicz have outlined.

<sup>2</sup>In addition to the voluminous TESOL and secondary English education scholarship based on videorecordings, there are also many pedagogical videorecording-based publications in foreign language fields, including Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish—and also in the teaching of early childhood education, agricultural science, philosophy, physical education, K–12 social studies and sciences, business, history, mathematics, psychology, and theater. For more sources on videorecording in TESOL, see, for example, Mercer (2004), Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and Stempleski and Arcario (1992); in English Education, Athanases (1993), and Michaels (1999); in Arabic, Mackey (2007); in Spanish, Poveda (2004); in early childhood education, Forman (1999); in philosophy, van Gulick and Lynch (1996); in physical education, Campbell and Jones (1999); in social studies, Kelleher and Cramm (1996); in mathematics and sciences,

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Correspondence should be sent to James M. Cahalan, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, English Department, 110 Leonard Hall, 421 North Walk, Indiana, PA 15705-1094, USA. E-mail: jcahalan@iup.edu

<sup>1</sup>I have asked TAs to show, in meetings of our mentoring circle, five-minute video clips from their teaching and then get feedback (and often praise) from faculty mentors and their fellow TAs. My all-time favorite was a TA, one of our best, who felt comfortable (and courageous) enough to introduce his video clip by saying, "Here's something that really bombed. Please let me know what I should do differently the next time." Such meetings over

was on studying her own teaching through an open-ended, ethnographic approach. I want to outline some more specific analytical strategies that can be used not only to enhance our own teaching, but also can be taught to others, such as TAs and other novice graduate-student teachers. I focus here on college literature because it's my field, but I believe that the strategies that I outline and exemplify are applicable also in many other areas of college teaching. In fact, videorecording analysis is often much the same regardless of the subject, as evidenced not only by publications in fields ranging from A (agriculture) to Z (zoology), but also by the fact that Harvard's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning has been facilitating, since the 1990s, the use of videorecordings to enhance teaching in many different departments.<sup>3</sup>

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Atkins (1997), Chavez (2007), and Ellis and Backe (1995), Lowery (2002), Na-Young and Orrill (2007), Star and Strickland (2008), Storeygard and Fox (1995), and Yung et al. (2007); in business, Deutsch (1991); in history, Leander (2002); in psychology, Stokoe (2000); and in theater, Lan and Morgan (2003). Nor is writing about videorecording found only in scholarly journals and books on pedagogy. Elizabeth Green's *New York Times* article "Building a Better Teacher" (2010)—which explores, in considerable detail, reform efforts in many schools and various different subjects—draws from the experiences of several teachers who make use of videorecordings. English professor Sue Lonoff's article "Using Videotape to Talk about Teaching" (1997) is rare in that it actually deals with videorecording classes in college literature (and many other departments), as part of the Bok Center's program. It is significant that Lonoff's work, like the ongoing work of English professor Barbara Millis with videorecordings, has been housed in university-wide teaching excellence centers rather than focused on and sponsored by English departments. My most surprising finding was that video-based studies of classes are as rare in college composition as in college literature. The only compositionist I know of who wrote about videorecorded classes was Wendy Bishop, in *Something Old, Something New: College Writing Teachers and Classroom Change* (1990).

<sup>3</sup>College literature professors rarely use videorecordings to critique and improve their own teaching, let alone write about it. This resistance is linked to the longstanding neglect of pedagogy in general in college literature, which is rooted far back in the development of English departments that, despite its pedagogical origins, moved further and further away from pedagogy, seeing that as the business of colleges of education, and has long privileged literary scholarship rather than pedagogy. The increasing neglect of pedagogy in English departments can be traced back more than a century, and is critiqued perhaps best by Salvatori (1996) in *Pedagogy: Disturbing History, 1819–1929*. It has continued in the case of teaching college literature despite the fact that Marshall issued, in 1999, a powerful clarion call for generating ethnographies of college literature teaching: "The truth is that there are no published research studies about how the teaching of literature proceeds" (381). We have histories, "arguments about what teaching ought to be," and anecdotes and "memoirs"—attempts to recount classroom experiences, but working only from memories and notes. The word "pedagogy" has been invoked more frequently by college literature teachers in recent years, but sometimes more in political than pragmatic contexts. It's all well and good to invoke Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and to argue against the "banking" approach to teaching. However, Stenberg notes that "scholarship on pedagogy is often more concerned with what Gore calls 'social visions' than with the 'instructional acts' of teaching" (qtd. in Stenberg 2005, 5). This can lead to ironic situations where, say, a feminist or marxist might eat up 90% of a class session's "talk time" by lecturing about the need to empower students.

A videorecording can be watched over and over, with the educator looking for different details each time or studying a particular interaction repeatedly until its many aspects become clear. There is truth to be found in the cliché that "the camera doesn't lie."<sup>4</sup> Also, as Linda Allen reports, "Experts in nonverbal communication estimate that at least 65% of the meaning in any social situation is conveyed nonverbally. In classroom settings, it is estimated that 82% of all teachers' communications are nonverbal" (1999, 469). An observer, and certainly the teacher being observed, often do not notice key details that become apparent only when looking at a videorecording later (Hall 2000, 671). If properly handled—panning around at the students, for example, even when only the instructor is speaking, instead of remaining pointed at only the teacher—the camera can take in a lot more than the professor can. One teacher remarked, "This is the beauty of seeing a tape like this, because there is no way I can be looking at four groups simultaneously" (qtd. in Herbert and Tankersley 1993, 30).

## SPECIFIC METHODS AND CASES

In Teaching College Literature, I ask my graduate students to videorecord and analyze two Humanities Literature classes—our oversized, 45-student introductory literature course that is required of all undergraduates who are not English majors—as taught by two different teachers. I also require them to guest-teach in one such class themselves, in the presence of its instructor, and to write an analytical paper based on the videorecording of that class. When practicing videorecording analysis, I show my graduate students two Humanities Literature video segments that offer sharp contrasts and have them analyze particular aspects of what they see and hear. The first segment is of an instructor talking to his students (seated in traditional rows) from the front of the room, asking a few questions, and preparing his students to watch video clips from different film versions of *Hamlet*. In the other one, with the class in a large circle, a student group reads and acts out its own creative writings, and then questions and answers are exchanged among other students, the instructor, and the presenting group. Before my students report their findings—which reinforce in very specific ways the sharp contrast between the first, teacher-centered video and the second, student-centered one—I tell them to remain objective, avoiding any value judgments. If they nonetheless slide into the subjective—"I really like how this instructor . . ." or "It bothered me that this teacher . . ."—I cut them off immediately and remind them to stick to "just the facts." I also ask them to avoid the natural inclination to want to

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<sup>4</sup>I recognize that not even a videorecording can ever be *completely* "objective." Hall (2000) argues that filming a class is like shooting any other kind of movie: Its effects depend greatly on camera angles and other choices and details in film-making.

“vote” for one instructor over the other. “This is not an election,” I stress. Any “rush to judgment” shuts down analysis and often even the motivation to observe closely. I remind my students that when they guest-teach, they won’t want to be judged, except by themselves.

There is perhaps nothing more terrifying for neophyte teachers than to perform in front of a class of strangers, be recorded doing so, and then write an analytical paper about the experience. On the other hand, I don’t grade their teaching, but only their essay, and it is quite possible to teach poorly and write brilliantly about it (and also possible to teach wonderfully, but then write a weak paper about that). I thus relieve some of my students’ fears about guest-teaching, and also make them feel that they can take some chances: “As the actual guest teaching would not receive a grade,” Justin wrote, “I made a decision to try an experiment.” Indeed, my students learn to overcome the resistance that most of us have to watching ourselves in a videorecording of our teaching, which takes at least four interrelated forms: nervousness beforehand about being videorecorded, embarrassment and even pain when watching and listening to ourselves afterwards, fear that our privacy will be violated, and concern that videorecording will disrupt or alter what happens in our classroom. My students get over their nervousness, are reassured about embarrassment and privacy when they know that only they will watch their videorecordings, and discover that videorecording does not disrupt the classroom—especially since students in this video age pay less attention to a camera in the classroom than we do. This is even truer now than when my 1990s graduate students carried large cameras and clunky tripods into the classroom; now they can use unobtrusive pocket videocams no larger than a cell phone. TESOL scholar Jerry Gebhard (2006, 20) notes, “I have audio- and videotaped many classes, and it is amazing how fast students accept the recorder, especially if it is treated as a natural part of the classroom setting.”

How do my students analyze videorecordings of their guest-teaching? Here are my chief observational assignments, divided into five categories—classroom “geography,” class discussion, fillers and slang, nonverbal communication, and lesson plan—with brief notes about what my students often learn:

### Classroom “Geography”

- Draw a map of the classroom. This shows how crucial classroom “geography” is—how the setup of the classroom determines the quality of the interactions that occur. Just as it is important for students to form small circles in small-group discussions, it is equally crucial for them to move out of those formations, ideally back into a big circle, for whole-class discussions. I’ve seen too many instructors leave small groups in their little circles when going to whole-class discussions. Students can’t focus on

what their classmates are saying when they’re sitting with their backs to them.

### Class Discussion

- Tally the number of times you as teacher talked, the number of times students talked, and the number of different students who talk.
- Run a stopwatch and calculate the total, cumulative time that you talked and that students talked. How many times you and your students talk, and the total “talk time” of each, reflect the realities of how teacher-centered or student-centered a class is, particularly in whole-class discussions, and how democratic (or not) it is. Often instructors feel that they are student-centered, or they want to be, but the numbers show that the videorecording has captured a teacher-centered class.
- Note how many questions you asked and calculate the average “wait time” for how long you waited for each student response. Often teachers find that they ask too many questions, fail to wait long enough for replies, and frequently then answer their own questions.

### Fillers and Slang

- Note particular words (or non-word “fillers” such as “uh”) and phrases spoken by both you as teacher and the students—jargon? slang?—that seem typical of their styles of speech and yours. Instructors are often surprised to hear just how many . . . um, fillers they utter, and how they say “good” repeatedly after their students’ responses, to the point when “good” is no longer good, because it’s said so often that it loses its force.

### Nonverbal Communication

- Notice any and all of your nonverbal gestures, facial expressions, and the like.
- How did you dress? Where did you sit or stand? In general, how did you comport yourself, and what kind of image or impression did that convey? Powerful unspoken messages are communicated. If, for example, students are seated in a circle, but the teacher spends the whole class standing above them, what message does that send about the power relationship in a supposedly student-centered class?

### Lesson Plan

- Outline the lesson plan that you took to class. A common experience is the departure from, or even complete abandonment of, the lesson plan. If you plan generous time for student discussion and activities, but then talk too much, you have subverted your own lesson plan. On the other hand, if students in class have not done the assigned reading and your lesson plan depends on their being prepared, then your lesson plan *has* to be changed.

## RESULTS

In a paper entitled “The Need for Plan B,” Kristen memorably illustrated the problem of unprepared students. It shows why not allowing my opinion of my graduate students’ teaching to influence my grading of their papers is not at all a challenge, but comes easily, because my favorite papers are often the ones in which they insightfully deconstruct themselves. Kristen’s host instructor had told her that the class would have read the first 250 pages of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but Kristen quickly learned otherwise from those forthright students:

“Not that far?” I repeated weakly, and my face paled noticeably as I finally clarified that they had read only up to Chapter Nine of the novel—One Hundred Crucial Pages *less* than what I had planned to cover in my lesson. I was devastated . . . My voice grew shaky and affected as I struggled to maintain composure; my knuckles turned white as I clutched the book, and my feet were planted firmly on a single square of tile behind the desk, barring me from the onslaught of indifference that those thirty-two pairs of eyes hurled in my direction . . . My first instinct was to call it a reading day and make a mad dash for the door.

Kristen lamented not having designed a fallback lesson plan for the probability that a large group of non-majors would not have made it through 250 pages of Marquez’s complex masterpiece (a text whose very assignment in this particular class was problematic). She concluded her essay by consoling herself that “then again, at least now I know what *not* to do.” And it was good that Kristen’s experience came as part of my course, prior to her becoming a successful TA with her own classes.

My students best illustrate the important lessons that they learn from their analyses. Here are some examples drawn from three of my major analytical categories:

### Class Discussion

One student illustrates well a pattern very common among my students’ guest-teaching experiences: “While ideologically and pedagogically committed to focusing on students in the classroom, the numbers from my revised on-the-spot lesson plan tell a different tale” (see figure 1): He had planned to get students talking much more but instead took up nearly 70% of the “talk time” himself. He resolved to talk less in the future.

Another student discovered that not only was he dominating discussion by a similar margin, but also that his male students talked more than twice as much as his female ones (see figure 2): I suggested that he have his students talk in pairs first, and then go around the room and have each pair report its thoughts to the whole class. This guarantees gender balance—and also overcomes the shortcomings of whole-class discussions in which just a few students do all of the

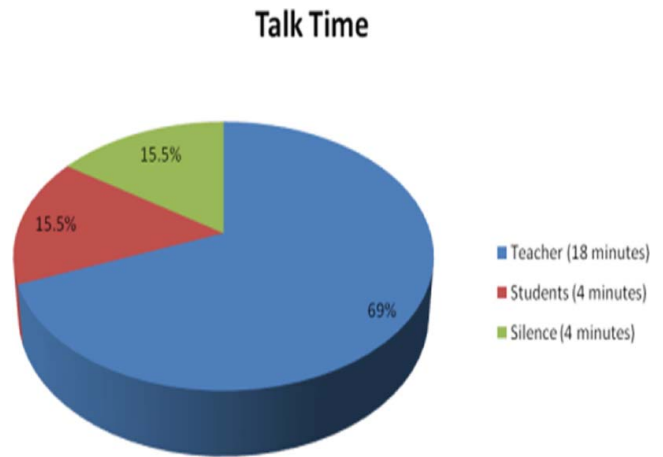


FIGURE 1 Talk time. (Color figure available online.)

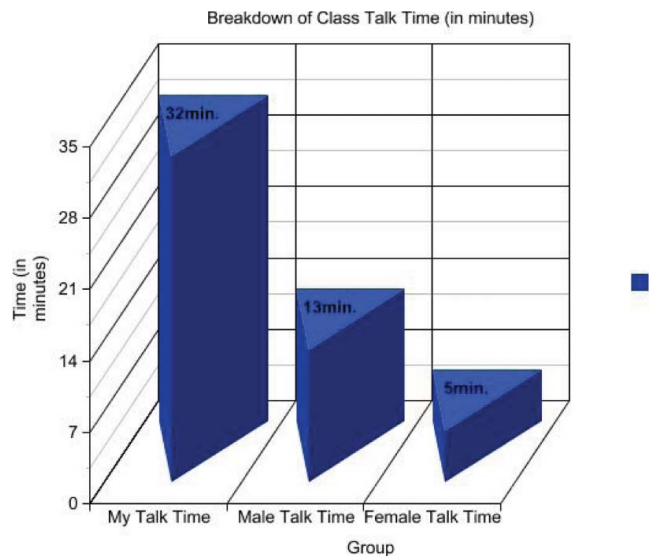


FIGURE 2 Breakdown of class talk time. (Color figure available online.)

student talking while the “great silent majority” sit by and say nothing, a very common pattern reflected in my students’ analyses of their videorecordings.

Regarding questions, Tony wrote,

I spoke for 24 minutes and asked 76 questions, which is roughly an average of three questions per minute. In my opinion, I asked a ridiculous number of questions and I asked them too quickly. I believe I did this because I was uncomfortable when students were not participating, when the classroom was filled with silence. If I was more comfortable with silence in the classroom, I would have allowed the students time to think about the questions that I posed; instead, I pressured them to answer quickly which, I believe, forced them to answer without fully formulating their responses.

I point out that even the experienced, expert teacher-scholar Jerry Gebhard encountered this problem in his own teaching. He describes an instance when he was asking his students open questions, but not getting very many responses. Then he watched his videorecording, calculated that he had asked his students 28 questions in 25 minutes, and immediately realized that, so eager was he to hear from his students, he was bombarding them with too many questions at too rapid a pace, leaving them with little time to respond. So he went back and asked only a handful of questions—and made sure to wait, patiently, after each one. Now his students not only responded to him, but also “asked each other questions, and . . . students reacted to the responses of others” (2006, 26). In terms of his questions, he learned that less was more, that asking fewer questions facilitated much more discussion. Silence can also provide valuable spaces during which everyone can think for a moment about what someone has said.

Concerning the problem with saying “good” repeatedly after student comments, a student teacher in Ireland remarked after watching her videorecording, “It almost seems superficial, I say it so often . . . I was just wondering are the kids sitting there thinking I don’t actually mean it?” (qtd. in Harford and MacRuairc 2008, 1888). She decided that it’s better to say “good” or the like only when a student’s comment really *is* outstanding, or to respond more specifically, or to nod encouragingly, say nothing at all, and simply wait for the next student to speak.

### Fillers and Slang

Dan wrote,

Over the course of the 30 minutes I taught, I counted 185 fillers in my language, most prevalently in the form of “uh” and “um”—a frightening frequency of six fillers per minute! The crown jewel of my shame goes to the fact that I even used “like” in the same way that many undergraduates do. If I wish to pursue teaching, my public speaking skills need work.

Slang is not always a bad thing, and students are sometimes able to shift their speech styles. When analyzing the videorecording of an experienced teacher’s class, Begoña noted:

His vocabulary, while precise and educated in nature, was peppered with slang terms. This approach allowed him to be perceived as relaxed and knowledgeable. Students, when addressing the professor in front of the entire class, tended to speak slightly more formally than when they were in groups of their peers.

### Nonverbal Communication

When we watch the video segments of the two different Humanities Literature instructors, my students easily notice their very contrasting styles of dress. One wears a tie; the

other, a T-shirt and jeans. I then tell them that the first instructor was a young TA, in need of establishing his formal authority; the other, a tenured full professor with no such need, instead “dressing down” to get closer to his students. I recommend the TA’s dress style to my novice graduate-student teachers.

As Zach wrote, “Body position, as well, poses a means of nonverbal communication.” He was pleased with what he observed on his videorecording:

While in front of the classroom for the first ten minutes of class, I sat on a desk in a casual manner to evince a relaxed tone for the classroom; likewise, during small group discussion, I crouched down next to the students instead of standing above them. By being at the same or lower eye-level, I attempted to lessen students’ feelings of inferiority to me, the lecturer.

But Scott was not happy with what he saw:

My review of the recording also showed me to be physically authoritative or even intimidating in the classroom. I don’t mean that I am physically threatening, but that I am constantly standing and looming over students who are seated. I never sit down. I am always standing at the front of the room, or standing over students as they are working in groups. It is obvious that if everyone is sitting and I am standing, then I am the center of attention, whether I am supposed to be or not.

He resolved to “make more of an effort to sit with groups, rather than stand over them.”

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the biggest question that a videorecording can help a teacher answer is one posed by Gebhard: “Do I do what I think I do in the classroom?” As many of the examples above illustrate, often instructors see “that what they are doing does not always match what they think they are doing” (2006, 22)—or would like to do. I have focused mostly on strategies for moving toward more student-centered teaching, because that is my commitment. But teachers who want to be more teacher-centered, or who might reasonably want a particular class to be a teacher-centered one because of what they feel students need on a given day, can use videorecording to see if that different goal has been met. Did students get what the instructor wanted them to get? A videocamera pointed at students can help answer that question. Whatever teachers’ ideologies or pedagogical aims may be, videorecordings can help them meet those goals.

Graduate students learn valuable lessons through videorecording analysis, ones that they will not forget and, best of all, after I have introduced these analytic strategies, they use them to teach *themselves* what they need to know. Typical and illustrative is this student’s chart:

TABLE 1  
Graduate Student's Decisions About her Guest-Teaching

Keep: What I Did Well	Change: What I Need to Revise
Telling students where to look in their text for the quotation that I was discussing.	Not listening closely enough to students' responses to questions.
Giving an example to which students could relate.	Giving only my own interpretation instead of really valuing those of the students.
Referring to students' online posts.	Dominating talk time.
Asking other students to share their opinions after a classmate responded.	Not giving students enough time to respond to my questions and their classmates' comments.
Referring to a term students had learned in another class.	Reading a passage too quickly.
Rephrasing a question if students did not seem to understand it.	Instead of quietly and patiently waiting for students' responses, answering my own questions and asking another question.

My students survive the rite of passage of guest-teaching. They often feel like the people in Plato's "Myth of the Cave" who have just emerged into blinding, bright light. They need some time to adjust. They undergo the further challenge of watching themselves on their videorecordings—"the horror!" as Diana called it, invoking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—and the hard work of analyzing the data on their recordings. Another graduate student describes this process of close self-study as "brutal self-dissection." Yet almost always, my guest-teachers end up feeling encouraged about teaching literature, and filled with ideas about what they want to do differently the next time they teach, when in charge of their own class. Besides, some of what they do does go well; sometimes a *lot* goes *very* well, and of that they can be proud.

We can teach our graduate students valuable lessons by using these analytical strategies. My experience has been that I have also learned much from my graduate students. They are exemplars of what so many of us in college literature and other fields could learn if we only took the time to videorecord one or more of our classes and study them. We could close that gap between what we are *actually* doing in the classroom and what we *think* we are doing and *want* to do. We *do*, after all, care about our teaching. Beyond "the horror," Diana felt "an incomparable zest and genuine love for the subject matter. I believe that an instructor can plant the seeds of interest that sometimes begin small, but have the potential to grow into great things by the end of a semester." Such zest and love can come through loud and clear on a videorecording. We *can* get past the fear that—along with historical, institutional, and ideological forces—keeps us from even *thinking* about recording our classes, let alone *actually doing* so. Often younger teachers are more comfortable with videorecording their classes than we veterans are. Some have included videorecordings in teaching portfolios that they submit with letters of application for teaching positions—and, in this digital age, that is likely to become an increasingly common practice.

Videorecordings offer pragmatic strategies to enhance not only our graduate students' teaching, but also our own work. We can use videorecordings to help merge our research and our teaching, with almost endless possibilities for what we

might discover. Our classrooms can become laboratories for our own pedagogical research and publication, rather than impediments to academic research that happens only outside the classroom and does not connect to our teaching. Seeing *is* believing—seeing what we are really doing in class and how we can improve it, and believing that what we are doing is important and worthy of such careful self-study.

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