
TEACHING THE CORE CURRICULUM WITH

Enthusiasm

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Much has been said lately about the purpose of general education. The thoughtful, stimulating report on the baccalaureate, recently completed by Tom Thomson's committee, recommends that all Core courses be examined to ensure that they teach "fundamental principles and theories," "foster analysis," and emphasize "reading and writing... in a variety of contexts."

I would like to suggest that these laudable aims can best be accomplished when faculty in the survey courses strive for another, perhaps more fundamental, goal. The word "professor," it seems to me, implies a burning desire to "profess" the truth as one understands it. We all find great joy in teaching and learning. If we did not, why would we be here? Nonetheless, I sometimes wonder how successful we are in communicating our zeal to the students in the Core classes.

It is relatively easy to teach the upper division courses. The students

at that level are there because they are already interested in the subject. As faculty, we preach to the converted. Many students, however, arrive in the survey classes with negative feelings about being there. Typical 18-year-old freshmen lack the foggiest idea why Core courses are good for them. With regard to my discipline, they hardly know what history is, associating the field with the meaningless memorization of irrelevant facts and dates. I believe our most fundamental mission in the survey classes is to overcome this hostility and to persuade students of the value of liberal education.

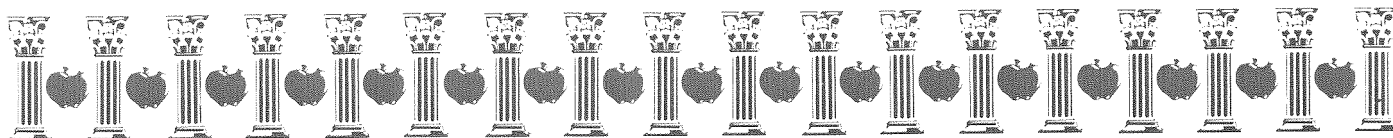
A painful experience during Fall Quarter, 1987, brought this lesson home to me. I had an opportunity to teach the first honors history class taught at Kennesaw. Since the class would be small and the students all bright, I decided to do some things which ordinarily I would not do. Lectures were replaced by group discussions revolving around two stimulating books. The students did library research to prepare for a series of debates held in classes. Tests consisted of essay questions requiring students to state and defend their own viewpoint. Finally, a term paper required them to discuss and analyze the impact on their

family of the major events of the last 60 years.

Back last September, I was looking forward to an exciting course. Unfortunately, my image of an entering "honor student" did not conform to reality. The model in my head was that of a mature student who enjoyed learning for the sake of learning, who was already persuaded that the subject matter was important, and who had already acquired a rudimentary knowledge of the field.

The students who arrived, while highly intelligent, had much more in common with other 18-year-olds than with our older students. For many, if not all, the only thing worth knowing was what would appear on the test. For some, critical analysis meant figuring out which opinions they should hold to please the professor. Few brought with them to the course much knowledge or much love of American history. The honors students perhaps learned as much as those in my regular survey course, but they clearly did not enjoy it. Student evaluations were the lowest I have ever received.

As unhappy as the experience was it taught me some valuable lessons or, rather, reenforced some





lessons I had learned long ago and had largely forgotten. First, it seems essential to me that we must know our students well — their strong points as well as their weaknesses, and the attitudes and assumptions that they bring to the classroom with them. My fundamental mistake in the honors class, I think, was my failure to design a course that was on the same level as the students. It was not that my standards were too high. Rather, my situation was something like that of a math instructor who skips several important steps in working a problem and then wonders why the class could not follow the explanation.

Second, I believe that we can best facilitate learning when the atmosphere in our classrooms is relaxed and pleasant. It seems to me that students can be encouraged to learn either out of love for the subject or fear of the instructor. I much prefer the former method. As faculty, our role is not to dispense castor oil. When we require students to do things that are good for them, we should make sure that the medicine is sugar-coated.

A student in my Georgia history course this past quarter visited the Wren's Nest (Joel Chandler Harris's home) as a class project. In talking

to one of Harris's descendants, she learned that the author of the Uncle Remus stories was so repelled by violence that he never spanked his children. When discipline was necessary, he would unravel a ball of yarn and make the child roll it up again. He had a way of teaching a lesson without the direct application of force. In my opinion, faculty should follow Harris's example, requiring high standards, but administering our courses through love and mutual respect and not by fear.

Third, recognizing that our survey class will be the last course most students will take in our discipline, we should use this final opportunity to be missionaries for our field. If general education is to serve the function of preparing students for lifelong learning, we must make sure our graduates want to continue reading in our fields when they do not have to. The old Methodist circuit riders used to have a simple message of salvation by grace designed to bring "sinners" into the House of the Lord. Then, once they had converts, the missionaries encouraged the new members to strive for Christian perfection in the hope that they eventually would receive another blessing of sanctification by grace. The Methodist evangelizers

understood that their first task was to lead their charges to the threshold of the House and then they could work on taking them fully inside.

In my mind, our noblest task in the Core courses is to bring our students to the door of academia, teaching them to love learning for the sake of learning. Just as the circuit-riding preacher was an "enthusiast" for his cause, we need to be enthusiastic about our disciplines. I am less apologetic than I used to be for the lecture method of instruction when properly employed. I believe that a good lecture is not designed primarily to convey knowledge; the textbooks can do that better than any of us. On the contrary, a lecture should hit the highlights, showing how apparently unrelated items tie together, demonstrating how facts can be interpreted in a meaningful way. Moreover, a lecture should convey our love for the subject and our enthusiasm for ideas. I do not necessarily want to produce "history majors" in my survey classes. But I do want students to leave them with the belief that they have learned something and that they enjoyed every minute of it. It seems to me that the love of learning is the best gift we could possibly give to our students. 🍏

