
THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY: THEY EARN IT

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When I was approached to submit an essay about my most successful teaching strategies, I was momentarily nonplused because I don't think of myself as someone with a bag of tricks in the classroom. I thought about a college friend who now runs management-training sessions for IBM, who recently told me about the various gimmicks, games, and strategies she employs in her teaching to catch and secure her students' attention. Well, all I can say is, woe betide American capitalism if its captains have the attention span of infants!

I disdain gimmickry and gamesmanship, and the truth is that my method is one of the two oldest teaching techniques in the Western tradition (the other being of course Jesus's parables). I aspire to a Socratic method. I try to make myself, as one of my colleagues once observed of my approach, as “transparent” as possible, to engage my students directly with the work of literature at hand, as it reveals literary style, substantive content, historical or biographical information, or enduring truth. I am not a master of ceremonies or an entertainer through whom my students

reach the poem, story, or essay. Rather, I try to get them immediately in contact with the work. Following the model of Socrates, I ask questions. If no one responds, I rephrase the question and wait. Another peer who observed my teaching commented that whereas she felt obliged to rush to fill any pauses or silences, I appeared not to mind. That's exactly right. I think that wisdom comes in the moments of silence, the stillness when wheels are turning, when minds are meditating. As Wordsworth wrote of the child who halloed in the evenings in mimicry of owls, “when there came a pause/ Of silence..., while he hung/ Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise/...carried far into his heart the voice/ Of mountain torrents...”

I hope that I am provocative in the classroom, that my students can experience for themselves those shocks of mild surprise, and that the classroom will be electric with students' own intellectual discoveries, with the riches that their efforts, merely prodded or awakened by my questions, have earned for them. That is, I aim to be the kind of teacher who teaches people ultimately how to leave the classroom and continue to learn on their own, continue to read, continue to think, continue to inquire and discover. 🍏

