

The Teacherless Classroom

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Monday, 11 November, was busier than usual. I had returned to my office from my eleven o'clock class to the hurly-burly of early registration. A queue of students waited my signature, my advice, or my explanation of what was required in the program or in a class I was offering next quarter. I slipped a Dinty Moore dinner into the microwave and gulped down the lunch between questions. A staff person from Computer Services squeezed into the crowd in my office to adjust some malfunction in my computer. Although I tell my students that a high tolerance for ambiguity and confusion is a defining characteristic of sociologists, I had just about reached my limit for chaos. I glanced at my watch and gulped again. "Is it really 1:05? I'm late for my one o'clock class," and I dashed out of my office, carrying the last few bites of Dinty Moore turkey and dressing, my texts, and my class notes.

When I got to my Introduction to Sociology classroom ten minutes late, the door was closed. I peeked in through the window and my face broke into a grin. The twenty-five students were gathered in groups of three or four and were busily engaged in discussing the articles scheduled for the day. They did not notice me at the door, so I quietly came into the classroom. One student looked up and said, "Go ahead and have a seat and let us finish. We'll be ready for the large group discussion in about ten minutes." So I took a seat and began to reflect on what I was observing as the students continued their discussion and then wrote their conclusions on the board. Let me share three of those reflections with you.

First, I thought of the way this group of students had responded to my absence—they saw that the class did not depend on an instructor but could be seen as a community of people working together to achieve a common goal. I saw a restructuring of the more typical power relationships in a classroom, where students depend on the instructor to provide information to them in a largely one-way transmission.

In many of the classes I had sat through as a student and in many classes I saw elsewhere on campus, the most important student obligation is to be an accurate scribe, taking down what the instructor says. If stenography is the primary student obligation, then accurate repetition of that information later on a test ranks next. Paulo Freire describes this too-frequent model of education as a "banking" pedagogy, where the instructor makes deposits in the students

and later, during an examination, withdraws those largely unchanged deposits (1982).

But what I saw in this group of introductory sociology students was a very different model at work. For these students, the first student obligation requires taking responsibility for learning, rather than waiting for an instructor to take charge. The second obligation asks students to see themselves as generators of knowledge: students are to make sense of the material under consideration, to test that sense with peers, to revise and sharpen the emerging understanding, and to put results into the public forum where others can further fine tune and clarify the growing common understanding. It is important to stress that in this alternate model students are charged with making sense, to be themselves the constructors of their knowledge.

I think this approach to teaching and learning has very important implications. This model fosters agency in students, calling on them to take responsibility for their knowledge. In addition, it implies an epistemology appropriate for a world both of the extraordinary rapid production of knowledge but also of the remarkable brevity of the life of knowledge. Learning what is already known is a frustratingly futile task: knowledge expands so fast that no one person can master it, and our current knowledge decays so quickly in the face of new discoveries and understandings that much of what we teach is obsolete even as we teach it. I am reminded of Parker Palmer's call that we help students "to know how to generate...new information, to check it, to critique it, to research it, to do all of those things that a practicing scholar of a field has top know how to do" (1997, p. 9). Anything less does our students a disservice.

My second reflection centers around the power of collaborative work. As you look back on the story of the classroom that began these ruminations, you will recall that the students were already in groups. A continual puzzle for me is the disjunction between the way professors do much (if not most) of their own work and how they ask students to do their work. It is, after all, no accident that much of our work as college and university faculty takes place in committees or meetings. Much though we may malign committees, many of our best ideas, programs, and strategies have their roots in the tensions and accommodations of faculty working in groups. We insist that our disciplines be represented on our campuses most usually not by solitary individuals but rather by groups of colleagues. I cannot imagine trying to make my own discipline of sociology present at Augusta State without my peers who bring their own different slants, perspectives, even questions to their practice of sociology. Those differences—acted out in our common love for the discipline and for our students—are our strength.

Collaborative work is not second best work but is often the most fruitful, the most exciting. I'm reminded first of Emile Durkheim's argument in the sociology classic *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) that all thinking is social in its roots and expression, and second of Martin Heidegger's insistence throughout his work (see, for ex-

ample, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 1968) that thinking is conversation. However, in most of our classrooms, the instructor hogs the floor; students speak little and seldom speak to each other. How can they think if they cannot talk? What I saw in my introductory sociology classroom was students eager to talk, to dispute, to challenge each other, to craft together their sense of things. Collaboration made them co-builders of their own learning and made them partners in creating knowledge.

My third reflection brought to mind another of Parker Palmer's first esoteric comments: "When we study things in ways that are not isomorphic with the things themselves, there's disconnect, there's dissonance, and the hidden curriculum isn't working on our behalf" (1997, p. 15). As I looked at my classroom, I asked myself, "Can I tell what they're studying? Can a colleague tell by what's going on here that these people are working on sociology sociologically?" One teaches best when one invites and empowers students to be practitioners of the discipline one professes. One does not, I believe, become a sociologist at some magical point when a dissertation committee calls one a sociologist, although that is an important marker event in the career of many of us. Rather, one becomes a sociologist when one catches the passion and wonder of the discipline and begins to use that discipline to address the world in which we find ourselves. In sociology, we call that catching fire developing the "sociological imagination." I imagine that each discipline has an equivalent descriptor. The point, however, is that it seems to me that we are at our best as teachers when we invite students as colleagues into our work.

While a beginner's early steps may be halting and may often lead into blind alleys, we should invite those beginners to walk rather than weary them with our stories about how we do the walking and they only get to hear the travelogues. As I observed my class and overheard their conversation, I witnessed their being caught up in thinking, querying, and acting sociologically.

These reflections have probably taxed your patience, but if you've come this far with me, let me at least note some of the strategies I've adopted to foster the kind of classroom I've described. A major component of the course is the use of an anthology of primary sources in sociology, a collection of the works of both classic and contemporary sociologists (this quarter I used Heeren and Mason's *Windows on Society*). I find it critical that students and I work together on "real" sociology, not the predigested materials found in most textbooks. For each class session, students are asked to read two or three articles from the anthology and to bring short (150 words) response papers for each article to class. In the response papers, students are asked (1) to identify and articulate in their own words the "argument" of the article ("What is the author trying to get us to see?"), (2) to show how this article connects to other articles we have read, to class discussion, or to other concerns, and (3) to raise questions they have for the author. While I do not grade these response papers, I do collect them each class, I read and respond to them, and the comple-

tion of the response papers is a major component of the student's grade. I find that this strategy encourages students not only to read the assigned material, even to re-read it, but to have spent some time processing the article before we consider it in class. At the beginning of most class periods, I ask students to get into small groups and to share their response papers and for the group to be ready to report their discussions to the class at large. These groups take about ten minutes. The majority of the rest of the class period is spent hearing group reports and following up on questions that those discussions elicit. My role is to challenge, to urge stronger analyses, to provoke by raising questions of my own, to identify connections, to provide larger frameworks, and to offer examples and problems to compare and contrast the ideas brought up. Classes are usually ended by taking about three minutes for a concluding exercise. Each student is asked to take a minute to write a response to the question, "What was the point of today's class?" or, "What is the argument made by the material we discussed?" or, "What conclusions did we come to today?" In the final two minutes one or two students are asked to share these final papers.

While I do not argue from this story that classrooms should have no instructors, I do suggest that by restructuring the power distribution in a classroom we empower students to take on a richer and more rewarding role and we support students in discovering and exercising what Carol Gilligan (1982) and the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) describe as voice—the ability to name oneself and one's activity in the world. Further, I suggest that collaborative work makes classroom more fertile and more effective because collaboration is a better approximation of the character of thinking and of knowledge than is monologue. Finally, I suggest that each of us create classroom environments and structures that are isomorphic to the quest that is our discipline. Just as I ask sociologists to teach sociologically, I encourage historians to teach historically, chemists chemically, musicians musically. Such teaching is "teacherless" since it calls for everyone in the classroom to create together the discipline and its questions, its passions, and its sense of wonder. •

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