

Teaching from the Edge: The Student-Centered Classroom

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As a veteran English teacher I, like most of my Liberal Arts-trained colleagues, often despair over the future of the disciplines we have devoted our careers to fostering. As higher education has become synonymous with job training and students less receptive to the notion of knowledge for its own sake, I spend as much time brooding over what will be palatable to my students as I do trying to maintain the integrity of course descriptions. Having resisted the "relevance" movement for years, I am in a new place in my teaching. I have come to focus on ways of knowing and giving students the skills and experiences that will inspire them to teach themselves so much of the information that historically has been my charge. These days I work hard to invest my students with authority in the classroom and to remove myself to the periphery.

A recent experience is typical of the work I now do. Wearing by the idea of teaching another frustrating Humanities class to students who probably would not be nearly as enthusiastic as I wanted, I determined to devise a course in which students would carry much of the responsibility for course content and classroom dynamics. My first hurdle was to establish a climate for experimentation; the next was to offer myself as guide rather than expert. The results have revolutionized my teaching.

An interest that had nagged at my mind for several years guided the planning of this course. In the early seventies, everyone I cared to spend time with had read Thoreau's *Walden* numerous times; most hauled around thoroughly thumbed and dog-eared volumes and took it as a prescription for life well-lived. By the mid-eighties, attitudes toward Thoreau's work were dramatically different. In the me-decade of MBA's and corporate ladder climbing, Thoreau's experiment in simplicity and individual spiritual transcendence often bred disbelief or even open hostility. I was curious to see how Generation X reacted to this classic, so *Walden* became the foundation from which I built a course around the theme of community. Shamelessly hoping to influence the students' response to a work dear to me, I located a pseudo-Walden Pond near the campus and arranged a couple of field trips. When we first discussed *Walden* in the classroom, the students were unable, or unwilling, to respond to the written images of Thoreau's nature. The next day, freed from a windowless cave, they could hardly contain their enthusiasm for the ritualistic daily baptism of his bath as the mist rose off the water in that cool, shady place. Immersing themselves in the reality of physical descriptions made the leap to philosophical discussion of his spiritual-

ism not only possible but desirable. They seemed to "feel" Thoreau rather than simply "know" him.

We went to a local test garden for daylilies to read and discuss Wordsworth late one rainy afternoon. The daylilies in full bloom weren't exactly Wordsworth's daffodils, but they were close enough for just the right intellectual and emotional inspiration. We went to a nearby living-history museum to check out the architecture in an elegant turn-of-the-century house in connection with our discussion of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Having no way to predict the success or failure of these trips, I chose to let each class session develop as naturally as possible, guided by student interest and response, rather than work toward a desired outcome. Without exception, these were among the most successful classes. As the students assumed ownership of the course, their interest and commitment grew dramatically. For example, students came to class actually having read the material. As I withdrew from the discussion, students pressured each other for input. Occasionally putting groups of students in charge of providing background, conducting class discussions, and formulating study questions increased their appreciation of the research process and the necessity for organization. They also recognized the responsibility to perform well in support of colleagues who would soon be their own audiences.

Other changes that quarter, both major and minor, led to even greater authority for the students. Having long used a circle of conversation rather than the traditional lecture hall setting for classes, I further removed myself as the expert by inviting other faculty, whose talents and expertise superseded my own in various areas, to perform for the class. In selecting these guests, a major goal was to make real student-world connections between the classroom content and popular culture while still maintaining curricular integrity. A discussion of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* serendipitously led us to a consideration of opera. Most of my students are from a rural area, and none had any real exposure to opera. The movie *Philadelphia* has a wonderful segment in which a Maria Callas aria provides the dramatic backdrop for a key scene. We watched the scene a number of times, focusing more and more on the power of the music. After that we watched the *Three Tenors'* 1990 concert in The Catacombs and then listened to part of the 1994 concert at Dodger Stadium. These concerts worked well because the tenors included some American music that appealed to the fledgling audience and helped to develop their ear. Finally, a faculty member on campus who has

professional experience came to perform for the class. Cognizant of the students' newly found but growing appetite for this art form, I requested a variety of music that would entice the students without overwhelming them. In addition to talking the students through basic mechanics of operatic production from the position of an insider, she performed pieces from *La Boheme* as well as *Porgy and Bess*. Though familiar with "Summertime," most of the students had no idea it is opera. Hearing "The Laughing Song" from Mozart's *Die Fledermaus* in English rather than German further removed the mystery from what had been an alien form for the students. On the whole, I have rarely had such a successful unit in a Humanities class.

Other performances were equally successful. One faculty member who is an accomplished pianist traced contemporary connections to classical music by playing popular music the students knew and then the classical source for the melody. They were amazed that "A Whiter Shade of Pale" takes its melody from Bach's "Air on the G String" and that the theme music from the movie *10* is Ravel's "Bolero." "The Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's 9th *Symphony* led to requests for another performance centered on the connections between hymn melodies most of the students were familiar with and their classical origins. Still another day, a brass quintet played classical and contemporary pieces for the class. In each case, my request was the same. I wanted the performers to work from popular culture to high culture, the familiar to the remote. I am past the point of lamenting what students ought to know, but don't. Wordsworth said, "What we have loved/Others will love, and we will teach them how." For me, the "how" has become more critical than the "what."

One of the most successful adventures for the students occurred inadvertently, but it has become a staple when I teach this course. In conjunction with a discussion of Impressionist painting, I had planned to create a slide show accompaniment of Van Gogh paintings with Don McLean's "Vincent," a song all the students could sing but for which none knew the artistic connection. Time and circumstance prevented my pulling together more than the materials (slides, CD player, CD) for the project. Happily, that proved fortuitous. It occurred to me that constructing this show ought not to be my task. I was not the one who needed to make connections, exercise judgment, or create synthesis. These were skills the students needed to acquire. I went to class and gave the students the slides, the CD, and a few instructions. At the end of the hour they had produced, rehearsed, and performed a professional quality slide show which they then took on the road to a few other classes taught by adventurous instructors. As successful as their presentation was, the process was much more important than the finished product.

The simplicity of that statement is deceptive. Too often in the past I have done practically everything for students by concocting slick lectures or presentations that by design insured their passivity. Genuine learning rarely takes place in such an environment. My own education really began

when I went to graduate school, where I assumed a more active role in creating seminar presentations and participating actively with my colleagues. We shortchange undergraduates by not giving them similar authority over their educations.

The inauspicious beginning with this Humanities class became one of the most empowering experiences of my professional career. The empowerment was not my own but my students'. Fired with enthusiasm by the success of one early outdoor venture, they were receptive to practically any experiment. Sitting at eye level with students, allowing them the freedom of silences so that thinking could take place, granting legitimacy to their own culture while also leading them to draw analogies to more traditionally recognized cultural icons, required me to be co-learner with them. I had to give up control, to be comfortable with what sometimes gives the appearance of chaos, and to be happy as a facilitator.

I still see most of the students from that class often. They come in to talk with me about Thoreau or Wharton or Mann. They come in to share their insights into a painting that leads them back to Wordsworth. They come in with music I ought to hear, books I ought to read, trips I ought to plan for my current students. In short, they come in to share with me an education that continues.

The world today requires us to be skilled in accessing information. Technology has rendered many of the old ways of knowing inadequate. I worry about the future of liberal education, but I have determined to be proactive. If I can meet students where they are, touch realities in their worlds, and teach them how to make connections to that other world that is more cultured, intellectual, and liberal, they will be in a position someday to teach themselves the illusive facts and figures that I have historically held up with such authority.

Chaucer says of the Oxford Cleric, "gladly would he learn and gladly teach." The real value of education rests in giving our students the desire to be lifelong learners. We do so by modeling that concept for them. These days I openly experiment with classroom dynamics and activities, announcing ahead of time our collaborative effort in charting new territory and asking afterwards for student evaluation. Students generally rise to the occasion and willingly assume responsibility and accountability. My position in the classroom has doubled, not diminished. I learn and I teach. And both gladly.

Sometimes I still fret over not living up to standards of the purists, but I know more of my students are better prepared to augment their own educations in future. I came to this current place with difficulty. Having gone through my own undergraduate career eager to soak up everything from professorial gods, I haven't easily given up the pedestal I thought I acquired by divine right when I took a Ph.D. Sometimes I still miss the me-centered classroom, where I stand in the stunning spotlight, but I've relinquished the podium and moved the students to center stage. •