Learning to Teach in the 21st Century

Peter T. Struck
University of Pennsylvania, STRUCK@SAS.UPENN.EDU

Recommended Citation

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers

Part of the Classics Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/174
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Learning to Teach in the 21st Century

Abstract
No doubt all of us, with a few exceptions, face a challenge in making the material we teach relevant and compelling to a contemporary audience. I am a classicist. The following recounts my own struggle with the issue.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Classics | Curriculum and Instruction | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Methods | Educational Psychology | Higher Education
Learning to Teach in the 21st Century

Peter Struck

No doubt all of us, with a few exceptions, face a challenge in making the material we teach relevant and compelling to a contemporary audience. I am a classicist. The following recounts my own struggle with the issue.

Kids Today

As the ancient rhetoricians teach, first, know your audience. When I began teaching at Penn I had a sense that mine was career-minded. Undergraduates had a tactical attitude toward their educations, they were on their way to their professions and so not terribly engaged in life’s unwieldy, large questions. In surveys of their attitudes that I remembered reading about in the newspaper the goal of developing a “meaningful philosophy of life” scored poorly. Without exactly consciously deciding to do so, I had classified this as a likely fact, a sad one, that I could do little about. It had to do with larger cultural forces, or some such thing, and besides it was confirmed by colleagues and my own experience—you know, grade-grubbing and that kind of thing.

But after some intervention, mainly from students (on which more below), I decided to try looking at this as a hypothesis rather than a fact, and started paying closer attention. It turns out that in class, difficult, open-ended questions about human existence, human society and the fundamental structure of the world actually were, on occasion, coming up and students were not, in fact, showing any particular resistance to thinking about them. They were perhaps even eager to do so. On the other hand, I was passing these openings by. Teaching my students to read Greek was challenge enough, after all, and for that matter I have no professional knowledge or insight into, say, the meaning of life, but I do actually know a lot about Greek optative verbs, so isn’t it reasonable that I should just teach them that instead? Besides, I thought they weren’t here to get that kind of thing.

Big Ideas

Attuned to my own resistance, I tried to adopt a new habit of willingness to discuss big questions when they come up. And as it turns out, I sometimes can, actually, offer my students a forum in which they can think constructively and rigorously on them. I see it when I teach ancient philosophy or myth, as one might think, but big questions are not missing from the more technical material as well (you’d be surprised at how often the Greek middle voice sparks a discussion of human agency. I no longer brush them off. An openness to thinking on my feet along with students about the broad and unwieldy sends the incalculably important message that wonder is welcome—and I have found it easier to nurture my better side? Besides, I thought they weren’t here to get that kind of thing.

College Houses

My conversion is entirely due to my time as a faculty fellow in the college houses. My time there improved my teaching overall, and particularly heroic efforts to achieve. In fact, from an entirely mercenary perspective, it has in the aggregate greatly improved the balance of drudgery vs. reward—and I have found it easier to nurture my better angels, and to act on my belief that students are people for whose overall development and well-being I am in some part responsible.