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Learning to Teach in the 21st Century

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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

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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 likely a 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 here, and I can report, with confidence this time, that the wondrous remains the most relevant thing on the globe (and from wonder come all I would really like to be able to teach: curiosity, respect, discipline, a capacity for empathy, and an ability to embrace both doubt and certainty). After starting down this road, I have been struck by how much more I can do purposefully to produce an environment in which students are invited and encouraged to think about large questions, even to try to help them develop a meaningful philosophy of life, as someone might put it.

College Houses

My conversion is entirely due to my time as a faculty fellow in the college houses. After some careful thought, my family and I moved into Stouffer College House where we lived for two years. Because I value privacy, I had to overcome some dispositional resistance. The privacy question turned out to be a non-issue, and in the mean time I had the opportunity to get to know some of the students and a few of them quite well. I gathered from this experience that I had been at some unarticulated level unfair to them. What did I learn? Impossible to convey with any granu-

larity, but the broad impression, drawn from countless examples of passions pursued for their own sakes, was that they were not in fact narrow careerists, but were leading vigorous lives. In case it helps, a few cases at random: there were the not entirely unexpected examples of the refined pursuits (amateur cellists, mezzo-sopranos, poets and novelists) the casual examples of extraordinary discipline (a past life as a Buddhist monk, a 100-mile-a-week runner) and, not least, the inspired talents of the entirely heedless variety (an all-night call-in radio show savagely satirizing the self-help industry; a character who occasionally emerged on Locust Walk, calling himself "El Diablo," who did interviews for the *Daily Pennsylvanian* in cape, horns, and a trident; the untold hours put in by a chorus member in the Law School Light Opera Company, which I don't think was a resume-builder). The cumulative effect of a hundred such conversations over two years, meeting and listening to students speak of their lives (which none of them described as "extra-curricular") even in the cursory way we did (we should have done more) made hash out of any predispositions I had unknowingly harbored about their impulses to explore, take risks, and look for lasting good in life. This new knowledge reoriented my expectations when facing a new group of undergraduates at the start of each semester.

E.g., Assessments

In closing I offer one quick, concrete example of how this reorientation has changed what I do in class. Designing assignments and tests used to be a task for which one would need a micrometer to measure my interest. The whole business was unpleasant, reminded me of the grading that I would have to do and the grade-grubbing my students would likely do—in short, smacked of the instrumental side of learning that I found inspiring. Somewhere between the cello and the Law School Light Opera, I started to look at it through new lenses, now untinted by my pre-conversion suspicions. Right, so a lot of students care a great deal about their grades. If this were not taken as evidence that they are narrow careerists, it might mean only that they are highly motivated and value their performance in my class. I also have complete and utter autonomy to devise the measures and means to evaluate their performance. Why not come up with a better set of evaluations? What if I could conceive of a way to test all the things I truly want them to learn? I haven't yet come up with a way to evaluate someone's capacity for wonder, but I don't despair that I can do much better than I have been doing. I am experimenting with a whole raft of what used to sound to me like buzz-words and bullet points—group assignments, role playing scenarios, real-world implementation of knowledge (in my course on ancient magic), and project-based assignments that lead students to teach themselves and each other what they need to do to complete them. The default idea of midterm, final (and maybe a paper) has lessened its grip on my imagination. The improvement in the classes has been visible and (more important) ongoing. None of this has taken any 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 in my own experience of creating and grading my assignments, not to mention doing the student "follow-up" on them.

This is only one example. My best advice on teaching? You might do a stint in the college houses. My time there improved my teaching overall, even of Greek optative constructions—which after all is the mood that expresses doubt and wonder—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.

Peter Struck is associate professor of Classical Studies and a recipient of the Lindback Award (2004).

This essay continues the series that began in the fall of 1994 as the joint creation of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Lindback Society for Distinguished Teaching.

See www.upenn.edu/almanac/teach/teachall.html for the previous essays.