

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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9 July 2004

The first question I ask my students is “Why did you come to college?” Most reply with the typical answers of the day—an ambitious “To get a good job,” an honest “Because I didn’t know what else to do,” or the more plaintive “It was expected in my family.” And every so often one hears someone say, “To expand my horizons.” This is a question they have been asked repeatedly, in residence halls by their advisors, in social settings by their peers, and probably in other classrooms by other teachers. And, in most other instances, nods and agreement but little discussion meet their answers.

In my classroom, however, students rarely get away with such a trite answer. Adopting the role of Plato’s gadfly (*elenchus*) I prick at their veneer of self-assurance to force them to reassess their goals and question the fundamental assumptions about life and living that they have brought to college. I push students on this question for it is one of the most important questions they will encounter over their four years at Ohio State. And, after a while, for a lucky few, the answers do change, but only if they are continuously forced to ask this question of themselves: “Why did I come to college?” or, equivalently, “What’s the purpose of college?”

In his oft-quoted address to the *Phi Beta Kappa* society at Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of the ideal form of ‘Man Thinking.’ His point, and the principle I strive to teach my students, is that being an intellectual is a full-time occupation. It is a *weltanschauung*, a worldview that one cannot leave at the doorstep of parties or football games or the dining hall but rather one that moulds the thinker’s perspective on all aspects of life. All of life therefore becomes an opportunity for learning, not in the cliched sense of which students often speak (“Most of my learning is outside the classroom”), but in a deeper sense of being constantly engaged in ideas and the pursuit of greater knowledge.

To alter one’s definition of the college experience from the traditional emphasis on picking up vocational skills accompanied by social enjoyment to a more esoteric focus on knowledge and truth is to change fundamentally the way one approaches life in and out of the classroom. Respect for learning becomes one’s central value and all else is secondary. More specifically, one realizes that one pursues knowledge not for the sake of knowing something particular or for some precise application (as is emphasized in vocational programs such as the Business, Law, or Engineering schools) but rather knowledge for the sake of knowing that something is known, a philosophical orientation that is unique to the liberal arts and natural sciences. *Learning becomes all consuming and one organizes life around it rather than the other way around.* This is the central tenet of my teaching philosophy and the sole lesson that I hope to impart to any of the students that I have had or will have the privilege of teaching.

I have spent this time discussing my ideas on learning because without that foundation it is difficult to understand the approach I take to teaching. “A college,” President Lowry of the College of Wooster opined in a convocation address in August 1961, “is a place where people of varying degrees of ignorance sit around trying to make their ignorance less.” I am dedicated to this communal pursuit of knowledge, which formed the driving purpose behind my own undergraduate experience. Once inspired to seek knowledge by my own teachers, I realized that research and scholarship were to be my life-long vocation and that this quest for learning is necessarily shared. For most scholars, the natural partners in this endeavor are their faculty colleagues and, at times, their graduate students. For me, my students are my partners, whether they like it or not!

So how do I teach?

“First figure out why you want the student to learn the subject and what you want them to know, and the method will result more or less by common sense.”

Richard Feynman, Brazil, 1952 (CalTech archives)

There has been much discussion in higher education today about the apathy and disaffection young people feel for politics. Recent issues of *PS: Political Science and Politics* similarly bemoan this cynicism and discuss the implications for the teaching of political science. To counter this attitude in the classroom, I use a two-pronged strategy. First, I try to convey my unbridled passion for learning and suggest to my students that they might be better served to think of political science as just one area of study among many. It is imperative to get them out of the mind-set that views courses as merely ways of meeting distribution or concentration requirements or so many hoops one has to jump through before one can get on with “real life.” Once I feel I’ve done this successfully, I turn my focus to the subject matter of politics and demonstrate to students the vital importance of social scientific thinking for improving the daily lives of billions. The questions political science tackles, unlike many other disciplines, is manifest with moral significance, and while I try to eschew moralizing in the classroom, students must understand why the questions are important and, ergo, why the pursuit of the truth is crucial.

In addition to these macro-goals, I have four main lessons I want students to learn that will aid them in other classes and situations. I want them to 1) learn to read scholarly material of some sophistication, 2) analyze and critique these readings, 3) abstract away from daily events to more generalizable theories of politics, and 4) express ideas effectively both orally and in writing.

Given this multiplicity of goals, I have to use many different tools to get students to learn. I have a large arsenal of such tactics, ranging from quizzes that provide incentives to read and examples of what to read for to short ‘think pieces’ in which students can tackle ideas in original and innovative manners. Classroom discussion is key to my teaching style. Students are expected to have done the reading before they enter the classroom and to be ready to offer some thoughts on what they have read. My interest is less in hearing the “right” answer and more in helping them realize that our discussions help us learn what that answer is. As Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in *Glimpses of World History*, “the best way to find out what is right and what is not right, what should be done and what should not be done, is not by giving a sermon, but by talking and discussing, and out of discussion sometimes a little bit of the truth comes out.”

This dialectic method of learning is initially frustrating as students expect to be able to be passive learners in the classroom. But the struggle to master the material is well worth it. Frederick Douglass said, “Without struggle, there can be no progress.” I believe that. Therefore, I never give the easy answer or solve problems that I think they should be able to do themselves. Further, my standards are very high, but fair. My written evaluations and student recommendations will attest to that fact, I am sure. Of the 376 students I have had over the past five years, fewer than 10% have earned a “straight A” and the median grade is a C+. As one student put it to me, I’m fighting a one-man war against grade inflation. I fight this war because I believe that achievements are devalued if one does not have to work for them and that our students are better than we give them credit for. They are, after all, the “leaders and the best” and, therefore, I believe I have the right—indeed the duty—to hold them to that. The payoffs are huge. Most of my students become political science majors, many submit papers to the Eldersveld Writing Contest each year (nine have won over the past five years), and several write honors theses as seniors. But the real testament to the method’s success is the myriad of e-mails, notes, and conversations I have with many of them after our time together is done in which they assure me that they were better for having “struggled.”

Final Words

I love to learn. And I love to teach. These two twin activities are my life’s passion and fill my days joyously. I try never to miss opportunities to learn or to instruct and seek out situations in which I might be able to work with students. I meet students at all hours and on their terms. I invite them for talks and lectures that I attend. I have worked as a Resident Director in an undergraduate residence hall (Alice Lloyd Hall) and as an Undergraduate Advisor for the Political Science department. Nietzsche thought “one repaid a teacher badly by remaining a student forever.” I teach because my teachers taught me and because of a faith in the university’s mission, where people of all kinds come together for knowledge, each a student and therefore a teacher. I am proud and glad to be a member of such a community.

“To teach is to touch a life forever.” I try to do so with respect for my students and love for knowledge. What more can I say?