

## TEACHING THEM HOW TO TEACH THEMSELVES

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One of the encouraging signs on the educational landscape just now is a renewed interest in teaching. We seem to be remembering again that knowledge and thinking about knowledge do not come automatically.

If we ask ourselves: what is the very best teaching or learning experience we have ever had, chances are the answer will not be some time when we sat and listened to even a very great lecturer, but it will be a time when something so inspired our interest as to overcome the natural human tendency to inertia, and we went searching for answers. And the reason we remember those moments favorably is because we come out of such experiences feeling more competent to learn what we need to learn. It is just such learning experiences that sometimes transform negligent students into dedicated ones, that start people on the road to a lifetime career, or that give rise to significant new ideas.

Teaching and learning, which I would argue are two sides of the same process, are among the most complex activities in which human beings can engage, and neither is fully understood. Why, for example, can a boy who cannot remember the date of the war of 1812 tell you who was up to bat in the 9th inning of the 1929 Yankees-Red Sox game? Why does a young woman who has slept through half your classes suddenly come alive when you come to the subject of black women's history? Why did a boy I know well, hitherto resolutely against learning to read, learn in two days when his sister bought him 16 volumes of *The Handy Man's Encyclopedia*? Why did John Munro find his students at Tugaloo College, hitherto resistant to reading, devouring *Manchild in a Promised Land* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*?

There may be more mysterious reasons, but in each case the student really cared about the subject. Part of our job, therefore, is to think constantly about finding ways to make it possible for our students to really care about what we are doing. There are a number of ways to do this.

Primary sources are almost surefire. I would suggest that no generalization of the kind that fills textbooks means anything to a person who has never experienced at least some of the concrete evidence on which the generalization is based. So primary sources *first*--before there is any context--to arouse interest and then there will be a serious wish to find out about the context. Why were these people writing these things at this time and place? And soon the student is off badgering the Documents Librarian, ransacking the textbooks, and asking the teacher all sorts of questions she cannot answer.

Second, it helps if people can relate what they are studying in history to things they already know. I am recurrently astounded at the amount of work undergraduates are willing to put into writing a paper on "Women in My Family." Some particularly energetic ones will do a pretty good history of some urban or rural area or of some immigrant group in order to understand their own family's experience. Of course it is not in human nature that all would do equally well, but every year some moderate B student turns into an A+ one under my eyes as she

or he devotes nearly every waking hour to the paper that has so engaged attention. In a course called "Frontier and City" I had equally encouraging results when students traced the movement of their families from first arrival to twentieth-century resting place.

My third proposition is that you should NEVER lecture unless you have something to say that cannot be found in any book or source. In that case go to it, and your students may be excited by the fact that you are telling them something new. But for the learning of established knowledge it works much better for the student to read and for the class to discuss the reading. Real learning occurs when people change the way they think. They change the way they think when they are actively engaged in discovery--discovery of "facts," of what other people think about certain questions, of what we mean by knowledge of history, and when they discover or formulate their own questions.

None of this is likely to occur as a result of listening to lectures. It is likely to occur when students know they will have a chance to participate in the class discussion. When they read with a purpose it is surprising how much they learn and how much they remember. I try to structure things so that the student grapevine, that most marvelous of communication systems, sends out the word: "You don't dare to come to that class unprepared, and you certainly don't dare cut . . . so you have to do the reading."

At this point colleagues say - well, what you say makes sense, but I simply can't lead a discussion. To which my answer is, of course you can--but like any other skill (including the skill of lecturing) hardly anybody is born knowing how.

Let us say you want to plan a semester's work based on discussion. First, you need to formulate your goals so that you can say on the first day: this is what I hope to accomplish in this course. Then ask them--what are YOUR goals in taking this course? Ask them to be honest: nothing is off limits. (Some remarkable answers come back that have very little to do with the study of history!) The answers themselves open the way to some stimulating discussion. And if they don't have any goals they are right away challenged to begin developing some.

Second, you need a reading list carefully designed to include a sequence of articles, monographs, primary sources, and the student's own research. The syllabus should be absolutely clear about what is expected each time the class meets--even including a few questions that may form the opening of the discussion. Questions should include such things as "Upon what evidence does X argue that southern women were entering the labor force in ever increasing numbers?" "Is the evidence reliable? Is there more than one way in which it might be interpreted?" And so on.

Your own class preparation requires designing a list of logically related questions in which one thing lead to another and so the whole session may lead to some tentative generalizations. No matter how carefully you prepare, however, you must expect surprises. Students will sometimes take off in directions you had not expected or even thought of, and you may learn something . . . always a nice bonus. Your questions should rarely be the kind that can be answered with information. Instead ask the students to think about the matter at hand with all

the information they have. Tie things into their own experience: For example, have you ever had an experience that would help you understand what it was like to be a slave? a mistress?--or what do you think the women who wrote to Margaret Sanger for information about birth control were really saying (this after they have read that collection of letters, *Motherhood in Bondage*)?

People ask me practical questions. What do you do when nobody has anything to say? Well, on bad days, say the Monday after spring break, you may have to resort to some lively extemporaneous lecturing. But most of the time if you rephrase and ask particular people about things you know they are interested in, you can get things going. I try to talk to individual students early in the semester and to give papers from the first day that will enable me to get some line on what their interests are. In one class this year I had two very bright engineering students. They were absolutely delighted to enlighten us all on questions having to do with technology. The economics graduates are full of generalizations that they have taken on faith, which they will offer and the class will sometimes devastate. And so on.

I call on people--on everybody. This is generally frowned on in theory but well responded to in practice. (Of course I warn students while there is still time to drop the course that this will happen. If they are really unwilling to be called, it's better that they find another course.)

I like individual projects. Let every member of the class be the expert on something--once this year my women's history class decided to figure out what we really meant by the term "middle class" in the late nineteenth century. Each person took a biography of a person who we could agree was certainly middle class and, after they had all done the reading, we discussed the question: What do these women have in common? It was a wonderful day and left me, at any rate, with a lot of unanswered questions about that category. (In case your curiosity is aroused, what we discovered was that the ONLY thing these disparate middle class people had in common was a higher-than-average level of education.)

There is a fringe benefit to the kind of teaching I am describing: You can never get bored. Every class is different, what students know and understand changes rather rapidly over time, the effort to bring them into the process keeps you from going stale and, so they tell me, keeps you young. What more can a teacher ask?

Note: For those who may be interested in pursuing the question of discussion as a mode of teaching I have a little article called "Why I Teach By Discussion" in Leigh Deneef, ed., *The Academic Handbook* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988). It is available in paperback.