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Pedagogy as the Subversive Art of the Impossible

RICHARD S. RAWLS

Teaching at the university level is a privilege bringing both joys and frustrations (mostly joys). It is also, I asseverate, more art than science. By preferring the word *art* over *science* as a descriptor, I mean to signify that there remains no singularly correct way of teaching, no scientific principles that will produce x result under y circumstances. Some approaches work better than others, certain professors will produce better results in their students using techniques that differ from their colleagues, and certain topics lend themselves to varied pedagogical styles. The key is figuring out which styles fit which students. It is not easy.

For example, one can teach a course on the history of Rome the same way every time. The first time finds that the class readings, issues, and questions resonated well with students. The next time around, everything can be taught the same way but the students think the experience was decidedly less positive than the first time. Every semester discovers the professor experiencing anew both the challenge and the *art* characterizing the craft of university teaching. Thus, the title of this essay: “Pedagogy as the Subversive Art of the Impossible.” I shall first examine five philosophical and pedagogical principles informing my teaching. Then, I shall briefly describe three specific considerations taken into account when I move from *theoria* to *praxis* as I prepare to teach a course.

My approach toward education (that is, teaching and learning) revolves around five philosophical and pedagogical considerations: 1) education is a transformative action for both learner and educator; 2) an education that aims at holistic development is most effective; 3) an engaged student learning environment will draw students into learning about topics that only mildly interested them before; 4) clearly communicated expectations have as much to do with the success of learners and educators as any other factor; 5) education ought to be fun.

A former professor once said that education is “delightfully subversive” in that it changes the learner. In fact, one could go further and assert that education, properly conceived, changes everything as it **transforms** all in its path. This is because the acquisition of knowledge is an epistemic event in which both learner and what

is learned are changed. The learner hopefully assimilates this new knowledge and is in turn changed by what s/he learned. For example, Einstein could never look at the world the same again after verifying the soundness of the Theory of Relativity. He could never look at himself in the same way, either. In another example from science, Werner Heisenberg, in his Uncertainty Principle, recognized that whatever was being observed was in fact changed by the mere process of its being observed. So, both the thing that is being learned and the learner are simultaneously changed. Moreover, as this knowledge is assimilated, new modes of inquiry frequently develop to take account recent discoveries. This completes the epistemic cycle: learner, content learned, and the means by which knowledge is acquired or analyzed are all transformed.

Although most of my students are not Einstein, Heisenberg, or even Edward Gibbon, the fact of **transformation** remains the same in their lives. In a democratic society like ours, we hope that this transformation decreases or removes such things as egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and other maladies of simply being human. In encountering ideas, people, and events from other places and times, we hope students learn that this great human endeavor is replete with the follies of acting on such ego- and ethnocentrism. We hope they learn that, while we are all bound by our fears, finitude, cultural patterns of thought, and other limitations, we can also relax the grip that these exercise over us. Education ought to help one to contextualize and understand the forces that have shaped history, culture, and oneself. It ought to therefore help students become more accepting and tolerant of themselves and others, to avoid leaping to conclusions, and to become better citizens of their nation and the world.

In order to achieve this transformation, students and faculty alike ought to endeavor for education as a **holistic process**. This holistic process implies many things, including meeting students where they are, developing multiple skills from the mundane (how to read a book and what to look for), to the general (giving a speech in a debate), to the complex (developing analytical skills and using them to write a paper). In all of this, I aim at multiple modes of learning, student activity, and classroom interaction. I assume we educators have a shared responsibility for reading, writing, speaking, computing, and many other things across the

curriculum. I certainly have a responsibility to share my approach to teaching as one who comes at it from the perspective of a lifelong learner.

This holistic process extends beyond modes of learning to content, as well. For example, history is seldom just about names, dates, and facts. Instead, my courses tend to focus around central themes that often engage students where they are. A good course, like a good book, has an identifiable thesis. In a Western or world civilization survey we might look at paradigms for understanding heroes and then see how these themes or patterns of interpretation are present or absent in the literature. Students often like to talk about themselves, and we may reflect on how heroic elements exist in their own lives. In encountering some of the more unfortunate aspects of history (such as slavery or the Holocaust), students have an opportunity to exercise moral judgment, but also to understand the developments that led to such traumatic events. Although I am not a trained psychologist and would avoid giving psychological counsel, I have found that when students learn to dig beneath and investigate the significant events in history, many are able to think about their own lives in different ways.

A third approach takes seriously the idea that an **engaged student** environment elicits further participation and interest from students. This will in turn lead to greater student success. Since student interests remain as varied as the number of students in the seats, no singular formula works for all students. This requires me to know students, their interests, and the things that motivate them. In short, I try to take a student-centered approach that gives students some ability to select topics they want to research *and* the mode by which they want to deliver their findings. For example, one assignment requires students to research a topic of their choice originating out of the chronology of the class. They then have the option of delivering their findings in three modes: 1) a traditional term paper, 2) a newspaper by using Microsoft Publisher or some other technology, or 3) a digital documentary.

Another assignment requires students to work with a second student to produce a debate. In some classes the debate is accompanied by a paper, and both are graded. In other classes, just the debate is required. In each instance, however, students simultaneously experience working on their own but also working with another,

selecting a debate topic of their own (or having me assign one). The debates can be argued from either side, introduce students to controversial topics from which they might otherwise shy away, and provide them an opportunity to engage in public speaking with the use of PowerPoint.

Fourth, my courses go to great lengths to provide **clear communication** about expectations, evaluation and assessments, course direction, and the reason why I require students to complete certain assignments. Each of my syllabi, for example, contains a rubric related to an oral project, and considerable effort is made both in class and in the syllabus to communicate the expectations. Additional feedback is given after the assignment has been turned in so that students know what they did well and what needed improvement. One trick in helping students to understand the nature of a paper or oral presentation is to turn it into an argument. Once they understand that a paper or presentation is something that must be proven, they then begin to realize the importance of providing supporting evidence, sequential development of ideas, and all of the other things that go into constructing a proper paper or oral presentation.

Fifth, my courses are “deliberately subversive” in that I try to make them **fun**. They have tended to be every bit as difficult as those offered by other professors. Yet, students consistently say that they found my classes fun. If people enjoy what they do, then it no longer seems like work. Learning can be fun even as worldviews are explored, expanded, and challenged. Hopefully, the students see I am a committed lifelong learner, and they understand I am learning and sharing in the joys of discovery right alongside of them.

With these theoretical assumptions covered, I shall discuss the specifics I consider in preparing a class. First, in contemplating the organization and instruction of a course, I take students into account. This commences a flow of inquiries: are they mostly freshmen or seniors? What are their abilities? Why do they take my class: as part of a general education core, as a class in their area of

specialization, or as an upper level course required outside of their major? What do students and the institution hope to get out of this class in terms of skills, abilities, content knowledge, and requirements of the major? A student-centered approach takes students where they are and then begins to work around and toward the skill sets. I try to tailor assignments in such a way that students are encouraged to pursue their interests within the overall class structure.

Second, I take into account the material I am teaching. Questions again surface: is the material appropriate for the students? How much content is realistic? What ought students to learn from the content I assign? In a perfect world, students and faculty would not have to worry about constituencies, but the reality is that various groups of people and organizations maintain a vested interest in seeing that certain content be taught. For example, teacher education commissions remain justifiably concerned that students learn prescribed sets of content areas. Agencies sponsoring and funding the institution have *agendae*. Whether a religiously affiliated school, a secular private institution, or a state college or university, somebody, somewhere keeps an anxious eye out on what is being taught. While this is not onerous and is seldom if ever intrusive, it does play a role in the shape and function of some courses.

Finally, content is related to desired skills that one hopes one's students learn. Each class ought therefore to advance a student's ability to read, write, analyze, speak well, and use interpretive paradigms. With luck and prodding, students learn how to separate the ephemeral from the significant. The various skill sets they learn help them to do this.

In conclusion, my philosophy of education assumes that learning takes time. A problem that I have with No Child Left Behind applies as much to university students as it does to those in younger grades: it remains extremely difficult to measure the impact of instruction when some students learn differently, acquire skills and knowledge at various paces, and begin applying these skills and abilities at varying rates. For instance, students have contacted me a decade after a course to tell me that what we learned finally transformed their lives. Subversion, it seems, takes time.