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Somewhere I've Never Been: Part 1

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“Somewhere I’ve Never Been”

Part I

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“We want teaching to be something we can acquire and lock up,” but teaching is “nothing we can hold onto, nothing we can simply pull off the shelf and run.”¹ I suspect that after the experience of the past semester, most of us have kissed that aspiration goodbye. For us in academia, it is hardly an exaggeration to note that everything has changed, and changed fast, and most of us are now being asked to do what seems impossible despite our institutions’ emergency attempts to equip us for what we need in order to promote (or at least maintain) student learning in an uncertain time.

In a time of on-going, almost daily emergencies, epidemiological, interpersonal, and pedagogical, we can only wonder what comes next in the classroom. What comes next here is a relatively informal (for an academic journal) three-part invitation to use the current turmoil in your professional life as an opportunity to re-examine how you teach. What I propose is neither new nor radical, though it is fundamental: What would happen to our classes if we shifted the focus away from content delivery and mastery to what pedagogical specialists call “deep learning”? In a new time and a new format, can we meet our curricular outcomes in new ways?

In part one, we will reflect briefly on the nature of deep learning and what qualities are needed in a faculty dedicated to the engaged pedagogy involved. Part two will present a sample assignment that will demonstrate how the theoretical rubber hits the pedagogical road: How, concretely, can we accomplish deep learning at a distance? How can we foster a connection with our students that will promote their learning and still maintain physical distance from them? In part three, we will examine one of the earliest types of engaged pedagogy—problem based learning—to uncover ways that one might reconfigure a larger unit of a course.

This is teaching we’re talking about, folks! No one size fits all. But some aspects of what I propose here—or perhaps one or two of the sources I note—may stimulate your thinking as you lick recent wounds, recover from the harrowing experiences of the spring of 2020, and somehow plan for a most uncertain future.

¹ Jerry Farber, “Teaching and Presence,” *Pedagogy* 8 (2008) 215–225, 233. I thank editor Nate DesRosiers for suggesting the topic for this essay, and the anonymous readers whose comments enriched its thesis.

To begin, I want to share an assumption I am making about you: You teach, not just to put food on the table for yourself and your family, but because you still—even after years of hard work for little pay, even with the frustration of unmotivated and/or unprepared students, in spite of a bewildering array of what often seems like willful incompetence on the part of administrators, editors, and colleagues, and now, even after a spring season in pedagogical hell—you still want to make a difference. You're not in it for the money or the glory. If teaching is just a job for you, you may as well stop reading. I have nothing to offer you.

You still here?

Now, let me share another assumption: If you are teaching undergraduates, as most of us are, you recognize that very few of your students will be going to graduate school in our field or aspire to become professors of history, religion, or theology, much less papyrology or dirt archaeology. The vast majority of our students are not driven vocationally like us. But they *are* like us in one critically important way: they want to learn. They may not want to learn about the prominence of women among the Christian communities of second-century Phrygia. And they may not want to learn *anything* from our classes that is not going to help them get a better job. But they know there's a reason they are sitting in a classroom rather than washing dishes in the back of a diner.

Hold that thought.

For years my colleagues and I sat around the break room at our Catholic college and kvetched about how our students, many of them bequeathed to us from Catholic high schools, knew little to nothing about the Bible. How could it be that in a class of twenty, no one could recall in even rudimentary detail the story of Adam and Eve? What the hell were they teaching in high school religion classes? By the early part of the twenty-first century they surely had moved beyond macramé wall hangings and banners.

Some research was in order, and when we actually met with the religion teachers from our feeder schools, they were dismayed by our questions. Of course Adam and Eve were part of the curriculum! Their students had been quizzed and tested about the Bible and earned high grades in the process. And yet, by the time they arrived in a first-year seminar on religion, none of them—not just the sullen ones who felt sentenced to yet another year of theological hard labor, but even the quasi-interested ones—none of them remembered the content of even the first few books of Genesis.²

² Some studies indicate that most of the content-knowledge a student gains in a course “is lost within two years;” D. R. Bacon and K. A. Stewart, cited by Maryellen Weimer, *Inspired College Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 162. Our students seemed to have set speed records, losing track of everything biblical in under a year.

My point is that there may be a silver lining to the dark clouds of distant learning: it might be a good thing to shift away from a focus on content-delivery that doesn't yield lasting results. Besides, an undergraduate liberal arts education has always been about more than memorizing things. As bell hooks suggests, our job is “not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.”³ Even those of us whose research interests live and breathe in the first centuries of the common era are called upon by our institutions to prepare our students for life in this century.

To do this we have to promote what educators call “deep learning,” a process in which we engage students so that when they encounter the content of our courses, they learn how to evaluate, contextualize, and appropriate its deeper implications for life today.

In other words—words probably familiar to anyone who teaches in a general education program—course content is important in and of itself, but it also can function as a means to promoting a wider range of learning—critical thinking, clear writing, effective working in teams, and the like. We can encourage students not merely to master content but to demonstrate how “to apply new information to varied real-life settings.”⁴

To engage this kind of active learning, we cannot fall back on a set of techniques we can learn once and then lock up in our pedagogical toolbox to pull out as needed. Rather, each semester, each class is a new chance to create ways to interact with each of our students to prompt, critique, and inspire them. Even in the best of circumstances, this kind of interaction was fluid and idiosyncratic, but now that we find ourselves expected to teach in a time of crisis for both students and faculty, it is even more of a challenge: how do we foster personal interaction between ourselves and our students that will promote this learning that they call “deep”?

Yes, in this dreadful time, I suggest that we re-invent our teaching.

Education scholar Stephen Brookfield was an early advocate of new forms of engaged pedagogy. Poring over the data he accumulated, he noted that students look for two characteristics in their teachers: credibility and authenticity.” “Credibility” in this context indicates that a professor has something valuable to offer “and that whatever this ‘something’ is (skills, knowledge, insight, wisdom, information) learning it will benefit the student

³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

⁴ Arthur W. Chickering, “Curricular Content and Powerful Pedagogy,” in *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, ed. Arthur W. Chickering, Jon C. Dalton, and Liesa Stam, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 113–144, 132–3.

considerably.”⁵ “Authenticity” is a bit more difficult for us to negotiate. It means that we are open and honest as we engage students in class, while at the same time maintaining a professional distance. Maryellen Weimer, another prominent pedagogical heavyweight, calls this developing a persona that allows us to be at once transparent—for instance, admitting when we are as stumped as our students are by a techno-glitch or a question or a problem under discussion—and at the same time preserving our privacy. Creating the persona of a teacher takes time, trial, and error, she claims, blending “expressions of personhood with appropriate professional behavior.”⁶

What she is suggesting is that effective teachers are approachable, sometimes even unabashedly vulnerable. They don’t hide behind the podium of professionalism; instead, they envision a culture of collaboration with their students. While it is true that we are the resident content experts, and it’s true that we have slogged through life’s vicissitudes a lot longer than traditional students have—in the classroom (or the Zoom gallery) we are all in this together. We can communicate this sense of collaboration to our students, even remotely, while at the same time avoiding uncomfortable or boundary-defying self-disclosure. “Be humble and kind,” as Tim McGraw sings/croaks, but with a good dose of academic rigor.

This time of crisis is also a time of opportunity, a chance to take another look at what, how, and why we are teaching, and an occasion to test out new methods, some of which we will want to develop further if and when we ever return to face-to-face classes. In the next part of this essay, I’ll offer an example of what all this might look like—Weimer’s engaged pedagogy and Brookfield’s authenticity—in or out of a physical classroom.

Think about it: What could be more exciting, and perhaps more challenging, after a period of such stress both personal and professional, than to be able to return to the classroom armed with an array of new techniques, questions, and sources, and a new attitude, to actively engage students? “The very next time I walk into class,” Jerry Farber writes, “I will be, once again, somewhere I’ve never been.”⁷

⁵ Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 56. A third edition of the book was published in 2015; quarantined in the middle of nowhere, however, I have not had access to it.

⁶ Weimer, *Inspired College Teaching*, 155.

⁷ Farber, “Teaching and Presence,” 223.