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## Somewhere I've Never Been Part 3

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## Somewhere I've Never Been

### Part III

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In this time of pandemic, many of us, particularly those laboring in the humanities, find ourselves—along with our students—somewhere where we have never been before. Nothing prevents us from continuing to use the paradigm that many of us were trained to deploy: conduct the course as a series of lectures that students tune in to hear, and require a mid-term examination and perhaps a final paper based on the content of those lectures. We can do this, but I for one cannot think of a more boring way to make a living as an academic—listening to myself speak what I already know and then have to read through dozens of attempts to parrot back to me what I said.<sup>1</sup>

In previous essays I have suggested that strange times require what may seem like strange responses on our part. We need to move away from “content delivery” as the core of our classes. We need to change the way we teach in significant ways if we are going to promote the kind of deep learning that will most effectively prepare our students to engage in life after undergraduate study. As a study by the National Research Council put it over twenty years ago, “the meaning of ‘knowing’ has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find it and use it.”<sup>2</sup> To make this shift from learning that focuses on content to classes that allow students to grapple with content in deeper and more meaningful ways—and to do it remotely or in a hybrid class—is the challenge we must address.

In my second essay, I touched, among other things, upon one of the most significant problems for those practicing distance learning: plagiarism. Here, I want to address a second challenge, one we always face but which is more difficult to handle remotely: *student investment*. When some or all of our students have to “attend” class remotely, how do we make sure that they show up in our Zoom gallery, and show up prepared? How do we encourage them to engage with the material under discussion and engage with one another? And, I would add, how do we see to it that all of us don't just go through the motions of what education is

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1 Once again, gratitude to the editor and readers for their helpful suggestions.

2 John D. Bransford, *et al.*, eds., *How People Learn. Brain, Mind, Experience, School*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000, 5.

“supposed to be,” thereby overlaying this time of insecurity with a sense of boredom for our students and a feeling of utter defeat for ourselves as professionals?

An answer, I suggest, lies in how we understand ourselves as faculty in relation to our students, and how we re-think the roles we play in class. In my first essay, I highlighted research that suggests two main attributes that our students look for in faculty and which are most likely to promote learning: they want us to be credible—meaning that we have something valuable to offer them that will lead to their eventual success—and they want us to be authentic. “Authenticity” in this context involves congruence between what we say we will do and what we actually do, full disclosure of our expectations, assumptions, and the criteria we will use for evaluation, and responsiveness—demonstrating that we actually do want to know if what we are doing is helping them to learn.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I propose that we examine the implications of a shift of fundamental importance, a shift in the way we see ourselves in the classroom and the difficult changes we need to make in the power relationships traditionally at play in our work.<sup>4</sup> What follows is not an analysis of power relationships in general, but thoughts about how power flows in the classroom, and how we might modify that flow to encourage more effective teaching and learning. My point: *If we empower students to become not passive listeners but active collaborators, they will be more likely to invest in our course and be more likely to engage in deeper forms of learning.*<sup>5</sup> This will involve some soul-searching on our part, since what I suggest involves sharing power over how the class is run and how students’ performance is assessed. Are we willing, in a spirit of humility, to allow students to become collaborators in the process of teaching so as to take responsibility for their own deep learning?<sup>6</sup>

This question of course raises others concerning issues of control and the part our own expertise and experience should play. To relinquish of some of our power is to incur a certain level of vulnerability on our part, and it raises perhaps the thorniest of problems with respect to education of the young. If we are not standing up there behind a podium, if we are not the recognized expert in all things pedagogical, if we don’t set all the rules and standards

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3 Cf, Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 67-69, 71.

4 Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that when we talk about “power” in any social circumstances, we enter a complex matrix of intersectional realities, experiences, and interests. The literature on this matrix is burgeoning. One place to start: Kerry Ann O’Meara, Aimee LaPointe Terosky, and Anna Neumann, *Faculty Careers and Work Lives: A Professional Growth Perspective*, ASHE Higher Education Report, 34.3, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008. As they discuss professional growth, they focus on the situations of women and people of color.

5 “[T]he most effective teaching and learning requires active student involvement and participation.” Cf., E. T. Pascarella and P. T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*, vol. 2: *A Third Decade of Research*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005, 646-647.

6 In the context of teaching, “humility means knowing where one’s expertise ends, and it also means knowing when to keep one’s expertise to oneself;” R. Eugene Rice, “Faculty Priorities: Where Does Faith Fit?” in Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 111.

for success, then what are we there for in class? Moreover, where are the boundaries between faculty and student?

I am not so deluded as to think I can offer you answers to these questions in a brief essay, but I can prompt us all to think about them.

Why, then, are we in class at all? Of course, we are there to earn our keep. But I suspect that even in your worst moments you don't completely lose track of your best and deepest motive: you do what you do because you want to promote learning in a culture sorely in need of clear, generous, and action-oriented thinking.

If I'm right—admit it, you know I am—what are you willing to do to accomplish your goal, to promote learning in your students? Are you willing to re-conceive your approach to the task? Are you willing, even just a little, to re-think your professional relationship to the process of deep learning? In other words, to put it plainly, are you willing to let go of some of the control you think you have over your students and their learning?

Control. It is what we have been trained to believe will provide the framework for us to teach effectively. I suggest, though, that control is an “issue” we need to address, a “problem” that stands between us and effective teaching and learning.

Follow me in my reasoning here, and see if it makes sense to you.

First of all, ***we have been trained to be experts in our field.*** We are paid to tap into our expertise.<sup>7</sup> By virtue of our training and our expertise, we are figures of authority in our classrooms.

Nonetheless, we know from our own experience as students, and the data confirms it: ***the more an authority figure exerts control over students, the less they will acquiesce and do what they are told to do.***<sup>8</sup>

If we are honest, we have to admit that ***we actually have very little control over what happens in the classroom;*** learning “is an inherently voluntary act that you can no more force than you can force someone to love you.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the students are the ones who are actually in control when it comes to their own learning.<sup>10</sup> The situation is made even more challenging by the fact that in order for students to learn, they have to be open to the experience. Even in the best of times, students' devotion their coursework must compete with other commitments. Many have jobs or live at home and share familial responsibilities.

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7 Set aside for a moment the fact that just about none of us were ever actually trained as teachers.

8 Maryellen Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching. Five Key Changes to Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed., San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013, 90-93.

9 Marco Singham, “Moving Away from the Authoritarian Classroom,” *Change* 37.3 (2005): 55.

10 Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 93.

Other campus activities—sports, student government and clubs, internships, and, of course, social life—claim their attention. Traditional students are at an age where much of their world, and how they see themselves in it, is changing. And now they confront a global pandemic that injects new uncertainty and fear into every aspect of those commitments, activities, and changes.

Because of our inherent *lack* of control, ***few professionals in the workforce are as vulnerable as we are.*** You know how this goes: we can do everything right, and the class still falls flat. When that happens, even the most hard-nosed among us feels the particular kind of disappointment that comes from a sense of personal failure.<sup>11</sup>

So, even though we are experts in our field and figures of authority in the classroom, our ultimate success—student learning—is dependent on the investment and consent of learners. What are we to do in a situation like this? Again, how can we promote better learning? Here are some ideas. See what you think.

About that vulnerability thing. Perhaps we should just toughen up and accept reality: we are not lone rangers (I think the technical/legal term is “independent contractors”). We are all in this together, with our students, since we need their cooperation if they are going to learn, but also with our peers. For starts, then, ***we need to go about the process of re-creating or re-inventing the sense of community among faculty many of us once experienced on the front lines of education.*** This is an enormously fraught task, and how we approach it will depend on our individual institutions, their mission, their history, and their culture. One place to start might be an examination of the connections we already have with other faculty.<sup>12</sup>

In an age of divisiveness, we must uncover common ground among faculty and staff. Despite our institutional, professional, and personal differences, it seems to me that we do share in common our desire to promote learning among our students. Alone in the classroom, we are vulnerable; together, not so much. Building or re-building the academic community as we search together for a sense of the common good is important even in the best of times; now, as we are fragmenting in new ways every month, it is essential.<sup>13</sup>

We are all in this together, including our students. ***We must trust our students.*** Rather than signal that they must earn our respect and trust, let them know they have it already, though it is theirs to lose. I don’t suggest this because trust is a nice thing or the right thing to

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11 Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 92.

12 For instance, even in the humanities many of our courses are, or could be, more clearly sequenced or scaffolded. Perhaps these connections could be strengthened through more collaborative course planning, or they might be linked more closely and even team-taught.

13 Julius Getman, *In the Company of Scholars*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, 266; David Damrosch, *We Scholars. Changing the Culture of the University* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 78-107.

do (though I think it is); rather, it is an effective strategy to promote investment. We need to let go of some of our “authority” in the classroom for a cold-eyed practical reason, put well by veteran teacher Jane Tompkins: “You have to be willing to give up your authority, and the sense of identity and prestige that comes with it, for the students to be able to feel their own authority.”<sup>14</sup> Why? When you offer others a share of power, “you get an explosion of curiosity, innovation, and effort.”<sup>15</sup> And, I would add, investment.<sup>16</sup>

We need to have the students trust us as well. We can promote mutual trust by *practicing pedagogical transparency*. We can do this by being willing to explain why we are asking students to do what we ask them to do. It is critical for us to be able to tie every assignment, every activity to our learning goals. (“Why do you want us to write and perform a silly skit concerning Adam and Even in the garden?” Well, because I want you to be more comfortable being up front and owning and sharing your creativity. And I want you to demonstrate to the rest of us how you have interpreted an important text. Win us over, and you’ll be more likely to convince your boss that you have what it takes to get that promotion.).

Transparency also can counteract our sense of vulnerability. When I don’t know the answer to a question—or how to proceed next in a seminar—I own up to my ignorance. Again, I don’t do this because it’s a nice thing to do; rather, it is another piece of learning strategy: I want them to understand that I am human and there are limits to my expertise because when they perceive “that their teachers are flesh and blood human beings,” our vulnerability becomes an indicator to them of our trustworthiness. We are like them, allies in learning.<sup>17</sup> And again, this promotes investment.

Allies in learning. In the classroom, *we need to model what it is to be a learner*. Can we move from being the smartest person in the room to being a co-learner, the *primus inter pares*, the “lead student” in the class?<sup>18</sup> Yes, we are the content experts, but our students should be able to observe us approach a problem and wrestle with it. We show them how to learn by placing ourselves in the position of learners.<sup>19</sup> Demonstrating how we learn may be

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14 Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School. What the Teacher Learned*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996, 147.

15 Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable*, New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2009, 235.

16 One example: You can signal a willingness to trust your students by sending them a draft syllabus before class begins. Ask for their feedback, particularly concerning how they will be evaluated (Will daily quizzes help motivate you? Short papers or one long one? What of group work—can you do it remotely? How shall we evaluate participation/student investment?) When I have done this, only a few students respond with questions or constructive suggestions. But everyone has been put on notice: we are all in this together, and everyone’s ideas are valued. And when we discuss the syllabus in the first class, more students toss out their ideas.

17 Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher*, 71-72.

18 On not being the smartest person in the room, see R. Eugene Rice, “Faculty Priorities: Where Does Faith Fit?” in Jacobsen and Jacobsen, ed., *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, 110-111. On the teacher as the lead student, see Jay Parini, *The Art of Teaching*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 55.

19 Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 79.

more valuable for them than the actual content of the course. This means, of course, that we have to be able to admit our limitations, but more importantly, it means we have to invite them into the problem-solving experience in a way that is authentic and not condescending.<sup>20</sup> I might suspect that no nineteen-year-old is going to actually teach me something about the life of Thecla, but I'm not so sure. What might my born-again student bring to her story? How does a young woman or a transgender student approach the story of this opinionated young woman from a former age? I have no idea, but I don't doubt they will teach me something, perhaps not about the ancient text, but certainly about what it is to be young and fired with conviction here and now. At the very least, this semester's students can teach me how better to approach the assignment the next time I offer it. As Jay Parini puts it, "there is a natural wisdom among the young that refreshes me, that startles me, that often forces me to reconsider long-cherished ideas and assumptions."<sup>21</sup>

All of what I am saying here distills down to the idea that teaching offers us a chance to join our students, to be "good company for the journey toward self-authorship."<sup>22</sup> We can, even in a time of pandemic, build a sense of community with our students, and we can model the virtues we value most—respect, honesty, openness to new ideas, forgiveness for mistakes, acceptance of limitations, generosity in giving praise. We can offer a safe space where our students (and we) can discover the best of themselves while at the same time they are challenged to change and grow and find their own voices.<sup>23</sup> "When teaching is learner-centered," Maryellen Weimer notes, "power is shared with students, not transferred to them wholesale."<sup>24</sup> Shared power implies shared ownership of our classes, which demands shared responsibility and fosters shared investment.

Create a space like that, and even in the plague years students will want to hoist themselves into the Zoom gallery. They might even look forward to their time with you and their peers.

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20 "For students to become interested in active modes of learning, they need to be shown that their input really influences the substance of the course;" Damrosch, *We Scholars*, 135.

21 "In fact, I continue to work in this profession long after I thought I'd be done because I get something valuable *back* from students;" Parini, *The Art of Teaching*, 53.

22 Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, "Helping Students Make Their Way to Adulthood,": *About Campus* January/February, 2002, 5.

23 On creating "safe" space for student voices, see Barbara E. Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Courses*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008, 96-97.

24 *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 94. If you have been following these footnotes, you know how heavily I have relied on the Weimer's work. There is a reason: she long ago set the standard for the scholarship of teaching and learning and all of her work is to be closely watched and highly recommended.