

The Most Rewarding Journey

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Sometimes the most rewarding journey begins with a negative. Although I had been the "instructor of record" for several years of a large enrollment introductory course at Ohio State, I had never thought much about what it meant to teach at the 100-level with any kind of scholarly quality. My sojourn is far from over, but as I look back on my career, I know exactly when, many years ago, I first thought about the scholarship of teaching and learning and how it applies to a "freshman level" context. Although the event was not positive, it was positively memorable.

The setting was a drab meeting room in the Agricultural Administration Building, typical for university structures built in the 1950s, designed by a seemingly brain-dead architect and with a quality of construction typical of the lowest bidder. On the wall was a panoply of pictures of former department chairs, each looking sufficiently officious and reliable.

The faculty had assembled around the long, rectangular meeting room table, the protective coating of its formica top long since rubbed dull by years of use and misuse, judging from the amount of ball point and felt tip penned graffiti. I was thoroughly bored and had drifted over to a juvenile mind-set, speculating on how many pieces of dried up gum wads could be found on the table's underbelly, if one cared to count.

The uneventful meeting agenda turned to course scheduling and teaching responsibilities for the next academic year. First to be considered was the seven sections of a 100-level course (RS 105 - Introduction to Rural Sociology), with three sections offered Autumn Quarter, and two each during the Winter and Spring Quarters. One faculty member regularly taught four of those sections, and I usually taught two others. The extra section was "up for grabs," or should I say, "down for kicks," a la, a good, hard punt.

Then, it happened, that shining moment of negativity that today forms a constant and positive reminder to me that damn good teaching at any level can be damn good scholarship. A senior professor at the meeting, chest puffed out, and breathing arrogance for air, proclaimed, "I'm too rigorous to teach freshmen." What? How can that be? Totally wrong! Why isn't someone rebuking this ridiculous claim? Why do I remain silent?

The faculty meeting soon settled back to its hum-drum demeanor, but I sat there, outwardly passive, but inwardly disconcerted. Forget the gum wad mystery! How could any faculty member make such a wildly false, audacious declaration? I looked at the pictures and could detect no Dorian Gray like change in the faces of those long-ago department chairs, and the rest of us in that dull room remained complicit with our silence. Perhaps it was the times, for this event

occurred in an era when quality teaching at the 100-level was least appreciated.

Today, I know the answer. Well, at least I know enough to reply, and now appreciate how much I am kindly served by the utter falseness of that pathetic proclamation made so many years ago. If that same faculty get-together could be held tomorrow in that same boring room, amidst the unchanging visages of those department chairs, and that silly statement replayed, I would be ready. Scooting up in my chair and leaning forward, arms folded, covering up the age-worn political commentary about American presidents from Carter to Bush, my reply would be confident and strong, vanquishing the idiocy of beliefs held by those who presume teaching freshmen is not "rigorous" scholarship. Today, I am fortified by years of reflection on my own teaching experiences; the influential works of Boyer (1990), Schulman (1993; 2000), and Cox (2003), among others; and, my involvement with such excellent programs as my College's Student Centered Learning Initiative, the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the Faculty and TA Development office at OSU, and attendance at the annual meetings of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. With this foundation, my daydream drubbing of that professor would go something like this:

"How can you make such a screwball statement and keep a straight face? How can the rest of my colleagues sit here at this meeting exhibiting about as much backbone as jellyfish?"

"Truly good college teachers are truly rigorous scholars, whether they are instructors of record for a 100-level freshmen, GEC course, or an 800-level graduate seminar. Perhaps my colleagues have offered no retort to this nonsense because the scholarship of teaching and learning at the 100-level is less obvious when compared to a highly specialized graduate course.

"Rigorous scholarship is possible when teaching an introductory course in the following five ways.

"First, there is no better way to be reminded of the basic concepts and theories that underpin one's own discipline than to try to teach these very concepts and theories to freshmen. We were all, at one time, novice scholars. As wide-eyed students, we had yet to earn the accoutrements of professorial rank and the rank mind-set acquired by a few professors who no longer remember the trailhead at the start of their scholarly journey. At an earlier time, our interests were much broader, but the demands of preparing for general exams, of writing the dissertation, of acquiring a faculty position, and demonstrating our scholarly acumen through publishing so that we could get promoted and achieve tenure, meant that we gradually but inexorably narrowed our interests. Our work environment, that is, the game we call 'P & T' compelled us to specialize, and in doing so, it became easy for all of us to forget about the start of our scholarship, which included learning about our discipline's history, its intellectual pioneers, its classic theories, and the incredible diversity of the sub-fields and specializations into which we academics have sorted ourselves. We became segmented and in many respects, intellectually isolated from most other colleagues within our own discipline, especially those who were not in the same narrow specialization.

"We were socialized to become the best looking leaf on one branch of the tree. That is how we achieved tenure and professional recognition. Forget about the old, standard piece of wisdom that says we are not able to see 'the forest for the tree.' Fellow colleagues, most of us are to the point in the 'P & T' game that we are no longer able to see 'the tree for the leaf!'

"Teaching a freshmen level course forces us into a different kind of scholarship, the kind most of us possessed during the earliest days of our careers. Preparing lessons for an introductory course

challenges us to remember the roots and scope of our discipline. The imperative of preparing for a freshmen level course is that we must re-learn the fundamentals and re-appreciate the nuances of our discipline's basic concepts and theories. Without these scholarly traits, we cannot be effective teachers at the 100-level. The form of scholarship required to teach freshmen, and a benefit acquired from the experience itself, is somewhat akin to the usefulness of a sabbatical, that is, the idea that from time to time, we must take time off for professional development. One vital function of a sabbatical can be the renewal of our intellectual curiosity, an effect that can also be achieved by the challenge of teaching an introductory course.

"In addition, there is the ego-centered reward associated with playing the role of a subject matter expert that even the most arrogant among us can understand. We are the experts who bring 'knowledge from on high' all the way down to the level of a freshman. However, my fellow colleagues, rather than thinking about this as the mere transfer of complex knowledge to the so-called ignorant masses, I urge you to consider this process by recalling the name of a rigorous scholar whose joy of teaching was seen by millions on television - Carl Sagan.

"Carl Sagan did two things very well, both of which represent ideals which should be emulated by any faculty member who believes in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This guy knew his stuff. He was not using the same 'class notes' year after year, course after course. He did not sacrifice knowledge of his discipline in order to entertain. As his discipline changed, so too did his knowledge. As his knowledge changed, so too did his teaching strategy, from the content of his 'lectures' to the ways he tried to stimulate his television audience to think about the simultaneous complexities and simplicities of his discipline's cutting edge developments. The dual ability to keep up with the advances of one's discipline and

then explain them effectively to freshmen is not easy. It is work. It is scholarship.

"A third way to consider this issue is to think of scholarship applied within the context of an introductory course as being like a 'live, on the scene' news reporter. The diversity of our disciplines means that new discoveries, new findings and new information are available as a resource to you, the professor, who happens to be the instructor of record for that freshman level course. Wow! You get to be the person who reports the latest news, and by doing so, demonstrates to freshmen that what we do as scholars can be exciting and dynamic.

"Related to this is the fourth way to think about the scholarship of teaching and learning. As we advance in our careers, our discipline becomes our world. Within that world is an incredible diversity of facts, figures, and expert opinion. Some advances in knowledge and theory can be controversial, with supporters and detractors vying for influence over what is accepted within a discipline. These individuals are the history-makers of our discipline, and illustrate the messy, competitive, and critical give and take that occurs amongst scholars in all fields of study.

"Many students arrive at OSU with a very naïve view of what we do as professors. They think of professors as a group of aging nerds whose repertoire of exclamations is limited to 'gosh' and 'gee-whiz.' In fact, most of us work in highly competitive fields where the process by which theory and knowledge develops is a very tough environment. We live and work in a world of exquisite profanity and eloquent thought, in other words, we develop remarkably productive relationships with some fellow scholars, and find others to be like selfish hogs who carry little concern for the idea that our field of study, and those of every other academic discipline at OSU, is a collective endeavor.

"When it is at its worse, the scholarly process is like guerrilla warfare, where 'getting shot in the back' by another colleague is normal. When it is at its best, scholarship is a transparent process in which theories and research findings are revealed, reviewed, re-tested, re-examined and re-considered by colleagues who understand that sharing and criticizing is part of the scholarly covenant.

"Therefore, rigorous scholarship at the freshmen level is more than the effective presentation of information. It is about helping students to understand how to think and how to criticize, not for the sake of tearing down, but for the purpose of building up. These same skills are useful in every aspect of our lives. These skills help us to be effective in business, in sports, in parenting, and in academics.

"When we teach freshmen, we are presented with a wide array of opportunities to pose questions, present different sides to an issue, referee a fair and transparent discussion, and if the situation calls for it (which is not always necessary), declare a conclusion. Therefore, rigorous scholarship within the context of a 100-level course requires the wisdom we expect of a Supreme Court judge. After all the argumentation is complete, even though we do not know everything there is to know in our discipline, and even though our discipline is constantly changing, we can pass judgement and bring the discussion about an issue to a close. To do so, however, we have an obligation to make sure our judgement is rooted in rigorous scholarship; more so at the 100-level than at the 800-level, because those advanced students are further down the trail of their journey of scholarship and should have a better ability to engage in a critical dialogue with us.

"Finally, damn good scholarship within the context of a 100-level course requires a skill the arrogant will never learn. Damn good college teachers are damn rigorous scholars when they allow

themselves to be observed and constructively criticized by their colleagues and by their students, and from this review process, are able to change and improve. Professors who believe they are so rigorous that no one is able to offer a valid review of their teaching, that is, they believe they have achieved some self-proclaimed level that no other scholar can reach, live in a land of self-deception. Furthermore, damn good instructors at the university level know how to be self-critical and can step back and reflect on their own teaching as if they are the student, always considering if there is a better way to present facts, figures, theories, and concepts.

"My fellow colleagues, without a doubt, how one teaches with rigor varies greatly between the 100-level and the 800-level. But, the day you begin to believe that the requirement of rigor is less when you teach at the freshmen level, is the day that your ability to be a scholar begins a long, sad journey of decline."

References

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