

## **Teaching as an Art**

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Art.

There is no other word for the nuanced performances that take place in our classrooms. Every day at Ohio State, hundreds of us come to campus to stand before a roomful of students and try to ascertain the best way to share with them the gift of learning, the best way to open the minds and widen the eyes of aspiring PhDs, proud first generation college attendees, and that one guy in the back of the class who did not even bother to put his pants on frontways. Transferring knowledge and understanding from one generation to the next is one of mankind's greatest challenges. We are at once heroes and fools for even attempting it.

Like any art, teaching is simultaneously the most rewarding of activities and a sometimes frustrating and exhausting task. We are blessed here at Ohio State to be home to so many world-class scholars and world-class teachers—sometimes, when the stars align, they are even the same person!—and with such an embarrassment of riches, it behooves us to periodically gather up our collective wits and train them on that ancient question: how does one teach well?

This volume, edited with care by Joe Donnermeyer, is an important step in collaboratively honing our craft. Bringing together our newly inducted members of the Academy of Teaching—those faculty whose dedication to the intellectual well-being of their students has earned them our coveted Alumni Association Award for Distinguished Teaching—the essays that follow demonstrate clearly that the unified experiences of the classroom cut across the often artificial distinctions of discipline and department. A good teacher is a good teacher, and we all have much to learn from one another.

That said, the diversity and vibrancy of our contributors' approaches is simply striking. While Professor Emeritus John Lott of Pathology presents sound classroom management advice for those new to the profession, Ilana Maymind, a Graduate Associate working on her

doctorate in comparative studies, embarks upon an exegesis of what becoming a better teacher even means. Arguing for what she calls a "dialogic approach," Maymind asks us to critically re-examine our own understandings and beliefs by re-discovering the "otherness" of those positions. I am no philosopher, but I take the gist to be this: Humans come to know themselves only by entering into relationships with others. Far from being infallible vessels of irrefutable wisdom, the best teachers never stop being students, even students of our students.

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This is a crucial point because education does not exist in a vacuum. Even if our instinct is to believe our knowledge is timeless, the methods available for communicating our knowledge to students are inescapably time-bound. Each generation of young minds comes with its own predispositions, attitudes, and ideologies. What happens when a field of study falls out of favor with the cultural Zeitgeist is precisely the problem with which Susan Fisher, Professor of Biology wrestles. Recounting the obstacles to teaching Darwinian evolution to Ohioans in 2008, Fisher innovatively takes her students back to 19<sup>th</sup> century England in order to help them see the scientific processes and public debates surrounding *Origin of the Species*. Although she is candid in letting us know that she falls short of having all of her students achieve this invaluable "scientific literacy," Fisher is courageous enough to keep trying, and her innovative pedagogical practices should be inspiring to apple-eyed novice teachers and seasoned old-timers alike.

Fisher has an ally in James Phelan of the Department of English. Though many insist on perpetuating the stereotypical chasm between the sciences and the humanities, what we find here are two colleagues sharing the same problem. Phelan's question is a thoughtful one: In the literature classroom, where interpretation is everything, how do you respect multiple interpretations without succumbing to the anarchy of relativism? In other words, how do you teach in an age that prides itself on the belief that there are no "right answers"? This may be the defining riddle for educators in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I wish Phelan well in his grappling with it. More importantly, I am heartened that his efforts

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give the lie to the foolishness that pretends that the epistemological concerns of the literature classroom are not pertinent to the biology classroom, and vice versa.

For any deeply committed teacher, these essays—and the others contained in here in *Talking About Teaching*—present tricky questions, and yield no tidy answers. This is as it should be. At Ohio State, the product we produce is not widgets or steel, but ideas: ideas about art, about nature, about how the body works, about how to be a better citizen. Production occurs not in a well-regulated factory, but in the messy, all-too-human interactions between instructors and students. The energy involved is at once powerful and electric and magnificent. The more we, as colleagues, are able to talk openly with one another about how to successfully harness the potential of this energy, the closer we are knitted together as "One University" and the better our ability to move this University from excellence to eminence.

Teaching is not some utilitarian tool that can be picked up, mastered, and then put away until needed. It is an art, a calling that requires a lifetime not to perfect, but a life dedicated to perfecting it. In the graceful words of Prof. Richard Blatti, it is the never-ending rehearsal. I want thank all of this volume's contributing writers, and all of its future readers, for agreeing to start rehearsing together.