

Forum

Teaching Like You Mean It

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I began my career as a teacher in Corpus Christi, Texas, at Haas Junior High School way back when. The position offered two strategic advantages for me at the time: (1) a real paycheck, and (2) a short drive to miles of South Texas beach.

I was fresh out of college, flat broke, and had no other prospects. I was hired after a quick interview in mid-December to fill in for a teacher who had decided to spend a semester-long sabbatical in Mexico. The job entailed teaching three classes of “regular English” and three sections of “remedial reading.” By early January, after a week of teaching, I wholly understood the urge to light out for a foreign country—students were rude, apathetic, and oppositional; some seemed genuinely dangerous.

On my first day I assigned a seven-page story from the literature book to be read as homework. The next day, to prove that I was no pushover, I gave an easy, four-question pop quiz on the reading. Only 3 of my 180 students managed to pass the quiz. Not only did almost everyone fail, some students refused to even turn in a blank sheet of paper. “Why should I turn in nothing? It’s just a waste of paper.” They were right, of course, but I argued with them anyway.

After a few weeks of power struggles in which I gave out two packs of detention slips, had a dozen meetings with the assistant principal, and lob-

bied to expunge the most troublesome students from my class, I came to the realization that I was a failure as a teacher. Not only was I not teaching anything, I had created a siege mentality in the classroom. While this afforded me a semblance of control, the consequence was that my classroom was a kind of boot camp, alternating between ennui and angst. The most amazing aspect of my failure, at least to me personally, was that Haas was one of the better schools in the district. Indeed, Haas was not even considered a “tough school,” or anywhere near as difficult as schools located close to downtown.

Part of the problem was that I had no response when students asked the question, “Why are we doing this shit?” As a ninth grader, I never thought about not doing the work, let alone throwing the assignment back in the teacher’s face with an expletive attached. I spoke with my fellow teachers at Haas about student motivation, but they basically told me, “That is how it has always been. You can lead a student to learning, but you can’t make him think.”

Desperate to survive until the end of the term in June, I decided that I needed to learn some new approaches. I started out by trying to take master’s-level courses in English education at the local university, but that was no good. The master’s program was run by faculty who had never taught a day in public schools. The juxtaposition of the aloof, arrogant professor doling out the rudiments of postcolonial theory to a handful of eager, pampered graduate students was too incongruent with my daily battles as a teacher at Haas. I dropped out of the program.

In a game attempt to save my job and to keep my classes from going over the edge, I sought out and read every book on teaching I could find. One of the first books I read was Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle* (1987), which had been heralded as a “new way of teaching” by some of the more progressive English teachers at Haas. I gave Atwell’s approach a genuine shot and tried to turn my classroom into a reading/writing workshop. However, I soon learned that I was about as far from Nancie Atwell as my students were from being cooperative, middle-class kids from Maine (where Atwell taught). Instead of reading or writing, the guys in my classes went to sleep, traded insults, or threw spitballs. The girls talked, wrote notes, or got out compacts and started playing around with their makeup. Whereas Atwell was concerned with nuances of the “mini-lesson,” I was concerned with finding a way to get my students to quit talking about each others’ mamas.

One book that resonated with my dark days at Haas was Quincy Howe’s *Under Running Laughter* (1991). Howe was a tenured professor of classics at Claremont College who left his cushy post in California for a teach-

ing job at Leake and Watts in the Bronx, New York. Leake and Watts was a last-chance residential treatment center for students who had been expelled from group homes, were too difficult for foster parents, or were forced to go there by court decree. *Under Running Laughter* is the unadulterated story of Howe's life and times at Leake and Watts, teaching the toughest of the tough. One of the most refreshing aspects of *Under Running Laughter* is the frank discussion of failure—students' academic ineptitude, their open disdain for taking responsibility for their actions, teacher burnout, and the school's inability to promulgate genuine, positive change. Unlike other authors on teaching, Howe not only addresses the relentless despair of his students, he confides his own struggle to maintain hope and enthusiasm in the face of debilitating obstacles: "Day after day I was unable to bring my class under control. At the worst of times, half of my students would be out in the hall attracting the unfavorable attention of the administration, while the other half was racing around the room refusing all instruction. At the best of times, half the class would be busy, but there would still be four or five students cursing, threatening to fight, and shouting down my attempts to teach" (150).

The classroom Howe describes was much like mine at Haas, and perhaps more like most American classrooms than the utopian model implicit in the arguments of many educational theorists. In one remedial English class of thirty, I had many students who were bused in from housing projects downtown, several non-English speakers whose Mexican parents worked the farms during harvest, a few adolescents recently arrived from Vietnam who did not recognize the English alphabet, and a smattering of students who were repeating the course for the first or second time. In another class, I had three boys who had committed felonies—robbery, rape, and grand theft—but were ordered by the juvenile court to show up at Haas every day as part of their probation. Unlike the inevitable "happy ending" promised by most books on teaching, Howe acknowledged the difficulty of trying to simultaneously meet the complex needs of such a motley crew of adolescents day in and day out. He places the *good* of teaching beyond easy distinctions of "success/failure" or "useful/worthless." Howe writes, "I have always been bemused by the almost demented dedication of Socrates, who was prepared to die in order to instruct people whose capacity for self-improvement he thought to be negligible. I find this approach liberating in that it places the work of a teacher beyond the narrow criteria of success and failure. Teaching becomes a self-sufficient activity that is undertaken for its own sake, not for the sake of the demonstrable good that is being accomplished" (60).

At the postsecondary level, classes are usually less unruly, though

they may provide a similar, wide diversity of students in terms of age and experience. Currently, I teach a cross-listed secondary English methods course whose class roll includes a sixty-year-old who has never taught school, an alternatively certified teacher with a major in business, a few traditional English undergraduates in their twenties, and some experienced English teachers going to school at night to obtain their master's degrees.

One of the biggest frustrations for a teacher is the impossibility of determining whether or not you are having any impact at all on the lives of students. Now in my late forties, I often think of those rare moments of frenetic intensity and joy in college when I was certain that a professor's enthusiasm and knowledge led to a corresponding jump in my intellectual development. But in college I had things on my mind other than thanking my professors for their Herculean efforts. Perhaps the contribution a teacher makes is measurable only in retrospect, several decades after the actual contact.

After reading *Under Running Laughter* I understood that at Haas I had been operating under the delusion that I was merely a worker on a bureaucratic assembly line, otherwise known as a school. I thought my job was to insert the "English" part of the curriculum into students' heads, irrespective of who they were or what they could do. Sadly, this is the premise under which the U.S. Department of Education and most state departments of education now operate—that what matters most in teaching is making sure all students attain the same minimal level of performance. Thus billions of dollars are spent annually on nothing but paper shuffling—aligning curricula, and designing and scoring tests. Most of the fledgling billion-dollar accountability systems now in place only identify students and schools who do not make the grade so that they can be remediated, then punished. According to Howe, testing and remediation are of secondary import: "Educators should first and foremost seek to create a powerful and regenerative relationship with their students. It means that they should stress competence first, then remediation. And it means that a major and explicit goal in the curriculum should be to help the students to a positive and viable sense of identity" (129).

I think that Howe's point is as pertinent for a professor supervising a dissertation as it is for a junior-high school teacher teaching remedial reading. A teacher cannot legitimately address a curriculum as if it were a discrete part of a student's being. Even if a teacher refuses to acknowledge it, learning involves the whole human—not just the intellect, but also emotions, social relationships, and the body. When teachers close the classroom door, they create a small society that exists within the broader world while

remaining utterly distinct from it. What is valued and what is not depends on the teacher.

Teachers respond to this power in numerous ways. Some, like me at Haas, quickly evolve into strict disciplinarians who run their classes as if they are dictators. The approach has the advantage of keeping student opinions subjugated to the expertise (or whim) of the teacher. A dictatorial teacher already knows all the answers, and the rare student who dares to question a point often is shot down as a matter of routine. From my experience, dictatorial teaching is attractive because it is easy to implement and students in higher education are intimately familiar with it. But this style can alienate students and, worse, it can breed loathing for the subject matter.

Some teachers spurn the dictatorial approach in favor of a warm, chummy teaching style. Chummy teachers hand out high grades for minimal effort and avoid correcting mistakes or pointing out aberrant thinking. In the short term, the chummy approach may yield higher student evaluations, but it may also result in negligible learning and seething student disrespect.

From *Under Running Laughter* I learned that I had to find my niche between the extremes of dictator and chum, an approach that recognized students' strengths and pushed them to reach new intellectual heights. In truth, a teacher's effectiveness hinges on the ability (or inability) to form constructive human relationships. Everything depends on the relationship—expectations and outcomes, curriculum and instruction.

At the same time, a teacher cannot consistently perform at a superhuman level. After all, Quincy Howe, with his PhD in philosophy and years of experience as a professor at Yale University, went into teaching for all the right reasons, yet he struggled to get through the day just as much as I did. Sometimes, despite his best efforts, Howe just could not pull off a miracle. Nevertheless, he remained convinced of the value of hope, resolve, and care as a daily diet for his students.

Whereas Howe's *Under Running Laughter* provided a philosophical framework for what is, the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi helped me consider what could be. The problem with most schools, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996: 125) sees it, is that they “teach the routine of literature or history rather than the adventure.” As a result, even college courses are often perceived to be boring and irrelevant.

In thirty years spent surveying thousands of adults, adolescents, and children, Csikszentmihalyi found startling similarities in perceptions of peak experiences. A rock climber who is asked how it feels when a climb is going well will describe a state of mind that is very similar to the description

a chemist will give of a good experiment. *Flow* is the word that Csikszentmihalyi used to describe these intense, fulfilling experiences. In Csikszentmihalyi's *Creativity*, the creative people he interviews help him gain insight into ways of getting more flow into life.

For a teacher, the concept of flow has significant implications. In a flow environment, a teacher would spend more time directing student energy than trying to summon it. My awareness of flow has played out in my college teaching in interesting ways—I spend more time providing students with background information, doing build-up activities, emphasizing relevance, and providing formative feedback. In other words, much of my psychic energy is devoted to making learning fun and engaging.

Csikszentmihalyi often uses the equation $task/ability = 1$ to indicate that the difficulty of an assignment should be comparable to the ability of the student. If the assignment is too difficult, the student will give up eventually or think it impossible. If the assignment is too easy, the student will get bored quickly and lose his or her focus. Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that “the most important thing to remember . . . is that there is no single way to teach a domain and that the way knowledge is transmitted should be appropriate to the skills of the learner” (341).

In my first few weeks at Haas, I adopted a generic, detached approach to teaching that failed to consider my own strengths and talents or those of my students. As a result, I came to hate my classes as much as my students did. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from Csikszentmihalyi was the place of happiness in the life of a teacher or any creative individual. I used to think of happiness as a goal—I would eventually achieve happiness if only my students would become quiet, well-mannered, and high-achieving; if only I could finish the next degree; if only I would make more money. According to Csikszentmihalyi happiness is not a goal but “a distraction” (123). A fulfilled life is one in which you meet the challenges along the way and keep on moving. Once you stop striving, you stop living. “Verdi wrote *Falstaff* when he was 80 . . . Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal lens when he was 78; Frank Lloyd Wright completed the Guggenheim Museum, one of his masterpieces, when he was 91 years of age; and Michelangelo was painting the striking frescoes in the Pauline Chapel of the Vatican at 89” (212).

The Key School, a charter school in Indianapolis that puts into practice some of the educational theories of Csikszentmihalyi (and Howard Gardner), has instituted a “flow room,” where students can go during the day to work on projects in their areas of talent. While I admit to snickering when I consider what my former students at Haas might want to do in the flow

room, I also admit that I wish I could check into a flow room of my own at different times during the day. In his research, Csikszentmihalyi found most adolescents and adults spend little time pursuing their own talents; some have no idea what talent they might possess. A surprisingly large number of students remain confused over what they do and do not like. Individuals who do not know themselves are apt to have few flow experiences and thus are less likely to lead fulfilling, creative lives. According to Csikszentmihalyi, there is a simple way to enhance the quality of life: Discover what you love and what you hate. Do more of what you love and less of what you hate.

A professor gifted in oral performance should probably bring a love and knowledge of drama into the classroom and work off of it whenever possible. A professor who teaches mathematics but has a keen interest in music should probably find a way to integrate music into the teaching of mathematics. Not only would classes become more enjoyable, but students would likely reap the benefits as well. Too often, teachers waste time on tasks that mean nothing to them and seem frivolous to students.

Not surprisingly, the themes evident in both Howe's *Under Running Laughter* and Csikszentmihalyi's *Creativity* run against the grain of current educational policy.

- Howe and Csikszentmihalyi advocate that student engagement and the quality of instruction are crucial to learning, but many colleges and universities view the quality of a professor's teaching to be of secondary importance.
- Howe and Csikszentmihalyi advocate for individualization, but classes are getting larger and college curricula are becoming increasingly fixed and immutable.
- Howe and Csikszentmihalyi advocate for a broad, rigorous education with plenty of room for exploration and specialization, but some institutions of higher education have begun instituting streamlined "four-years-and-out" programs that expel students (or raise their tuition exponentially) when they exceed the minimum number of hours for a degree.
- Howe and Csikszentmihalyi advocate for the education of the whole human being in a stimulating, safe, efficient, aesthetically appropriate environment, but legislative bodies too often operate on the premise that the goal of higher education is to educate as many students as possible at the lowest possible cost.

As a junior high school teacher, I faced apathetic and oppositional adolescents who were struggling to gain mastery over the subject matter. As a professor, I face apathetic and oppositional undergraduate and graduate students who are struggling to gain mastery over the subject matter.

The lessons I learned from Howe's *Under Running Laughter* and Csikszentmihalyi's *Creativity* serve as guideposts for the kind of teacher I want to become. From these two books, I learned that how you teach is at least as important as what you teach.

As soon as one semester ends, the next begins. Once you realize that happiness is not the harbor that it seems, the journey comes to matter every bit as much as where you are bound.

Works Cited

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