

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Teaching with Hospitality

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Fortunately, hospitality is practiced more than it is preached. A cardinal academic virtue, hospitality is essential in the classroom as well as in relationships with colleagues. This essay looks at why this is so (Bennett, 1998; Bennett, in press.)

Although we seldom speak of hospitality as an academic virtue, many of us do practice it. We sense that it is more than a lingering piety, something inherited from the past whose point and purpose is now obscure. In fact, I suggest, hospitality is a cardinal virtue, an essential requirement for what we are about, however much we may at times ignore or even abuse it.

Hospitality is essential to our calling because without genuine mutual sharing, the interactions that constitute educational activity become thin, impoverished transmissions of data, devoid of the excitement and the full personal impact that mark learning and its advancement. Without genuine openness to others, peer review is hobbled; and the conditions whereby knowledge can be validated, corrected, and expanded are not in place. Without the mutual openness and reciprocity of sharing that are the marks of hospitality, the academy and the classroom become flat and impoverished - reverting to collections or conglomerates of individuals, not communities of learning.

I suggest three ways in which the openness characteristic of hospitality can generate more satisfying teaching and learning. Faithfully practiced, hospitality yields more appreciation for the distinct gifts of the other, whether student or colleague; a greater comfort about the role and burden of being an authority; and more

attention to the special responsibility educators have to others, a responsibility often captured by the concept "trust," and best understood in terms of covenant, not contract.

The Gifts of Others and the Rules of Conversation

The hospitable teacher is genuinely open to the particularity of the other and to the possibility that the other who is learner can also teach. Hospitable teachers work with the students they have-not the ones they might wish for. The particularity of these others-their unique talents and skills, distinctive experiences, and caches of learning-become resources rather than matters of indifference, and certainly not liabilities.

As a result, the various competencies the instructor is attempting to promote take root in the individual's own identity and personal experiences. Learning is not seen as foreign or imposed, but becomes part of who one is. Hospitable teaching empowers and liberates individuals rather than constraining them. When this does not happen, the price includes continued loneliness, isolation, and little self-understanding. In the hands of the hospitable teacher, however, the class is open to the multidirectional flow of discourse that occurs when its members share and augment each other's learning and its implications for who they are and can become.

And hospitable teachers learn from colleagues as well as students. Many communities develop an ethos that works against these hospitable interactions. Jane Tompkins' (1996) recent memoir recounts her struggles in academe with what she sees as a pervasive, destructive emphasis upon personal performance. The burden of her narrative is to question a widespread culture that too often places primary value on "appearing smart" and validates personal worth through what one knows (Astin, 1997).

Contrary to what Tompkins experienced, the hospitable academic setting is one in which each member of the community of learners is a resource for the other. Colleagues are not ignored, standards are not relaxed, and the plurality of viewpoints is engaged for the common good. In addition, the provisional character of knowledge is recognized. That the best of today may be revised and improved tomorrow provides grounds for hope, not a reason for relativism or

nihilistic despair.

An engaging metaphor for this mutual sharing and reciprocity is the "conversation" of the academy. David Tracy (1987) summarizes what it might entail: "Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it" (p. 19). When teachers model this conversation for their students, the best kinds of values, energy, and example are modeled.

The Teacher and Authority

The metaphor of hospitable conversation also says something about authority. Hospitable teachers work at setting to the side their natural preoccupation with issues of authority and control. This is no easy task because in some larger sense the teacher is clearly responsible for the class. Working to assure others, and oneself, that the class is moving toward (rather than away from) the announced goals and learning objectives often means that one simply cannot withdraw from a position of authority.

Yet, attempting to exert authority and control can clearly stand in the way of class learning. Once again, Jane Tompkins' (1996) reflections can illustrate this point. After decades of thinking that she had always been helping students to understand material, she reports her eventual realization that in fact "what I had actually been concerned with was showing the students how smart I was, how knowledgeable I was, and how well prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn. . .but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me" (p. 119).

This preoccupation with performance, as well as the traditional in locus parentis attitude that the professor knows the students' interests best, work against the development of student initiative and autonomy. Comfortable routines and the instructor's convenience can easily trump the good of the student. Resolution is to be found in the hospitality that is open to the other but does not deny anyone's

identity and experience. Hospitable instructors use the strengths of their personality in the service of student learning. This is the middle way between the nondirective presence of one kind of instructor and the rigid authoritarianism or performance orientation of another.

Hospitality and the Covenantal Community

Teachers have a position of trust—a fiduciary responsibility for advancing the welfare and good of the student, not their own good. Being hospitable is another way of speaking of this responsibility. It points us toward, and helps create, the covenantal, not the contractual, community. The covenantal relationship involves committing with others to a common good, promoted through open exchange and reciprocity. Each gives others the right to ask for insight, to provide criticism, and to place a claim upon some of the individual's time. Each accepts obligations to listen, respond and help the other. The greater the diversity of members, the greater (because the richer) the common good—so long as members remain respectful of each other and are committed to advancing the common good through incorporating members' individual gifts.

The model of the covenantal community is often obscured by elements of the social contract, a competing model. The contract sets the limits of the interactions and specifies a narrow set of rights and responsibilities.

Other elements of this contractual view are familiar. Individuals are locked inside themselves, self-absorbed and preoccupied because they are cut off from all but transactional relationships with others. Fear is a primary emotion since others may threaten one's own standing and security. Power is understood and sought as control rather than collaboration since advance by the other is often defeat for the self; and community is but a utilitarian convenience for an aggregation of rugged individualists where the goods of each are simply pooled rather than shared.

The list could be extended, but everything named reflects the notion of self as a substantial entity that has relationships rather than emerging from them. With its emphasis on control, the contractual concept lends itself to an emphasis upon teaching rather than learning.

By contrast, the concept of the covenantal community draws our attention to selves as relational-as constituted by relations with others and as helping to constitute them in turn. Individuals are ends, not simply means; and as ends they can contribute significantly to the experience of others. The covenantal concept directs us to the importance of the learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and its priority over that of teaching. Hence the importance of practicing hospitality-being open to sharing and to receiving, to being host as well as guest to the other.

References

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