Spectators and Gladiators: Reconnecting the Students with the Problem

John Boehrer, *Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University*

In "Bike Riding and the Art of Learning," Robert Kraft (1978) recalls that his own mastery of the two-wheeled vehicle resulted from a very focused quest for quick transportation to the candy counter at his father's store three blocks from home. The learning was halting and painful, but it was also self-directed, tenacious, and successful. Reviewing his college studies, he says that what he retained from them was not what he was told in class, but the thought he put into writing his papers, the product of his own efforts to construct meaning. Kraft goes on to relate 1) how reflecting on the connection between self, problem, and learning led him to recognize its importance to - and its usual absence from - his college students' experience, and 2) how he set about introducing it into their work. A similar reorientation of one's own teaching is worth considering.

It is common to regard teaching as meaning simply to convey knowledge, or perhaps skill. It seems unexceptional to speak of teaching something. The proposition becomes more questionable when we start to talk about teaching someone. As teachers we face the psychological reality that we cannot actually teach anybody anything (Rogers, 1951). By our efforts alone, we cannot simply transfer knowledge constructed in our own experience, or relayed by others, to our students for their genuine use. Perhaps unsettled by

our inability to control the outcome of the learning process, however, we habitually act as if it were entirely the teacher's problem. We develop an Atlas complex, shouldering the entire burden of teaching and learning (Finkel and Monk, 1983). We concern ourselves with the limits of our own knowledge and focus attention on our own performance. We subordinate process to content and active engagement to coverage. We relegate students to a passive role, making them spectators when they need, and would actually prefer, to be gladiators.

But learning is not passive, something that another performs on one, like surgery. It is active; one operates on oneself. Learning is personal and purposeful: we do it to accomplish something meaningful and important to our individual selves (Cantor, 1953), anything from getting to the candy store to getting quantum mechanics. It is a natural outcome of encountering an obstacle to a goal. The desirability of achieving the goal and the possibility of overcoming the obstacle drive the learning that addresses the problem. The will to grow in ways we value continually brings us up against obstacles, and learning predictably results. In this dynamic of self-actualization, the question is not so much what stimulates learning, as we often ask in a school setting, but what constrains it.

That we cannot actually teach someone something does not, of course, mean that he or she will necessarily learn it alone. The learning may require exposure to possibilities, access to information and other resources, a structured path, guidance and encouragement, constructive criticism. Schools and teachers can provide them. Indeed, at their most effective they provide the very problems that generate learning when linked to the students' own needs and interests. The irony of schooling, though, is that it often separates students from the experience of striving to resolve a problem for an intrinsically meaningful purpose. By focusing on solutions and answers already known, it abstracts the process of learning from the individual drive to overcome obstacles.

The structures of formal education often divert the natural flow of learning from the interaction of self and problem. The problems that prescribed curricula, and even elective courses, ask students to work represent others' judgments of what they need to learn and lead them

to acquire received wisdom instead of earned knowledge. Besides that, teachers are tempted to take over working the problem and ask students simply to learn the result. Gifted lecturers can entertain their students by enacting the drama and passion invested in the knowledge. More ordinarily we just present the dry results of the scholarship. Either way, we relegate the students to the galleries. It's easier to put them there, orderly and quiet, but they belong in the arena.   Excluded, students accumulate solutions to problems they haven't encountered, answers to questions they haven't asked. The problem they are actually working is passing the course, getting through school (Brown, et.al., 1989).

Having disconnected students from the primary experience of learning by working through their own problems, we may find that a lot of teaching feels like a daunting effort to make water flow uphill, and it may escape us that everything from rivulets to torrents wait to run naturally the other way. Students who are able and willing to be engaged can bring great energy and determination to the task of learning when the get access to central, constructive process. If they are asked mainly to hear and remember, it is not surprising that they either become restless and distracted, or they perform disappointingly when papers and exams require them to do higher order thinking. Without engagement in the problem, without some personal sense of investment in reaching a solution, the individual is poorly motivated to withstand the disturbance that accompanies genuine learning.

Students learn what they care about and remember what they understand. They may care because the material is personally relevant and interesting, because they encounter it in a challenging and intriguing way, because confronting it collaboratively with their peers is rewarding, because working out their own construction of it is real and satisfying. Whatever the reason, their caring re-establishes the connection between self, problem, and learning. Fortunately, sharing the problem with them, and engaging them in working it, can start with something as simple as framing a lecture with a question and interrupting it to hear interim answers. More productively, it can go on to supplanting some lectures with groups tasks. More elaboratively, it can extend to running case discussions or full-scale simulations.

Bringing students into the arena need not imply a total revision of one's teaching, but it does involve a shift of emphasis from the exposition of knowledge to the recasting of what we know into question to be resolved, issues to be grappled with, problems to be worked, mysteries to be unraveled. The shift involves recognizing the contrast between knowledge, a commodity that we can imagine being transferred or conveyed, and knowing, a living experience that we understand can only belong to the person having it. More important than the teacher's delivering the product of his or her own learning is the function of "creat[ing] and maintain[ing] an environment in which students will learn to work" (O'Hare, 1989).

Effective as this approach is, both students and faculty may resist it. They need to confront and conquer the collusion to avoid the effort and the risk that it entails. There is a bad bargain that teachers and students can, and often do, make to the effect of "I won't ask much of you if you don't ask much of me." This agreement to accept less learning for less work on both sides has several sources. To engage students more thoroughly requires teachers to become more personally involved, which produces a vulnerability they may find uncomfortable (Weimer, 1990). On their side, genuine learning implies change and requires students to withstand confusion and disturbance (Cantor, 1953). They may also resist the unfamiliar demand for greater involvement and higher order thinking when it counters the expectation that previous schooling has led them to develop.

Yet experience wears away resistance. The rewards of playing a more central and responsible role in working the problem are substantial and apparent in both the process and the outcome of learning (Jackson and Prosser, 1989). Active engagement in personally involving work that leads to genuine understanding creates its own demand, one that a teacher may sometimes find challenging to meet. Coming out of the spectator's seat may require overcoming some inertia, but being the gladiator, with all the exertion and risk it entails, compares with spectating as a three-dimensional reality with a two-dimensional representation. Learning is, after all, the students' problem, not because their progress and welfare don't concern us, but simply because they alone can actually solve it. The more centrally we can engage them in the learning

process, the more personally we can involve them in it, the more teaching we will be able to do. Recognizing that it is not our mastery of the material, but their struggle with it that is the issue, we can remember to keep their experience at the center of the process, not our own (Cantor, 1953). We can also remind ourselves that we are not simply trying to get them through school, or supply them with important knowledge, but to teach them to work the overarching problem, which is learning itself, for themselves. The farther they go, the more important it becomes to involve them in monitoring and directing their own learning. In the end, we are concerned not only about the knowledge they carry away, but even more about the capacity they take with them for learning on their own throughout life.

References
Brown, J.S., Collins, A., and Duguid, P. "Situated cognition and the culture of learning." *Educational Researcher*, 1989, 18, 1, 32-42.

Cantor, N. *The Teaching-Learning Process*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953.

Finkel, D.L. and Monk, G.S. "Teachers and Learning Groups: Dissolution of the Atlas Complex," in C. Bouton and R.Y. Garth, (eds.) *Learning In Groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983.

Jackson, M.W. and Prosser, M.T. "Less Lecturing, More Learning." *Studies in Higher Education*, 1989, 14, 1.

Kraft, R.G. "Bike Riding and the Art of Learning." *Change*, 1978, 10, 6.

O'Hare, M. "Teaching Formal Models." Unpublished, 1989.

Rogers, C.R. *Client-centered Therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1951.

Weimer, M. *Improving College Teaching: Strategies for Developing Instructional Effectivenes*s. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.