Building Confidence and Community in the Classroom

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Of all the weaknesses that bedevil my students, none seems to me more destructive than their abiding distrust of their own ideas. I don't know how many times students who have come up to me after class or stopped by my office to ask wonderfully perceptive questions have merely shrugged their shoulders and looked embarrassed when I asked them why they did not ask these questions in class. Apparently, they feared that their questions would make them look stupid. Something in the educational process, then, conditions students not to ask questions, not to voice ideas different from the teacher's, not to risk making a mistake in public. Most of the students who come into my classes would rather remain confused than admit that confusion in front of their classmates.

They feel this way, I think, because our educational system teaches them to feel this way. Too often what students learn, even about the study of literature, is that there is one correct reading for every text-the teacher's-and that any reading which departs from this one is faulty and misguided. That, at least, is how I was taught to read literature in high school, and sometimes in college and graduate school; and that is how most of my students have been taught to read it. In the process these students have not only been robbed of the chance to discover the variety of meaning and emotion in a great literary work; they have also been taught not to trust their own ideas, perceptions, and questions.

To see things differently than the teacher does, they have been

taught, is to get things wrong. And since their education often teaches them to get things right rather than to understand complexity and self-contradictoriness, successful students learn how to subject their own ideas to those of the teacher. They stop thinking for themselves as they more and more learn how to anticipate their teachers' thoughts, until eventually they have so little trust in their own ideas that they dare not bring them out into the open, where others can see them.

The paradigm for this process of suppressing individual thinking seems to me the teaching of drama, particularly Shakespearean drama. For the essence of drama as a form is its variability, its capacity to be different things-sometimes radically different things-in different productions. No actor wants to play a part exactly as another actor has played it; no director wants her production merely to replicate another's production of that work. And yet countless English teachers, in their "discussions" of a play, enforce single-minded, monolithic readings of that work on their students, as if there were one, and only one, reading of every play, a kind of Platonic Idea of that play, to be revealed by critical analysis.

Instead of recognizing that the "text" of a play is really a script, which takes full form in production or in the imagining of a production, too many teachers of drama treat the written work as the finished product-this in spite of the fact that the "texts" of many Shakespearean plays, like King Lear, for instance, are indeterminate. We do not even know which version of the play, the Quarto or the Folio, Shakespeare thought of as his "final draft"-if indeed he thought of plays as having final drafts. Relevant in this context, too, is the dearth of scholarly work on drama which takes any account of what actors have done with or said about parts they have played, as if actors were not intellectually qualified to understand the complexities of critical interpretation.

By teaching drama in such a rigid way-and what English teacher has not done so at one time or another?-we have missed a perfect opportunity to empower students' ideas in the classroom, to help them put aside the self-distrust fostered by much of their earlier education. For drama really does offer the reader a variety of viable interpretations, even when those interpretations are self-

contradictory: Dustin Hoffman and Lee J. Cobb, for example, offer us radically different, but equally convincing-equally "true"-Willy Lomans. And students can understand this fact if we will only help them to understand it by the way we teach plays. Instead of forcing "right" readings on our students, we need to encourage them to see the "text" as the script of a performance.

What does a character look like? What sort of costume does that character wear? What colors? How does the character move? What does her voice sound like? Where does she stand in this scene? Does she deliver a particular speech standing still or moving? What does she do when she is not talking?

By teaching plays in this way, we not only offer students the opportunity to understand and enjoy drama *as* process, as richly changeable, humanly embodied art. We also can begin to empower them by helping them to build trust in their own ideas. For if the questions we ask have no "right" answers, the students do not have to worry about getting things wrong. They can try ideas out in the classroom-provided they can back them with reason-even when these ideas conflict with those of the teacher and their fellow students. In the process their educational focus shifts from getting the right answers to thinking imaginatively and carefully about questions which have no right answers. They find class exciting because their ideas suddenly matter: people listen to them; their words often appear on the blackboard. And soon they begin to believe not only in their ideas but also in their capacity to articulate them; they become not only more imaginative thinkers but also more effective talkers.

With these new skills, too, comes a sense of developing community in the classroom. Because all of us are sharing our ideas with one another, submitting our perceptions to others' scrutiny and often watching others develop those perceptions, we develop a sense of trust and an esprit de corns. Playing with our own and others' ideas in an undertaking of genuine intellectual inquiry builds confidence in the group as well as in the self: the group becomes an intellectual community bound together by shared experiences, purposes, and productivity.

Too often those of us who teach ignore the importance of building

this kind of community in the classroom. So interested are we in the intellectual content of our subject that we forget that teaching, when it works best, is as much a human as an intellectual enterprise. After all, most of the people we teach are not going to become graduate students and, ultimately, scholars in our own specialty. They are instead going to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, businessmen, stockbrokers, bankers, advertising executives etc. So our job in the classroom is not to clone academicians like ourselves; it is rather to help produce more educated, articulate, imaginative, excited, disciplined, and interesting doctors, lawyers, engineers etc. And the best way to do this, I think, is to offer them a classroom environment which encourages them to trust their own ideas, their own voices, and their own experience. To do so, we must create in the classroom a community which does not encourage them to read the teacher's mind or to find a rigidly defined "right" answer but instead helps them to think for themselves, to voice their thoughts freely, and to share in a spirit of genuine intellectual inquiry. For only then will they learn what their earlier education has too often taken away from them-the self-satisfaction, joy, and fun which comes from trusting their own ideas and voices.