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The Age of False Positives

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The Age of False Positives

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Years ago, when I was beginning to develop field-based learning methods and experimenting with City as Text© as an integrative seminar, I learned a lot from the insights of Parker Palmer. His presentation at AAHE, a talk he called “Community, Conflict and Ways of Knowing” (published later, in 1988, in *CHANGE Magazine*) was a catalyst for those of us in NCHC who were refining the structure of “explorations,” linking them to extended seminar discussions and applying them to research projects, especially in Honors Semesters. Two passages in particular resonate with Joan Digby’s article on students today and remind me just why Palmer’s thoughts were so startlingly on target:

I do not believe that epistemology is a bloodless abstraction; the WAY we know has powerful implications for the WAY we live. I argue that every epistemology tends to become an ethic, and that every way of knowing tends to become a way of living. I argue that the relation established between the knower and the known, between the student and the subject, tends to become the relation of the living person to the world itself. I argue that every mode of knowing contains its own moral trajectory, its own ethical direction and outcome.

This statement rang true to me then, and still does now, when I think of how much it reflects the reality of who comes into our classes. Students who are good test takers, who have cast the world in somewhat simplified terms so that they can retrieve ‘answers’ quickly on timed exams – much like the monolithic simplifications their television screens project, as Digby says – come to us and we reward them: good test scores earn good scholarships and a seat in honors. Students come at a stage when they are still deeply dualistic and concrete in their perceptions of self and the world. What they see as either/or we reinforce, claiming with some pride that we ask them to see “both sides of the question,” often pretending that questions are clear and easy, always suggesting that “both” represents some kind of analytical breakthrough, despite lived evidence to the contrary in a world of complex propositions and hopeless contradictions. And we – the entire academy – are especially prone to reward students in this way and to reinforce their dualistic thinking during that freshman year when professors are so keen to “give information” and make sure students “get the right answer.”

Pedagogical practices and the presentation of complex material as if it can be simplified without distortion come to mirror the culture students bring with them. When they deal with material that refuses to be simplified, they fall back into the

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received worldview they originally brought with them from high school: what Palmer calls the false objectivism that they acquired as teenagers and that becomes a kind of mental haven when the literary and theory courses refuse to resolve into an either/or, when their science classes talk about unknowns and uncharted territory.

Digby suggests that sending students out into the world, as in *City as Text*© explorations, to pull from three-dimensional life the unmediated, raw materials out of which they need to shape an understanding of some problem or set of questions is a way to get them to think beyond received wisdom, to challenge themselves and each other, and to develop a voice of their own. Writing to “imitate” the styles of many is a way of experiencing voice and of finding out that no one of the imitated pitches or vocabularies quite matches what is going on in their own heads. The exercise itself pushes students to see that what they do when they accept other people’s insights is to “try on” viewpoints and ways of thinking – but the very consciousness of this process must push them, psychologically, to look back at their own modeling and see it is just one of several possible styles of thought or expression. The effect of a whole series of such try-ons can be liberating as well as revelatory.

Another strategy to jog students out of their comfort zone is to structure courses around a theme and deliberately examine it from the viewpoints of several disciplines – a curriculum design widely practiced in honors programs, though not necessarily elsewhere. When students witness readings of a single text dissolving into multiple statements, they become nervous, to be sure; but out of that nervousness might come a tentative willingness to see what happens when they scan the same text with their own eyes and try to figure out why they read it as they do.

If students display discomfort with the subtle, indicate they have no sense of irony, tremble with horror not of the vacuum but of the ambiguous, what might sensitive instructors do to utilize that discomfort, absence, horror as an occasion to learn? Systematic questioning like “What difference does it make?” and “What makes me think so?” pushes students to find some evidence for whatever it is they want to argue. Quickly enough they learn that finding citations on the internet or even in print is not identifying evidence. Maybe they need to write a thesis on what has NOT been examined or concluded, or make suggestions about what inquiry needs to be undertaken to conduct a genuine examination when no such inquiry yet exists. The second passage in Palmer that speaks to us about how to teach – indeed how to recognize those students Digby describes – as well as how to learn is this:

I want to argue that it’s a TRAINED schizophrenia [what students have acquired as their way of seeing the world]: It is the way students have been taught to look at reality through objectivist lenses. They have always been taught about a world out there somewhere apart from them, divorced from their personal lives; they never have been invited to intersect their autobiographies with the life story of the world. And so they can report on a world that is not the one in which they live, one they’ve been taught about from some objectivist’s fantasy.

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I would like to think that the great advantage in honors programs is that they provide an arena in which discussion can evolve over time, in which speakers come to hear what others who disagree with them are saying, and in which they learn to hear themselves differently. I would like to think that focused discussion permits contextualizing so that students come to see the persistence of point of view, even in analysis, and therefore to recognize the lack of absolute objectivity – and the consequent need to apprehend multiple viewpoints in order to see objects and ideas whole.

The lectures they hear – treated as texts – are/can be/should be as open to rethinking and restating as any book they read in preparation for class. The papers they write, if they have chosen topics that connect with the lives they actually lead, can/could/should become texts for precisely the same sort of rethinking and reconsidering as all other texts in their lives. Somewhere at the heart of the learning we call “honors” there needs to be a commitment to developing perspective – the one intellectual faculty so sorely missing from the world today.

Perspective is what makes the enterprise “liberal education,” a term which among other things suggests the capacity to be liberated from imitation and sycophancy. No doubt the forces Digby describes are indeed at play in our academy, as they are in our entire culture, but if so they are in evidence at least as much among faculty as among students. The challenge is to come up with assignments that provoke new ways of seeing and thinking, which this discussion might well generate among us in NCHC.

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