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Forward to Aristotle: Teaching as the Highest Form of Understanding

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Forward to Aristotle: Teaching as the highest form of understanding*

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Why isn't teaching more intellectually respectable? Is there something intrinsically dull about it? Or are the concepts we use to talk and think about it inadequate, flawed or demeaning when compared to the real complexity of the task that is teaching? It seems to me we have been operating on too hollow a conception of what teaching is all about; that there is a richer and deeper conception of teaching which could lift our attitudes about it to a higher level of development.

At AAHE two years ago we organized the whole conference around a celebration of teaching. I invited every provost in the country to identify one faculty member on campus who was doing an incredibly effective job of succeeding against the odds, of teaching hard-to-reach students, and to send that person to the conference to be saluted and meet others like them. We hoped to learn from them what exemplary teaching involved. Their first task was merely to sit in small groups and tell a story about what made their teaching so terrific. In about ten minutes the room had exploded with intense energy, excitement and vitality. One participant said that no one had

ever asked her to tell the stories about her teaching before. In fact, to talk publicly about one's teaching as if it were meaningful was to embarrass oneself. Nevertheless, there was a hunger in that room for a forum in which it was legitimate to share issues in teaching. Then we rearranged those small groups into three larger clusters representing Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences, in an attempt to come up with generalizations about what made for good teaching. It was a complete failure. They talked in platitudes, saying things like, "You can't generalize; you've got to come and see it happening." We were astounded. Why was it that we could generate so much energy asking faculty members to share the excitement of their teaching, but failed so miserably when we tried to take the next step and generalize?

Teaching as Transformation It seems to me that the answer lies in the ideas of another speaker at that conference, Lee Shulman. He would argue that good teaching is a highly complex, context-specific activity. If you ask the question "What makes a good teacher?" you will get one set of answers. But if you ask "What makes a good English professor?" you get a little bit different and a little bit better set of answers. And if you move to an even more specific context, "What explains the capacity of a teacher to get students interested in Julius Caesar?" you get a third, deeper and richer set of answers. Exemplary teachers have a whole repertoire of metaphors, demonstrations, strategems, and examples to transform their understanding of the subject into terms that their students can grasp. The exemplary teacher doesn't simply say to the class, "Tomorrow read the first chapter of Julius Caesar and come to class prepared to discuss the theme." Instead, she transforms her understanding of the theme into something that is meaningful to the students by saying "Suppose you're a member of the Starship Enterprise, and Captain Kirk is beginning to act a little strangely." She develops the plot a bit further and challenges the class to struggle in small groups with the question of what a commander looks like when he's going off his rocker, and what to do about it. Then she says, "Now, go read 'Julius Caesar'."

The metaphor for exemplary teaching changes from teaching as transmission to teaching as transformation. It is teaching as the representation of the ideas of a field in ways which are

comprehensible to and which will touch the souls as well as the minds of the students. What Shulman would argue is that Jaime Escalante of *Stand and Deliver* is brilliant as a teacher because he can take the difficult concepts of calculus and find ways to transform them into language and terms that kids from the East Barrio of Los Angeles understand.

In their heart of hearts, faculty know this; it is what they are about: their subjects. But what we haven't done is to connect the language of teaching to that core of faculty existence, the subject. There is more to teaching than simply knowing the subject and talking about it; that's the easy part. The difficult part is finding the words, the metaphors to represent the ideas of the discipline to those who don't already understand it. How do you represent the idea of electricity to a freshman? Is it like water flowing through pipes, cars on a highway, an assembly line? Is there a better analogy? Viewed this way, effective teaching becomes the highest form of understanding. Aristotle's strictest measure of whether or not someone really knew something was whether they could turn around and teach it. Does the teacher know the subject so well that he or she has an incredibly rich repertoire of ways in which to explain each concept? And if none of those ways works, can he or she devise a new one on the spot? What if we take this notion of teaching as the highest form of understanding seriously? Would it change the way we feel about teaching, the way we talk about it? What would we do differently and what would become important in our academic lives?

Perspectives on the Discipline One thing which would become important is how we view our disciplines and see ourselves as members of that discipline. Do we see the discipline as an accumulated body of knowledge and teach it as, in Joseph Schwab's terms, "a rhetoric of conclusions?" Or do we see it as a dynamic framework of inquiry, a movie that has a beginning and an end and is evolving and we are a contributing part of it? Do we introduce our students to a dynamic set of questions of the professional discourse that has been going on since the beginning of the discipline and make each class a microcosm of that great conversation? It would also become important that we see our discipline not only as a discipline but as a teachable subject. We would care about the purpose of teaching the discipline, not just as the Canon, but from

the perspective of the student. We would be more aware of what the students bring to the class, not just in general, but in terms of the specific understandings and misunderstandings about the subject. For example, there is the story of a teacher who spent two and a half days talking about the Reformation and Martin Luther, the 95 theses and so on. And almost at the end of the unit a student raised his hand and said, "Why haven't you talked about what Martin Luther did for black people?" It turned out that half the class thought that she had been talking about Martin Luther King. One wonders how many times college students bring to the classroom experience a mental picture of the subject under discussion which is at odds with what we are trying to teach. The exemplary teacher knows this is a possibility and how to bring those misconceptions to the surface to replace them with more adequate pictures and metaphors.

How Would We Change? If we accept teaching as the highest form of understanding, it becomes highly integrated with our scholarship. Teaching becomes a dimension and expression of one's scholarship and thus an integral part of departmental life. Prospective faculty are scrutinized for their conceptions of the field and how they would convey them to students. They would be asked to work up a draft syllabus for a course they might teach and discuss it with the members of the department, because it would be in the selection of books and materials, topics and procedures that they would reveal their true understanding of the discipline. Within the department, occasions like preparing syllabi for courses would be major opportunities for reflection and discussion. I know many faculty who wouldn't dream of starting a grant project or writing a book without doing a prospectus and sending it to colleagues for comment. But I don't know too many who follow the same procedure with a course. There would be planned occasions for reflection, department retreats, divisional retreats, organized around an analogy to what doctors do on grand rounds. Colleagues would present interesting cases about their teaching, unusual experiments in fostering student understanding, sticky problems of conveying difficult concepts, all to highlight the lessons that have been learned from their work on a particular case. In fact, reflections on such problem solving opportunities could be worked into portfolios in which faculty would be challenged to display samples of effective performance in the area of teaching for purposes of evaluation. I can imagine a portfolio in

which a faculty member puts samples of how a syllabus has evolved over several semesters along with a reflective essay documenting his or her own growth and understanding about the vision of the course. If we come to accept that teaching is not just a legitimate form of scholarship, but one of its highest forms, the questions posed at the beginning of this essay might disappear. Teaching would no longer be a dull, intellectual stepchild of the academy. It would instead exemplify the true meaning of scholarship and be heir to the intellectual excitement now reserved for research.