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Putting the “Human” into the Humanities

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Abstract: A recent (2020) report by the Modern Language Association addresses the ethical treatment of graduate students in the humanities, and the author considers this in the context of honors students and faculty. Lamenting missed opportunities for in-person group presentations, student-led Socratic circles, and final individual presentations during the coronavirus pandemic, the author reflects on ways of experiencing joy and practicing compassion in teaching. Students and faculty mutually benefit from exploring and honoring each other’s humanity.

Keywords: teacher-student relationships; joy; COVID-19 pandemic—teaching and learning; MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education; University of South Alabama (AL)—Honors College

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In this forum’s opening essay, “Teaching from the Heart,” Suketu Bhavsar reflects upon his mentor as someone who “brought his whole being to his academic community. His warm laughter rang through the department several times a day, relaxing us all and making the day seem bright and promising. The joy that he communicated did not detract one iota from his scientific achievements or standing.” This account reminded me of a story from my first year as a new PhD and tenure-track assistant professor in an English department. I was counseling a graduate student who was teaching a freshman composition course for the first time, and she was relieved to be speaking with me because, as she stated, “You’re the only professor who talks to us like we’re human.”

I was happy that students felt comfortable coming to my office. During my own time as a graduate student and teaching assistant, I had decided that as I moved up the professorial ladder, I was going to remain the same

blue-collar, down-to-earth teacher that I had been during my teaching assistantships. Academia was already teeming with pompous jerks, and I felt no need to assume that mantle, refusing to subject my students to the intellectual and professional hazing that I had suffered. Now, twenty years later, that graduate student and I are both associate professors, but our shared discipline unfortunately continues to mistreat students.

In spring 2020, the Modern Language Association released its “Report of the MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education,” of which the Executive Summary states in part:

The 2018 MLA Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) surveyed MLA members on perceived problems with graduate education, especially those that arise from the unequal power relations between faculty members and graduate students. The survey results, discussed at the Delegate Assembly meeting in January 2019, demonstrate a wide range of concerns about not only precarity and sexual harassment but also issues such as mental health challenges, lack of transparency, favoritism and bias, and emotional and material exploitation. The survey shows marked dissatisfaction—but it also highlights structural problems in how we educate and professionalize graduate students and spotlights long-standing practices that invite abuse. (1)

I am gratified that ongoing issues in the ethical treatment of students are being openly identified and addressed in writing, but I am also disappointed that, in a discipline focused on the creative exploration of the human condition, professors apparently still have trouble treating students as human beings.

In Bhavsar’s account of his mentor, the operative word for me is “joy.” I regularly experience joy in my work, both in my teaching and in my research, and I sometimes wonder if some professors have lost their joy or whether they ever felt that joy in the first place. Perhaps someone is a highly successful researcher but a horrible teacher; perhaps a renowned scholar publishes in top journals but deigns to teach only doctoral candidates and is loath to work with undergraduates. The joyful celebration of teaching bright, motivated undergraduates is the National Collegiate Honors Council’s *raison d’être*. Few disciplinary organizations showcase undergraduate work so prominently in regional and national publications and conferences. I particularly love watching undergraduate student presentations: individual ones and group ones; ten-minute ones and fifty-minute ones; PowerPoints and Prezis; end-of-semester reports, thesis defenses, and conference posters. I assign at least

one presentation in every class I teach. Technical Writing students present a research-based group recommendation report, and Teaching Composition students lead an individual assignment demonstration as if they were teaching an actual middle school or high school language arts class. Horror Literature and Film includes group presentations on prominent horror directors and a midterm poster session on horror authors. All of my honors courses, from honors composition to upper-division seminars on the Hero's Journey and *The Twilight Zone*, include group presentations, student-led Socratic circles, and/or a formal end-of-semester individual presentation. I confess that I get excited during student presentations, and I would never be a great poker player because every thought I have during presentations runs across my face. Students have taken to stealing glances at me because they like to watch my reactions, not simply because they think that good reactions mean good grades, but also because my willingness to be expressive demonstrates to my students that I am a human being.

During the spring 2020 pandemic lockdown, however, I was forced to shift my pedagogical priorities. By the end of March, students and faculty alike were already suffering from online overload, videoconferencing burn-out, and overall mental and emotional fatigue. Students were losing jobs, their parents were losing jobs, family members had become ill, and loved ones had died with no funerals taking place. In an effort to mitigate the stress, I chose to discard my beloved end-of-semester presentations and to limit my course activities to required papers and asynchronous participation in discussion forums. For my upper-division honors seminar on *The Twilight Zone*, I was especially sad about losing the communal viewing sessions in which we sat in the classroom as a group to watch and discuss the episodes together. Under stay-at-home orders, I was unsure of how many students subscribed to streaming services so that they could access the show legally, so for each episode I opened a forum on the episode's original syllabus date, kept it open so that students could contribute if and when they were able to watch the episode, and did not attach grades to forum participation. In this way, I hoped to create an online space that maintained our classroom comradery, one in which students felt comfortable sharing personal stories and connecting them to the day's material.

Students who had been active in class discussion continued to participate online while others who had typically been quiet in class or who had saved their personal reflections for the viewer response papers began to open up with their classmates when given the time and opportunity to craft thoughtful written comments. Several students commented on the emotional impact of

watching specific *Twilight Zone* episodes at home with family members. For the episode “In Praise of Pip,” in which a bookie reconnects with the spirit of his estranged son who is dying in Vietnam, one student discussed watching the episode with her father, whose own father had recently passed away, and another thought of her grandfather’s passing in China and how she had been unable to travel there. Similarly, the “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” adaptation was difficult for another student and her father to watch together because of a suicide by hanging in their immediate family. Some of the strongest reactions were prompted by the controversial episode “The Encounter,” in which a World War II veteran and a young Japanese-American man are trapped together in a stifling attic as their resentments boil over. One African-American student reflected on the veteran’s use of the belittling term “boy” and how her father, now in his 50s, is still called by the same pejorative term. Another told the story of two of his great-grandfathers who had served in the Pacific theater; the one who had seen hard combat was indoctrinated to think of the Japanese as enemy savages and had hidden an officer’s weapon in his luggage, just as the episode’s character had, while the other had seen very little combat as a mechanic and therefore did not return with as many entrenched racist tendencies. In each student’s case, the dehumanization of a person perceived as “the other” struck a strong chord. As students progressed through the asynchronous discussion forums, I made sure to reinforce to them how happy and proud I was that they were sharing these stories and supporting each other during this extraordinary time.

As the spring 2020 semester came to a close, I left open the class days previously scheduled for end-of-semester presentations, and I was ultimately relieved that each of my honors students was able to complete the final seminar paper amid the chaotic demands of online exams and Zoom honors thesis defenses. Throughout the last half of the semester, my university’s administration had been emailing frequent reminders to faculty about keeping student workloads manageable and urging faculty to be compassionate and to give students the benefit of the doubt. Upper administration had consulted with student leaders, and the deans’ offices were fielding student complaints about unreasonable expectations and, in some cases, workloads that had actually increased in the transition from face-to-face to online. My department chair, however, happily reported that the dean had received no complaints about the English department. Perhaps, in the spirit of collegiality and compassion—and in contrast to the MLA’s report—my colleagues and I had finally learned how to treat students like human beings after all.

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