

Change

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Teaching and Learning in the Service of Transformation

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In 1998 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching initiated a comprehensive study of professional education in the United States. By focusing on the interactions of teachers and students in the classroom and other formal and informal educational settings, the foundation hoped to discover how clergy, lawyers, engineers, doctors, and nurses were educated to link their professions' knowledge, skills, and norms with its practice. One of the most important findings in the study of clergy education, in particular, was that the preparation of future religious leaders goes beyond the development of knowledge and skills to encompass the formation, even the transformation, of the students' identities, perspectives, and practices as they prepared to become pastors, priests, or rabbis. And in this process, teaching and learning are utterly interdependent.

Teaching, Learning, and Transformation

During the academic year 2001-02, we surveyed faculty, students, and alumni in 18 academically accredited seminaries from across the spectrum of Jewish and Christian religious traditions in the United States about their experiences as teachers and students. The following year the research team visited 10 campuses to observe classes and other educational activities and to interview faculty, administrators, students, and staff. Faculty participating in the study had been identified by their deans as reflective about their teaching and respected by their colleagues as teachers. Students consistently confirmed that the teachers we observed and interviewed were among those who had most influenced their learning.

Responses to a survey question first drew our attention to the views of seminary educators about the impact of their teaching on student learning. They had been asked to identify the "most important change" they hoped might take "place for or in students" through their teaching. Many shared views similar to a Jewish seminary educator who expected students to move beyond the development of their knowledge and skills to some transformation of character: "My greatest hope for my students is that they feel themselves well-versed enough in the ideas and texts of the Jewish tradition to feel secure and 'authentic' in their rabbinate. This means not only textual virtuosity, but also a sense of rapport, empathy, and resonance with the Jewish textual tradition and its religious ideas."

A teacher in a university divinity school had a similar range of intentions for the learning of her students. She expressed the hope they would move beyond the demonstration of cognitive competence in the study of sacred texts to experience, in the dynamics of teaching and learning, "the displacement of interpretive pride by interpretive humility. ..." She wanted her students to "be open to surprise," "taken aback," and "'disarranged' by texts that they thought they controlled." This teacher concluded by adding that she hoped students in her classes would not become "slaves before the text" but rather "lovers ... with all the possibility that image entails for quarreling, mystery, intimacy, and gift-giving."

The expansiveness of those intentions for student learning was embedded in the formal goals seminary educators included in the syllabi for the courses they were teaching. A teacher of Talmud (the collection of writings that make up Jewish religious and civil law), for example, informed students that in the course she expected them to:

- Read some difficult classical texts richly and complexly.
- Pay attention to the process and methodology of different theologies.
- Develop an authentic, rigorous theological language for experiences to which we tend to respond either with silent terror or sloppy clichés.
- Address pain and suffering as specific to gendered persons embedded in specific families, communities, and cultures, rather than universalizing them.
- Evaluate prayers and ceremonies, traditional and new, which deal with pain, suffering, and loss in the light of the theological standards being developed.

Those goals point students to designated bodies of knowledge and highlight specific skills associated with reading and interpreting Talmudic texts. Since this course prepared students to participate in communities of disciplinary and professional discourse that value the study of Talmudic texts, it emphasized the capacities for reading with comprehension, distinguishing among prevailing disciplinary methods, and using a technical disciplinary vocabulary to interpret texts that address the human condition. But at another level, the goals make explicit assumptions deeply rooted in liberal higher education about the responsibility of teaching and learning to form habits of mind and dispositions in students that will facilitate their participation in those communities.

This teacher added a personal note at the bottom of her list indicating that those objectives reflected other expectations for student learning also associated with the traditions of liberal education: "You could say I want my students to be rooted in Jewish tradition, to learn to appreciate and begin to construct theologies that have integrity and don't marginalize specific embodied, encultured people who are suffering" by focusing "the discussion exclusively on God." She concluded with the hope that through her teaching, students could "face their own fears and learn courage." This teacher's formal statements of goals revealed her expectation that the teaching and learning in a class on Talmud would not only form but transform student character through engagement with, and participation in, "Jewish tradition." In this context, teaching and learning are no longer just about transmitting and receiving knowledge and skills, but also include shaping mind and character for the sake of the communities in and through which both students and teachers live.

Teaching as Modeling and Coaching

Interviews with students made it clear that they did not experience their relationship with these teachers in a linear, transmissive, or passive way. Instead they described how teachers modeled acquiring the knowledge, learning the skills and habits, and developing the dispositions that were embedded in their intentions for student learning, and then coached them as they became increasingly proficient participants in the community of their teaching and learning.

As we observed the teaching of seminary educators in the study, we discovered what the students meant. The interplay of teacher and students in an introductory course on the Old Testament provides an example. This professor wanted her students to become increasingly proficient readers and interpreters of texts for religious communities that considered them to be sacred—the communities that would eventually receive these students as religious leaders. She structured the course so that they could practice habits of mind integral to this proficiency. She developed a set of questions for students to use outside of class to practice the steps for interpreting texts they would also be going over in class. During class sessions she used those same questions to guide their discussion of the designated texts. Together they explored how the methods they were using to interpret texts influenced the interpretations they were collectively making.

They began the interpretive practice “in front of the text” by identifying what they as readers—teacher and students—brought to their reading from their religious traditions and personal experience. This collaborative discussion, led by the teacher, modeled how they might explore the influence of their social locations on the reading of any text. In a second step they discussed historical questions that opened up the “worlds behind the text.” This required ancillary literary, historical, and sometimes archeological research to fill the gaps in their knowledge. This rather traditional instructional moment could be filled either by the teacher or by students who had researched the question at hand, through mini-lectures and the sharing of individual or collaborative inquiries. In the final step, the teacher and students explored the “world that is in the text”—a step that explored questions such as “how God is depicted” in the text.

This professor continually reminded students that this interpretive practice is not linear, nor does it lead to a single or right interpretation. Rather, descriptions of the “world within the text” typically lead to questions “behind the text” to clarify the influence of the social locations of the writers and audience on the interpretation of its content and message—and to questions from the interpreter’s experience and social location “in front of the text.” With the expectation that students would become increasingly proficient interpreters of sacred texts, this teacher and her students rehearsed these steps in this interpretive practice in each class session.

Teaching and Learning for Transformation

During the course of our interviews and observations we saw teachers, like this professor of the Old Testament, cultivate learning in ways that went beyond the strictly cognitive. As I thought back to my own undergraduate liberal-arts education, I realized that similar approaches to teaching and learning had significantly shaped my own undergraduate educational experience.

An art-history survey course that fulfilled an arts and humanities requirement at the college I attended is illustrative. Objectives for our learning were explicitly chosen to expand our cultural literacy. It did not take long for us to discover that this goal entailed more than cognitive expertise. To reach this goal the instructor used a traditional set of teaching methods. Through readings, lectures, slides, quizzes, and research papers, he introduced us to artistic styles and genres in the traditions of Western art. He coached us through our struggling efforts to distinguish Greek from Roman and Byzantine architecture, Gothic from Romanesque architecture, Italian from Dutch Renaissance painting, Cubism from Impressionism.

By strategically organizing these methods into a series of learning experiences, this professor expanded our familiarity with the world of Western art. He provided, in other words, the structures and resources for forming in us an aesthetic consciousness—habits and dispositions associated with a particular way of seeing the world around us that the faculty of this university had determined was an integral feature of a liberal-arts education.

But something else was also going on in this class—our encounter with his vision of the necessary interdependence of the arts with the whole of culture; of the role of the arts in public life; and of art’s potential to alter how we thought about and approached our own fields of study and future professional experience. While showing us slides, he paced up and down the rows between our desks. Frequently he stopped behind one of us to ask a question. Invariably the question began with, “Mr. Foster, as an English literature major, could you comment on” whatever topic we were discussing or slide we were viewing at the moment. We learned quickly that he expected us to draw on knowledge from our majors to answer his question. We were to address the subject of art out of our growing understanding of chemistry, sociology, philosophy, religion, and English literature. We were learners, but he also gave us the responsibility to teach.

But only rarely could we answer his questions. So he sent us off to the library to research them and to report on our findings during the next class session. Our reports would provide the occasion for extended discussions on the mutuality of influence among art and economics, science, mathematics, and philosophy. Repeatedly being challenged to cross the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and methods eventually transformed the way I thought about the world around me and altered my approach to questions I have encountered ever since.

During the Carnegie study of seminary educators, we discovered many teachers who did more than introduce students to bodies of disciplinary or professional knowledge and methods of disciplinary or professional thinking. Although their stated goals for student learning invariably emphasized disciplinary and/or professional competencies, their teaching was also guided by a larger vision of student participation in the world. They sought, in other words to form in students the ability to participate competently in some constellation of disciplinary, religious, professional, and civic communities through their developing knowledge and skills. We gradually began to identify the interdependence of teaching and learning as a practice with roots in the traditions of both seminary and liberal education.

Structure of Teaching and Learning Practice

Eliot Eisner once observed that “schools teach both more and less than educators realize.” This suggests that teachers also teach more and less than they realize. On one hand, they are agents of an “explicit curriculum”—the expectations of the school’s sponsors and leaders as articulated in mission and policy statements, courses of study, course goals and assignments, methods of instruction, and the standards teachers use in assessing student work. These establish the formal framework for what Lee Shulman has called the surface structure of a teacher’s practice.

But Eisner’s point suggests that there is another layer in a teacher’s practice. He calls it the implicit curriculum, because it often exists outside the consciousness of teachers and students. It includes the structures and relationships, values and rituals that establish the norms in the pedagogical culture of a school, program, department, or class. It includes connecting beliefs about the relationship of disciplinary traditions of knowing and knowing how with the values and commitments embedded in the mission and traditions of the school.

For example, an implicit curriculum infuses the goals of the Talmud course taught by the educator quoted above with distinctive elements of Jewish tradition that are embedded in the curricular and institutional structures of her institution. It informs the methodology that expands the consciousness of the Old Testament professor and her students to the multidimensionality implicit in the reading of sacred (and other) texts. It carries into the classroom of the art historian assumptions about the role of the arts in being well educated. Lee Shulman has observed that commitments like these comprise the deep structures of a teaching practice.

Surface and deep structures together determine what and how we teach, and when we talk about our teaching with colleagues, these structures shape our conversations. They inform the goals of most workshops on teaching and learning. They are described in great detail in books by investigators of effective teaching strategies. They light our teacherly quest to generate student interest, expand student knowledge, and refine student skills. They establish the building blocks or scaffolds for producing often measurable “outcomes.” They shape the development in students of the understanding, skills, and habits or dispositions that enable them to become increasingly confident participants in our teaching and learning, disciplinary, and professional communities.

When the teacher quoted above wants students to “face their own fears and learn courage,” her expectations exceed those embedded in the surface structures of her syllabus and extend to the practice of her teaching as a “sustained, cooperative pattern of human activity that is big enough, rich enough, and complex enough to address some fundamental feature of human existence” (Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass’s definition). “I hope my students,” she writes, “will see their Judaism as a praxis that is nourished by Torah study and prayer rather than as a body of data or a repertoire of teachings for them to apply to other people. I hope they learn to keep a conversation going between the tradition, its texts and values, and the world they live in, the new problems it presents, and the new wonders it reveals to us. Their job is to live out that conversation with integrity and to help others learn to do the same.”

She illustrates Parker Palmer’s observation that good teaching moves beyond technique; it is shaped by the identity and integrity of the teacher’s own engagement with the subject of her or his teaching. Similarly, while my art-history professor certainly structured our class sessions so that we would be able to recognize various traditions and forms of Western art whenever we visited art galleries, traveled to Europe, or participated in the conversations of liberally educated people, he did more. He showed us how the worlds we inhabited and the varieties of professional experience we anticipated could be profoundly illuminated—and transformed—through our encounters with art. His teaching, like that of the Talmud professor, emphasized the “release” of our imaginations (Maxine Greene’s term) to unveil the dynamic complexity of the communities in which we live and work. Through his teaching we discovered alternative perspectives and skills for addressing the challenges we would meet. He urged us to practice in class the transformations of perspective and approach that such challenges might require of us.

Robert Inchausti has suggested that teachers like those I have been describing respond to the longing in students for “self-transcendence.” Such teachers share Paulo Freire’s contention that teachers and students and the communities that have a stake in their teaching and learning are always “unfinished work.” This means that they guide students in explorations of the “social reality they inhabit” (Greene again) and help them assume responsibility for shaping its future.

Lee Shulman has said that this communal orientation shapes the tacit structure of these teachers’ pedagogical practices. That structure also emerges from the meaning the subject of our teaching has in our lives. It is reflected in the confidence we have in our knowledge of its content and methods. It gives expression to our assumptions about the contribution and value of our discipline and teaching to the mission of the school and the larger social milieu. And it reveals how we link our own learning and teaching to the backgrounds and futures of the students we teach.

Teaching and Learning for Community

For most of the participants in our study, teaching is more than a set of strategies to enable students to reach the teacher’s goals for their learning. Rather, their impetus to teach originated in a sense of urgency about the importance of extending and revitalizing the meanings and purposes of human existence, as articulated in their religious traditions, through students who have a stake in the future. From this perspective, teachers engage students in their own practices of forming and transforming those religious traditions.

The same can be said of teachers who teach to extend any community into the future—whether family, society, religious tradition, academic discipline, or profession. They form the future of a community by cultivating student identification with and participation in it. Practices of teaching and learning give form to a community’s collective desire to pass on the knowledge and skills that have been honed through its experience and that are needed for the transformation of the community as it addresses the changing circumstances and emerging challenges affecting its future. Since the teacher is also a member of that community, this means that students become agents in the teacher’s continued learning.

This is not a view of teaching that can be reduced to technique or to seeing learning as measurable production. Rather, it is one that embraces the interdependence of past and future, individual and community, wisdom and skill, knowledge and character.

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