

Reflection: Teaching a Non-Course

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1. Abstract:

A year ago (Spring, 2007), I was on sabbatical. Being on sabbatical means focusing on my intellectual development rather than that of my students. That also means not teaching courses, but I had been teaching...a non-course. This small paper is a reflection on the experience.

Key Words:

sabbatical teaching, reflection, psychology

2. Reflection

Why teach a course when I didn't have to, when I'm committed to focusing away from student-teacher experiences? Well, I am also committed to individualized instruction and commonly have several students who do the work-academic combination of individual Applied Study courses. As Christmas and my sabbatical drew closer, I could see that two students, each of whom was working towards graduate training in Speech and Hearing Disorders and both of whom were working with populations at risk for speech problems, would benefit from focused instruction on language. My research background in ethology, the observational approach to animal and human behaviour, meant that I could show them a way of understanding speech, particularly in conversation. So we agreed to do a non-course. We met once a week, and I took them through a list of defects they might encounter in sentence construction, then to cognitive difficulties and non-verbal expression and finally to the massive complexity of multi-way conversation.

We met once a week in my office, went over the work they had done, discussed the next steps and planned how they would get the information they wanted to evaluate. There were no fixed assignments, no deadlines and no grades. I found the experience stimulating and yet restful. They were eager to learn, as this was a foundation for their future work, and their eagerness helped me re-connect with some of the basics of my approach to learning. We bounced ideas off each other, some coming from their other classes, some from me and some that we built together, a far cry from the dictation and memorization of traditional classrooms. Between our weekly meetings they completed the assignments. Why was this restful? There were no papers to mark, no hassle about grades, they were into it for the learning and not the marks. I didn't evaluate them at all, ironically since they worked extremely well.

What did the students say when I asked them for feedback at the end of the semester? Both of them noted that they had learned a lot, far more than in most traditional classes. One commented that she had given up telling her friends about it; they would ask why she was working when she wasn't getting any course credit. What a

comment on our system! Both of them loved the focus on themselves and what they wanted to know, but admitted a bit of a yearning for structure, for extrinsic as well as intrinsic rewards. Again, what a comment on our system. But I too expected no extrinsic reward. I was on sabbatical and I wasn't supposed to be teaching.

Could I take this practice back to my conventional classroom? If I were an Oxford-style Don, this is how I would teach. I would love it. Working with students to help them educate themselves, what could be better? I admit it's probably not cost efficient, though what is the cost efficiency of teaching a whole lot of students something they don't really want to know, in order that they can promptly forget it? As one of my slogans is "Students learn one at a time, shouldn't we focus on teaching them one at a time", this experience renewed my commitment to giving students choices of assignments, to remembering they are not a class but a group of learners. Still, one of the students commented wisely that something would be missing in a whole university career of learning in this style. She said, in indirect praise of our General Liberal Education requirement, that things came up in classrooms or through courses that you didn't necessarily want to take that nevertheless surprised and enriched you. So maybe I couldn't be an individualized tutor for all of my teaching, maybe only some of it...but what a rich reward that would be.

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