

BRINGING UP OUR STUDENTS AS RESPONSIBLE, VALUE-DRIVEN ADULTS

(Speech at the Celebrating Pedagogy Conversation-IX)

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As academic, I am first and foremost an historian. My broader world view is that of a heavily Jesuit-influenced Catholic. Thus, I believe that by “doing” history as well as I can, I contribute to the formation of our students into adults who will function as responsible, value-driven adults.

In recent years, the pedagogical concept of Understanding by Design resonates with me in that there are parallels between UbD’s demand that teaching goals determine pedagogy (or rather that how learning goals determine pedagogy) and the Ignatian imperative always to question one’s motives and goals. This means that each discipline, since it has different goals, might legitimately have different pedagogical approaches. Thus, the following comments should not be understood to make broad cross-disciplinary claims.

My goals are to promote a better understanding of history, certainly, but also to assist students in taking on increased responsibility for their own learning. History is worth learning for its own sake; historians have much to say about the human condition. History is learned by doing, in particular by interpretation of evidence and subsequent reflection about its meaning. This does not come naturally; it is best learned by modeling. In introductory courses, which is what most history courses here at Rivier College are, historians “lecture.” This lecture is far from that which is common at universities throughout the rest of the world. These “lectures” do not consist of a professor reading a prepared manuscript without interruption for up to 75 minutes or more. These “lectures” are presentations based on notes (sometimes as little as two pages for 75 minutes), frequently interrupted either by student questions or by probing questions from the professor.

There is a value to these “lectures.” First, while history certainly relies heavily on conceptual understanding, there also is an expectation that its students will have a grasp of a broad canon of events. A college graduate, for example, should know something about ancient Mesopotamia (one class), ancient Rome (three classes), the renaissance (two classes), etc. Time constraints impose certain limitations on the creative pedagogical approaches one can take. By the time one reaches the twentieth century, the Second World War and the shoah together “get” only one class.

Second, the “lecture” is only one part of the learning experience. Students are to have prepared for “lecture” by reading the assigned readings – consisting of textbook passages and historical documents – and by reviewing their own notes. In many ways, the purpose of the “lecture” is to provide students not with new information as much as with a framework for analysis and understanding what they have read.

Third, since “doing” history largely means analysis and reflection, this process has to be modeled. The application of logic to show connections is not something students can learn by doing problem sets or by completing experiments. It is best learned by having the professor make explicit his or her own thought process and by walking students through the analysis, then challenging them to do attempt the same by analyzing the documents.

Fourth, “lecture” serves a larger social purpose. Learning to listen for meaning or even just to pay attention for extended periods of time is not something that comes naturally; it must be trained. It cannot be acceptable to say that students today, if ever, do not possess the attention span necessary to follow a lecture. If that were true, then priests had better spend much more time in homiletics classes. More importantly, what will happen to the ability of students to appreciate and enjoy live classical music, theatrical performances and the like? Some of the best historians have had their lectures (now in the traditional sense) published; these are great works of intellectual insight that require the audience to pay close attention to the development of the logical argument.

We owe students the best preparation possible for their life after graduation, and our pedagogy must be one aimed at transferring ownership of learning, beginning in the freshman year. Also, it cannot be acceptable to say that we have to work with the students we admit and that these need more support than students elsewhere. It is true that our entering students often face great challenges to academic success, but that merely means we must provide them early on with the means to overcome those challenges by teaching them learning skills, not by continuously accommodating their challenges. To do otherwise would be to claim that our students, even with a Rivier education, cannot compete.

Finally, the success of this “lecture”-based pedagogy can be measured in a number of ways. Based on student evaluations, students appreciate “lectures” as long as the professor can convince students that he or she sincerely cares about the students and that he or she firmly believes in the importance of the discipline to the students’ lives. Finally, to return to the personal opening of this piece, students also have a keen sense of “phoniness” when a professor attempts a pedagogy that is alien both to him or her and to the discipline. Being authentic and true is what we want our students to be, so we must be that ourselves.

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