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On Teaching, Without Disciplines

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One of the many interesting posters from the weeks of revolt in Paris known as “May 68,” is a crude line drawing of a man pressing a folded cloth over the mouth of a smaller, obviously younger person next to text that reads: “Reformes – Chloroforme.” This is a useful image to keep in mind whenever reform is envisaged, promoted, or ordered. It reminds us that reforms can in some cases be used to stifle and put to sleep, as the student activists believed the proposed educational reforms of de Gaulle and his ministers were in fact doing. Real reform emerges out of alertness to the deep nature of a situation, an institution, a practice, and as the poster suggests, proof of the success of a reform is not a soporific state but a euphoric one.

In this short essay I want to make a suggestion for a small euphoric reform in the context of higher education. It emerges from my own experience at a university where the work of professors is presented to new faculty as being divided into three parts: research, teaching, and service. These three arenas are not weighted equally, however. The former is the weightiest, the latter the lightest, and the middle one simply acknowledged, although we quickly realize that it mostly melts into air. One is given to understand that research is what matters; research is what is rewarded and research success governs one’s progress up the mostly invisible hierarchy of respect. Teaching “success” is rarely if ever discussed; what matters most is not being a really bad teacher.

Of course, many professors would argue with this description. One often hears colleagues saying that teaching and research go hand in hand. I have heard many times that the classroom can be a place to “work out” one’s ideas before a captive and sometimes interested audience, before sending them to the important journals. I have come to think the opposite view might hold more water, that teaching and scholarship are incommensurate activities, practices which literally “do not sit at the same table.” I am not saying that their is no relationship between them, only that they are completely different from each other, and that a certain amount of fog has been generated by professors who in trying to make the best of an awkward situation, assert that they are seamlessly integrated.

We are at a point when the tension between these two activities has become acute, and that a clarification of their relationship would be invaluable for sorting out the multiple challenges to higher education. I would describe this tension as being between a research life defined by the structures, rewards, and constraints of an academic discipline, and a teaching life, for which a discipline is often an awkward and intrusive obstacle that separates a teacher from the activity of education. My concern, therefore, is to bring up yet again the place of disciplines within the project of education, and my reform is just a step in the direction of encouraging faculty to see themselves as something greater than as representatives of a discipline.

What is the big picture here? Post-secondary education is a system of undergraduate study in a discipline-defined major whose curriculum is delivered by a combined staff of professors and apprentice professors (graduate students) who present the essential techniques, theories, and practices of the discipline in a series of courses of increasing difficulty. In the context of a research
university, which as Louis Menand argues in *The Marketplace of Ideas* has been the model for nearly all postwar universities and that is increasingly the model for small colleges as well, research is grounded upon disciplines, which are the tectonic plates of knowledge, perpetually in motion but moving so slowly as to appear completely fixed and natural. The teaching of undergraduates takes shape from within and is delivered through disciplines. Administratively, the university is a collection of departments, which is the organizational form where both old disciplines like history and new interdisciplinary disciplines like Chicano Studies, are locally promoted and supported. The faculty who staff them pursue the slowly evolving pathways of disciplinary knowledge, which is constituted in ever widening national and international networks of colleagues, collaborators, and competitors. Menand notes how these research networks largely direct the attention of professors and graduate students away from their own institutions and towards the placeless and roving scholarly associations, journals, conferences, and meetings, where new research is presented, debates staged, and hierarchies and agendas hammered out.

Teaching, on the other hand–the kind of teaching tied to education in the Deweyan sense I am referring to here–is a one hundred percent *emplaced* activity. Teaching is a joint activity between teacher and students that emerges from considered and always evolving thought about exactly what it might mean to live in an “educated” society. A sense of what a well-educated society is, does not need the language of specialized disciplines but must draw from everyday experience. In other words, I am not suggesting that teachers work from a utopian vision; to the contrary, we can work with what we already know about the conduct, attitudes, and energies of the people we meet everyday–people who deliver packages to your door, fix the heating in your building, and make sure your teeth are clean and healthy–in order to build our projects of self-knowledge. A society is encountered singly as one moves from interaction to interaction, but collectively constituted and experienced, and without some vision or idea of what our collective life informed by education might be look like, it is next to impossible to get your bearings and find your place as a teacher.

The undergraduate classroom, then, needs to be a place where disciplines, rule-based, bounded zones of legitimated knowledge, are downplayed or set aside in the service of creating educational experiences that enable movement from one sense of self and society to a different, better one. When the overriding concern is education, then disciplines are at best invisible, and at worst awkward and inappropriate tools, the finger pointing at the moon rather than the encounter with the object that hangs so brilliantly in the sky. For example, disciplinary knowledge that reduces the phenomenon of personhood to the schematic descriptions of psychological theories, or the activity of human creativity and exchange into mathematical models describing a whole imaginary idea of “the economy,” do not begin to pull students into the project of understanding their own experiences. And yet these theories and models are taught because they are the currencies of disciplinary research, offered to young people in class after class as the substance of their learning.

The task, then, is to imagine how person-professors, conditioned for decades as disciplinary experts and practitioners, thinkers accustomed to promoting their discipline and to defending it when it is criticized by those in neighboring disciplines, can get back in touch with the impulses,
imperatives, and satisfactions of education. How can the practices of disciplinary training be reformulated to make accessible the profound educational processes and experiences that are at the heart being a person? Thinking of those forms of purely disciplinary teaching that do so little effective work, I am tempted to put this question in much stronger terms: how can we extract education from the stultification produced by indoctrination into disciplines?

I realize that these questions can be received as aggressive and condescending by professors for whom a tenured position in the professoriate is a significant achievement. But to me this response merely opens up another task: we professors, the most secure inhabitants of these revered but insecure institutions, must learn to view our own life stories differently, we must learn to tell different stories about ourselves and what is given to us as our success. We must separate our life story from its institutional infrastructure, stop seeing our CV as any meaningful record of a life. After all, we are under no compunction to defend our discipline or our department as something intrinsically valuable, that is, as valuable beyond questioning. No one is forcing us to take so seriously the sometimes ugly debates over who represents a discipline the best or whose work should be denigrated as not worthy of the discipline. We do this because largely because we become inhabited by the voices that assert that a disciplinary career is our highest calling. But is this so? Here we need only recall the vast indifference and echoing silence that meets the vast majority of scholarly publications in the humanities and social sciences; we are committed to careers because they allow us to perform our own importance before a tiny but psychologically powerful audience. There is of course nothing wrong with sharing one’s enthusiasm for obscure topics with distant others and with younger people who also have that interest. But that private pleasure cannot define one’s public purpose.

Finally to a concrete suggestion, a modest reform. Just as graduate students go through one final ritual at the end of their training called the “dissertation defense,” when they sit with their committee members who have advised them in the course of their research and writing, so too should professors periodically but frequently be required to “defend their teaching.” I don’t mean this in the medieval sense of defending one’s ideas before an audience of ostensibly hostile but actually indifferent critics, but more in the sense of what dissertation “defenses” have become, namely occasions for critical reflection and suggestive conversation. Professors should be able to give an account of themselves as educators, not researchers; they should be able to talk intelligently and articulately about the process and experiences of teaching—about, for example, the characteristics of the students they meet in their classes, their sense of how students learn, what skills students arrive with, what students seem to lack, and what students seem to fear, as well as about the obstacles, deficiencies, and struggles they experience as a teacher. Professors should be able to recall and think through those moments of educational success they have had, and think with colleagues about how to translate whatever worked for them into other contexts. Professors should be able to speak openly about their pedagogical experiments, failures and (re)discovered inadequacies and talents. Most importantly they should be able to explain just how they have come to deal with their discipline in the classroom.

This would involve much more than the occasional observation by colleagues of a single class in the context of promotion or merit review. Full time professors might be required every...
three years or to give a formal lecture or informal talk to their colleagues about the current state of their educational priorities and understandings. Performed in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, this would have many benefits, the most powerful of which would be the acquisition of a much more vivid sense of what is happening in the classrooms in the institution that you work within every day. It might help create a sense that your class, your subject, your approach does not exist alone in students’ minds, but actually resonates and interacts with other lowercase educational activities, that despite all evidence to the contrary, teaching in a university is in fact a collaborative, collective activity.

Of course, such a defense of teaching would be awkward and very troubling for many professors, both those who have long conceived their mission as delivering a discipline’s knowledge, and to those who want to find institutional support for their private fascinations, who want to live a pretty good life as a reader and writer of books and articles. And it would be difficult for those professors who have adopted the standpoint of disciplinary custodian and supervisor as the core of their personal identity, for example, who see their mission as sheltering and protecting their discipline from encroachment by politicians and administrators, because the point of this exercise as I have sketched it, is not to defend the teaching of a discipline, but to defend your teaching, your educational mission. This resistance would be yet another task to confront with patience and humility. In my experience such a “reform” would indeed be unprecedented. I know almost nothing about the teaching of the vast majority of my colleagues, aside from catching snatches of conversations in hallways and elevators about how a certain class is going, and aside from glimpses at syllabi left in the copier. It would take courage as well as a willingness to engage in a little risky self-examination.

And here professors might take cues from their colleagues in K-12 education, both in the mainstream, public and private schools, and on the fringes, in some charter and alternative schools. Many of these educators understand themselves as teachers first, and only distantly and dimly as disciplinary supervisors. Their examples could be studied, their strategies emulated. For what my colleagues in K-12 education convey to me most vividly when we “talk shop” is that they deal day in and day out with students in all their layeredness and multifacetedness. For example, they deal with them as newly desiring, alert sexual beings, as well as persons recognizing, judging, and struggling with the discovery that some parts of their worlds are maintained by flimsy and arbitrary rules and prescriptions. These teachers confront every day “discipline problems” that require close attention to the dilemmas families are going through as economic and family circumstances change. These problems are hard to ignore when students come to class sleepy from the inadequate rest they receive in a shelter or after a long bus ride from a distant neighborhood. The most skillful teachers I know jump minute by minute from role to role—friend, mentor, instructor, parent, modeler, questioner, critic, cheerleader, ironic commentator—as each student comes to school each day needing a different voice to hear and to listen to. These teachers can tell us so much about what it is to participate in the bringing up, the mutual forming of persons.

Yet it is also the case that by the time these students reach college most have learned to bottle up all this energy, this desire to learn, and to carefully ration out attention and effort as they move from school to work and back again, and as the frame “adult” is thrust upon them. What
happens in a college classroom must start from this recognition that students are conditioned to enter college focused on the task of learning how to leave it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Ultimately, though, the kind of teaching I am thinking about is a matter of our own, individual willingness to work with others to create some new experience of growth, both for ourselves and our students. Fortunately, this will is not hard to find. It emerges when we think in uncluttered moments about our most profound moments in the classroom. These are moments when the sheer energetic jolt of learning cannot be contained or controlled. Because every student will have different inclinations to react, one must keep moving— in any class, about any subject—from problems of time, to problems of self, to problems of society, to problems of interpretation, to problems of difference. This involves freeing oneself from the disciplinary object at hand, like “slavery” or “the way Congress works,” in order to discover all the ways that these academic subjects actually exist in students’ lives.

There is no single way to do this, of course. But a simple example might help. In an introductory level class about the history of the 20th century, a colleague and I take up the central theme of the “state.” But instead of a class that defaults to a history of international affairs, or worse, a retelling of American foreign relations, we are constantly and self-consciously changing the scale at which we are looking at the phenomenon of “the state.” In the course of a single class, we zoom out to the scale of populations, in order to stress the problem of how bounded states are and seek to be, but then in the next moment we might zoom in closely to the scale of individual lives and individual psychologies. This movement along different scales is of course also a movement across disciplinary problematics, from demography to psychology to sociology and back again. But I should stress that we are not switching back and forth from disciplinary languages, as if we were speaking French, then suddenly switching into Mandarin for the next ten minutes, only to jump to German. Rather we use a language appropriate to that particular scale in order to bring students into awareness that they too live on that scale, that they too walk beneath surveillance cameras and perhaps feel uneasy (or not) as drones destroy “evil-doers.” Our conviction is that our teaching must both be adequate to and correspond to the multiple powers of the state they experience every day.