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Teaching As Hospitality

Abstract

Looking at teaching as a form of hospitality (Nouwen, 1975), this essay explores the roles of teacher/host and student/guest. Drawing upon scripture, Wesleyan theology, insights from educational psychology, and personal experience, this article traces my journey from violent toward redemptive teaching. Balancing support and challenge in the classroom, a good host believes that her guests contribute to the learning process. She also desires the guests to see beyond their own experiences and assumptions to something deeper, developing perspectives more and more reflective of the Kingdom of God.

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Until the time I got sick watching a First-Aid movie in ninth grade, I thought I was going to be a nurse when I grew up. Since then I've discovered teaching as my calling; it's what God has wired me to do. I had taught English for seven years at the University of Kentucky and adult Bible studies for ten years in the local church before I discovered Henri Nouwen's interpretation of teaching as hospitality. His analogy presented me with a life-changing question: What would be different about your teaching if you thought of yourself as a *host* and of your students as *guests*?

Qualities of a Good Host

Thinking about hospitality may conjure up images of Martha Stewart or memories of reluctantly cleaning your room because company was coming. However, the more I thought about the good hosts in my life, the more I realized how intentionally they focused on making my visit enjoyable as well as beneficial. Grandma always asked in advance of our visits what kind of pie she should bake. This same Grandma decided I was too old to ask grown-ups to tie my shoes, plopped me up on the kitchen table, and started the lessons. At Thanksgiving Aunt Louise made sure our left-handed cousin was seated at the end of the table for elbow room. My mom still saves newspaper clippings about old friends in my hometown (even if they're obituaries). Clearly, each person created a supportive and challenging space with the guest in mind.

Friends in Mwimutoni, a small village outside Nairobi, Kenya, have taught me that good hosts believe receiving guests is an honor, a gift from God. They respond with kindness and generosity, often on a sacrificial level. Women carrying daily burdens beyond my comprehension meet early in the morning, bring treasures from each of their gardens, and begin cooking for their American guests. Taking sugar with milk-tea is a rare treat, yet sugar is always on hand during our visits to Mwimutoni. Pastors step aside from their pulpits and invite us to "bring a word" on Sunday morning. They ask because they know God is at work in the whole world and in all believers. Therefore, we will have something to offer their congregation. Nouwen would admire the Kenyans' practice of hospitality, as he affirms "a good host is the one who believes that his guest is carrying a promise he wants to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest" (1975, p. 87).

Believing their guests have value, good hosts listen. They are eager to hear

other people's stories, look at pictures, and ask questions that call for thoughtful reflection. Bad hosts push their own agendas. One time a friend and I stayed in a bed and breakfast where the owner told us not only where to shop, but what to buy. He also refused to fix the kind of tea I requested because he disliked it himself. "If you were a serious tea drinker, you would know that you only need a hint of flavor – try this!" His insistence created an awkward moment at the breakfast table, one that might remind us of an overbearing teacher who knew all the answers. Nouwen describes this kind of education as "violent" (1978, p. 5). All that is left for us to do is to reluctantly swallow the tea or regurgitate the "right" answers.

Motivation to Be Hospitable

What primarily motivated me to pursue this analogy for teaching was the model of Christ in the Gospels. For example, both in Luke 19 and John 4, Jesus hosts a life-changing encounter with two very unlikely people. Initially he assumes the guest role, as one who needs a place to eat supper or a drink of water. Then as he often does, Jesus turns the experience on its head and becomes a good host. What gifts could a tax collector and a Samaritan woman offer anybody? Still, Jesus approaches both with an expectant attitude, one that created a space where the man and the woman could ask tough questions, engage in respectful dialog, and face the truth about their lives. These two guests are transformed; not only that, but they impact others in the process of their own change.

A second motivation for my exploring hospitality in teaching is my Wesleyan background, emphasizing "faith formation for holiness of heart and life" (Matthaei, p. 19). Believing that God's life-long grace is at work in the students, I can expect them to contribute to the teaching-learning experience. In other words, hospitable teaching isn't just about me. Nouwen argues, "Teachers who can detach themselves from their need to impress and control, and who can allow themselves to become receptive for the news that their students carry with them, will find that it is in receptivity that gifts become visible" (p. 87). Their stories and insights are not just important or relevant; they are sacred. One question I always ask at the beginning of a new class is what each student plans on *giving* during our time together. Many of them have been passive receivers of one-way information for so long, that they have yet to consider what their presence might *add* to the class. Neither has it occurred to them that the teacher might actually learn from and along with them.

A third influence is my research in educational psychology. Flourishing in Christian education means more than acquiring new information; it means discovering and taking on a biblical, Kingdom of God worldview. What drew me to Transformative Learning Theory was its emphasis on adults developing new meaning perspectives from their experiences, engaging fuller,

better ways of seeing and doing life (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Cranton, 1994, 2006; Kegan, 1994; 2000). This model includes a trigger event or process; a safe, authentic community for personal and corporate critical reflection; and a facilitator. The mentor challenges learners to uncover personal assumptions, evaluate their validity, and make holistic changes as a result of their new insights. Reviewing and altering our mental maps is no small task; it takes courage. Kegan notes that “trans-*form*-itive learning puts the form itself at risk of change (and not just change, but increased capacity)” (2000, p. 49).

Edward Taylor reflects, “the practice of transformative learning, teaching for change, is an admirable approach to teaching and offers tremendous potential for growth among my students and myself as an educator, if I am willing to take some risks” (2006, p. 91).

Enthralled with the idea of connecting with students in meaningful ways, I rushed into a teaching opportunity, naively underestimating those risks.

The Reality

I did not initially experience hospitality-based teaching as idealistic or even rewarding. In fact, I found being a good host in the classroom messy, embarrassing, and too much work. In 1999, I was teaching my first on-line class for Asbury Theological Seminary, and I was hating it. Terribly disappointed with being assigned a computer course, I longed for a *real* class on campus, in a *real* room, with *real* people. To make matters worse, these students kept whining about not being able to follow my instructions or find the assignments. If this was typical behavior for graduate students clearly my expectations were too high. Without realizing it, I had begun to see the students as “poor, needy, ignorant beggars.” I quickly lost sight of them being “guests who honor the house with their visit and will not leave it without having made their own contribution” (Nouwen, p. 89).

As the weeks progressed it was obvious that the students were bonding with each other, but not with me. It was as if I were outside some invisible circle they had drawn in their electronic community. During a conversation with the Extended Learning (ExL) coordinator, she informed me that several of my students had been contacting her for help with my class. This was outrageous. After all, I teach people how to teach; I had received awards; I

well, I finally asked the coordinator for suggestions. She then posed a question that would transform my perspective as a teacher. “Have you ever looked at the course from the student’s perspective?” In our first years on the virtual campus what popped up on my screen differed significantly from what the students accessed through the Web.

So, one month into teaching my first on-line class, I pulled up “The Pastor and Christian Discipleship” to look at what the students were seeing. I was instantly lost. The icons were different colors than mine and located in

the opposite corners than I had described to students. My instructions made no sense whatsoever. In the language of Transformative Learning Theory, I had just bumped head-on into my “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991). The entire experience was so frustrating that I logged off, headed straight for my chocolate stash, and then called the coordinator (again).

“What do you think I should do? I’ve absolutely wasted these first four weeks of class.” She didn’t hesitate: “First, you need to apologize.” I was stunned. In all my own educational training, apologizing to students never surfaced as a topic of discussion. “Apologize?” To fill out this picture, you need to know that the class was currently studying Jesus’ incarnation approach to teaching – you know, one among and not one above; walking alongside his students instead of running ahead and looking back with disdain. Perhaps now you understand the extent of the situation’s irony and of my pride. I made some tea (the kind I like) and sat down at the computer with a heavy sigh. The typing and the apology began.

The way I was teaching the class had hindered learning, not encouraged it. My arrogant assumptions had also created distance and distrust between the students and me, a good host’s worst nightmare. We had lost precious time because I was convinced the students were clueless. Focusing only on the content I wanted to cover left little room for the students and me to learn as a Christian community. Palmer describes hospitality in education as “receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas, with openness and care. To be inhospitable to strangers or strange ideas, however unsettling they may be, is to be hostile to the possibility of truth; hospitality is not only an ethical virtue, but an epistemological one as well” (1983, pp. 73-74). I had failed on both counts. So I told my guests that I was sorry, and I meant it.

What I experienced the days and weeks following was forgiveness, expressed in gracious messages and instant inclusion into the community the students had formed. While I knew the course content best; my guests understood the medium through which it was being conveyed so much better than I ever would. From that moment on, I began asking them for help in organizing the class. They improved CD511 beyond what I ever could have accomplished on my own. My guests did have something to offer, and I was finally ready to receive their gifts.

Once I used this story as an example of servanthood in an adult Sunday school class. A longtime university professor spoke up, “I just wouldn’t be comfortable with that. You’re the teacher, the sole authority in that room.” I laughed and confessed that I wasn’t comfortable with apologizing either; God wouldn’t let my personal comfort be the issue. Apologizing was the right thing to do in my situation. I had discovered that being a good host meant, among other things, being a good servant – humble and well aware of my limitations.

The Journey

While Jesus taught with authority, he also taught within the context of respectful relationships. He created space for his guests to become who they were originally intended to be as sons and daughters of God. This is my deepest desire as a Christian educator. In practical terms that means along with anchoring my teaching in biblical foundations and Wesleyan theology, I'm also going to make good use of the tools social science has to offer.

If I'm convinced that the students on my roster each semester are God-sent guests, then I will intentionally create learning experiences that honor their unique personalities, intelligences (Gardner, 1993), and learning preferences (Kolb, 1984). This translates into more work for me: preparing informative lectures; planning group discussions, field experiences, and projects; interjecting poetry, music, film, and even (perish the thought) power point slides. Teaching in ways that "capture a student's strengths," also requires me to lay down my own insecurities and serve in authentic, prayerful ways (LeFever, 1995). Each of these tools can facilitate learning through *support* and through *challenge*. One responsibility of the teacher is to help guests see new things or even see familiar things differently (Daloz, 1999). The teacher ushers (hosts) students through initial conflict and even denial, into reflection that leads to deeper, fuller, more faithful perspectives.

When I present this hospitality analogy in my discipleship classes, seminary students struggle with it. They struggle because of our thin, entertainment-oriented perceptions of hospitality. But their objections to this model of teaching also reveal their fears (as well as mine). Usually it's not the student-as-guest connection that ruffles feathers. Instead, when considering shifting from teacher to host, students worry about forfeiting their power. We then evaluate what students assume will be lost in this hospitality-based teaching/learning process, and what will be gained. "If I serve my students as a host, won't I lose their respect? Does this mean I'm not responsible for presenting accurate, significant content? So I'm just supposed to chuck my outline and cater to the students' every whim? They need to know certain things; I need to tell them what those things are, right?" At this point, it's crucial for us to reexamine what the redemptive, responsible use of power in the classroom means. Not having experienced redemptive teaching doesn't excuse us from exploring it as a God-honoring way to facilitate learning.

Hospitality in the classroom continues to be messy and awkward for me at times, but also faithful, rewarding and worth the risks. One of my former students gave me some desk notes that read: "Hospitality is making your guests feel at home, even if you wish they were." There are days when I wish my students would go home so I could revert to autopilot, teaching the way I learn best. Thankfully, those days are rare. Looking back on that first on-line disaster, I now realize I was the poor beggar, not the students. At the time,

my assumptions kept me from being able to host them well, so they gave me the gift of being forgiven. Their hospitality not only made me a better teacher, it made me a better Christian.

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| JOHN DEWEY | | |
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| | Traditional Education | Progressive Education |
| Subject Matter | Information/Skills From Past | Information/Skills Related to Experience |
| Moral Training | Standards/Rules Of Conduct | Self Discipline That Emerges In Freedom |
| Educational Setting | Authoritative, Static, Private | Open, Contextual, Public |
| Teaching Objective | Prepare For Future Success | Full Advantage of Present Life |
| Teacher Role | Connect Students To Books | Shape Experiences Of Growth and Balance |
| Student Attitude | Docile, Receptive, Obedient | Inquisitive, Engaged, Creative |
| <p>— John Dewey, <i>Experience and Education</i> (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997 [1938]), 17-21</p> | | |