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Why Professors Hate Their Jobs: A Critique of the Pedagogy of Academic Disengagement

By Jim Parsons, William Frick

Summary

This co-author article discusses the disengagement that exists between today's professors and their students in the classroom. This article in particular really took an interactive approach by including our journals reviewer's comments, which adds for a great dynamic of communication between college students and professors in the academic world.

Introduction

Recently, a PhD student from the University of Alberta completed a dissertation about the lives of professors. Her findings? We are a deeply unhappy group; specifically, we hate our jobs. She was shocked. Dreaming of an academic position of her own, and seeing the completion of her doctoral dissertation as one of the final steps of this dream, she thought that her dreams would be shared by her soon-to-be colleagues. But, of the professors she interviewed, only two said they liked being an academic. Most felt caught, trapped, unappreciated, and powerless to find joy for their spirits. Her interviews were filled with commentary about academic life that offered little hope and much despair. In fact, deep regret and cynicism pervaded these conversations. Her participants felt caught and had little idea how to get uncaught. Her findings, if they are to be trusted, suggest that we are a hope-less lot, deeply cynical, feeling broken and battered. Perhaps most sad, we don't know how to make our



lives better; and, we feel like there is no time to get off the treadmill and try (Erfani, 2006).

Perhaps our young colleague created an aberration, but we think not. Our own experiences, coupled with wide conversations with our colleagues, suggest she accidentally found a flaw in our armor and an illness in our spirits. We feel it around us, and we also fear we are less than adequately prepared to fend off this erosion to our own immune systems. Although we have few answers, we hope this article, in a naïve way, might engender a conversation about this topic as a way of engaging the specter directly. Our work together is an attempt to find a process that, by its nature, addresses some of the issues we will raise. In addition to dialoguing with each other as we have engaged this work, our work has been shared with reviewers engaged in the adjudication of articles for this journal. The reviewers' comments, in themselves, represent additional conversations generated by colleagues interested in this topic. Specifically, in addition to necessary critique of our ideas, these reviewers suggested

additional readings they believed would add to our knowledge; and, in our “academic negotiations” towards publication of our ideas in an article for this journal, we have used their suggestions and insights to push our work further. At its basic level, our work together as writers and reviewers is one communicative aspect of academic journals – a conversation between working colleagues. In light of this focus on engendering a conversation around the current state of the professorship, we have chosen to include some reviewer comments within the article as a way to collectively engage the specter we sense so deeply within ourselves.

Before we begin, we hope to outline our task transparently. Because we are working toward understanding through communication, we will use Habermas’ (1984) four kinds of claims to validity as our guide. Habermas notes that presenters must (a) present something understandable (semantics and grammar); (b) give the hearer something to understand [speak the truth about a situation external to both us (speakers) and you (hearers)]; (c) make oneself thereby understandable (make our claims to truthfulness so as we become trustworthy); and (d) come to an understanding with another person (a claim for “normative rightness” by choosing something that fits within the framework of social norms forming the background to the interpersonal situation). This fourth claim to validity seems particularly powerful to us, because by its enacting we are attempting in our small way to work towards a solution to the problem of which we speak. And, here is the cart before the horse. Basically, we believe that the best way to overcome what we see as a culture of disengagement is to engage with each other socially and truthfully about it.

This article is an attempt to explore what we see as a sad state of affairs. What seems doubly sad to us is the irony of it all: the jobs we have are the jobs we aspired for, and this is the work we hoped would be both intellectually and socially stimulating. Why we should

come to despair in this work is worth considering publicly. Certainly, there are pragmatic reasons: most of us find ourselves in direct collegial competition for what seem like finite resources – research monies and yearly increments. Plus, the work can be difficult and lonely (no one we know evaluates and critiques students’ work at the pub as a social event), and the will wanes. There is the drudgery of grading the same paper dozens of times. In the lonely spirit of Don Juan, our writing and research articles can seem like so much piecemeal – a sort of Dickens’ morality drama where we feel we are dragging more chains than Jacob Marley.

We noted that our thinking (on paper) is both nascent (to us) and quite possibly naïve in the appraisal of others, and we our colleagues have told us so. But we wish things were different, and we hope beginning this discussion might be a forum to help. Here is our hope: we believe underneath the surface of these dis-eased activities are deeper afflictions – one that a hopeful pedagogy might help. We are going to, in this article, theorize that we are living in a world (the academy) – which is, in fact, a logical system where the current activities and the beliefs of academics are both symptomatic and expressive of a pedagogy and a philosophical culture that centers on the politics of disengagement and leaves academics on the whole with an overwhelming angst that approaches nihilism – where there is nothing to act upon and, even if there were, we feel powerless to act. We will address this lack of efficaciousness by intersecting two areas of inquiry and practice: pedagogy and philosophy.

An Apologetic about Pedagogy

We believe we have been schooled into this culture of disengagement and we seem to believe the desks are fixed to the floor. We use the concept “pedagogy” to explain this culture because we believe it has been a part of our

schooling – it has been leading us. And, we will contrast a pedagogy of disengagement with another pedagogy we will call a pedagogy of engagement. We understand these concepts to be both simple and perhaps provocative. Yet, we hope that our simplistic and exploratory article might help to engender a deeper conversation about the lives we live in the academy. Should we be able to begin this conversation, we believe that we will have moved a step toward engendering a healing missive that might help us thoughtfully attend to our own positive ends. We are also reminded that pedagogy can be understood in a variety of ways – from public policy discourse that contains particular ideological perspectives designed to influence popular opinion to institutional and organizational practices and structures that serve educative purposes and, by doing so, socialize and normalize participants.

In our attempt to question fundamental assumptions, we trust Alfred North Whitehead (1925) who, in *Science and the Modern World*, noted that those who critique a culture should not attend to intellectual positions that historians feel it necessary explicitly to defend. More important for a deep understanding of a culture are those fundamental assumptions that adherents of the systems unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming. Indeed, they do not know they are assuming anything because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them. In this article, we are trying to put things “another way” so that we might come to understand the culture of the academy as a world of myth, hegemony, and conflict.

The world of the academy is a “secondary world,” in the sense that the Middle Earth is, for Tolkien, a secondary world. It is a mythopoeia. The *sine qua non* of creating myths is that a world can resemble another world, but not really be that other world – a world mirrored through the looking glass. And, in

many ways, for those of us who live there, the academy is the academy and the rest (the non-academy) is the Muggle world. There is a clearly demarcated wholeness to the academy – it possesses an internal logic and self-consistency. It has its own peculiar rules that shape the lives of those who live and work there; and, it is these rules we are attempting to critique because we believe these rules are growing toxic to its inhabitants. Perhaps, to extend the metaphor, we are writing this article as a self-defense against the Dark Arts.

Contrasting Pedagogies

There are Jeremiads¹ and there are invitations to act differently. We hope ours is the latter. Invitations to act differently come in all cultures. Islam is short on theology and long on practice, believing for example that prostrating one’s self and giving alms will habituate edifying patterns of actions towards others. The story of the first Christmas, angels announced the birth of the “Child” and, by doing so, invited humans to a responsibility to live differently. This same onus is alluded to in the Japanese expression of thank you – which translated means, almost literally “it is a heavy weight you give to me.” We feel a similar need to create an enabling myth that calls academics to participate in some disruptively positive changes to our prevailing culture.

We are calling for all of us to work through, as Pope John Paul II calls it, a “philosophy of action.” This philosophy of action obliges us to create and express a vision for a pedagogy of engagement. The vision demands something of us, as teachers and academics, and attests to the moral courage required to understand our work as precondition, means, and

¹ A Jeremiad is a long literary work (almost as long as Freddie Mercury’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”), prose or poetry, in which the author laments the state of society and its morals in a serious tone of sustained invective. Usually, the work contains a prophecy of society’s imminent downfall. We aspire through our missive to be more hopeful.

end to a fulfillment of human purpose. To help us define this pedagogy of engagement, we ask this guiding question: What are people for? And, we answer that, to us, there is no mystery: We are for each other in community (Berry, 1990).

To help a reader understand what we mean by the concept pedagogy of engagement, we contrast our idea with what we will call a “pedagogy of disengagement.” In their simplicity, these phrases appear to us to represent distinct paradigms and, as ideas, become helpful to deconstruct the tenets of individual philosophical positions about the nature of teaching and the corresponding purposes of an academic life. What is the goal of teaching? Our answer is that teaching is a way of life based in community (teachers and students together) and invokes a pedagogy based on relational sharing rather than hierarchical (or status-imbued) pronouncing. The end is a holistic shared life in community; it is not the rescue of students from ignorance. Teaching finds its full meaning in a community of relationship, reconciliation, and justice. And as the reviewers of this article have made clear, justice is an elusive idea. We acknowledge this insight, especially as it pertains to the teaching context. Although we speak of justice (and injustice), we are guided by notions of justice as emancipation, not only for our students but for ourselves. This notion of justice as emancipation will hopefully be evident to the reader.

Education and Schooling

Paulo Freire (2007) would tell us that teaching, in addition to sharing, is a vocational opportunity to raise critical consciousness for the learner. The teacher, in community with others, practices so as to mobilize persons, to free persons from domination and oppression – to set learners on a different life-course because of newly-acquired thinking, attitudes, skills and dispositions. Teaching, then, finds its full

meaning in a community of liberated (broadly construed) persons who have dedicated themselves to reconciliation, justice (broadly construed), discourse, mutual dependence, collective interests beyond the limited parameters of individual and/or collective identity, and peace. And peace, as Howard John Loewen (1985) tells us, is a transformational grammar.

That we would place so much importance on how we educate each other might seem odd, but as Hodgkinson (1991) tells us, “Education is something very special in the field of human affairs” (p.15). Assuming a constellation of purposes and instilled with idealistic faith, “education has about it a...humanistic quality which renders it distinctive and special among the occupations of [humanity]” (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 23). The purposes of education and schooling as a formal institution in particular, are rooted in human desires and values. As an institution, schooling “seeks to serve...its clientele by altering the world in such a way as to realize those values” (p. 26) and, as such, education broadly conceived, formal schooling in general, and teaching in particular becomes a humanistic, idealistic, and moral pursuit.

Schooling is special (*unique*) because, compared to other social institutions that exist to ensure a primary purpose rooted in value, schooling encompasses a constellation of humanistic values ranging from aesthetic happiness, to ideological transmission, to instrumental economic gain. Education is, in one sense, “the most general human pursuit” (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 27) centering its work on the basic value of fulfillment, and itself a precondition to the fulfillment of other human purposes. “It is this all-inclusive quality that makes education so special” and posits it with a relevance to all aspects of the human condition (Hodgkinson, 1991, p, 27).

By way of schooling, students are inducted into the beliefs, values, customs, and cultural tools of our particular society; depend upon it for their economic livelihood; and acquire

from its appreciations and sentiments that contribute to our quality of life. The endeavor is profoundly moral. Hence, because the enterprise is so special, or uniquely moral, teaching and leading for the enterprise is special as well. It is a “moral art” (Hodkinson, 1991).

Differences between Pedagogies of Engagement and Pedagogies of Disengagement

The distinction between these pedagogies rests profoundly in one simple critique: how do we treat others? Note that others are always implied in our critique. To us, education is a vocation that implies one’s actions with others – in some way or form. Ergo, it is in how we engage the other(s) that defines our pedagogical actions. That said, we associate words, characteristics, or characterological virtues such as compassion, empathy, respect, humility, openness, and dialogue with a pedagogy of “engagement.” In dialogues of both words and actions, we associate words, characteristics, or characterological virtues such as pity, monologue, arrogance, exclusivism, and intrusion with a pedagogy of disengagement.

“Disengagement” assumes imposition, patronization, paternalism, and cultural arrogance that results in ignorance (we ignore others’ needs and persons) and presumption (we presume to know and understand others’ needs and persons). Such acts, in both cases, might be undertaken for noble intentions. But, regardless of how well-intended the actions might be, the “intentionality²” of the actions creates the philosophy of how we relate to others. “Engagement” assumes dialogical possibility, active gratitude, transformation through community (common unity), and loving emancipation.

Disengagement

² We will discuss the difference between intentionality and acts with intention later in the article.

When we speak to our graduate students, they seem to have few complaints; and, when we recall our own graduate education, we recall caring mentors and supervisors. That said, when we look back at what happens to our students and what happened to us (the totality of our experience), we see that something else has also concomitantly occurred; we learned to accept the world of the academy as “normal” and to fit into our tasks there without critique – without a sense of this culture having the potential for domination. We will explicate this culture more specifically later; suffice it to say, we believe a pedagogy of disengagement has sharply increased recently based in large part upon an institutional culture of domination.

When Jim, who has been an academic staff member at the University of Alberta since 1976, speaks with his aging colleagues at the University of Alberta, they often fall into “Camelot talk,” recalling the glory days of their Department and reveling in how things “used to be³” and, of course, are no longer. And, there is honesty in this talk – things are less collegial now than they were 30+ years ago⁴. We believe that the difference lies in the

³ It was not uncommon, in the mid-1970s to all have coffee together twice a day – 10:30 am and 2:30 pm. When one person moved, almost every young professor met to help. Weekends were spent together in families. Christmas parties of whole Departments were held in rented halls with 300+ attendees, with singing and comedy and talent shows. Obviously, other things have occurred to change these social communities; but, we attest that some of the things that have happened to reshape these events and this convivial attitude have to do with things outside of society’s sociological occurrences. We believe some things are systemic – competition for what seem like finite research dollars; strong personal competition for salary and promotion; and an academic culture driven by less than convivial philosophical groundings – and the things that go with that [such as a personal lack of efficacy and fullness that makes us, shall we say, edgy (on edge)].

⁴ We do, however, believe that those graduate student supervisors who acted in ways characterized by the old idea are no longer in the main. The saying was, at

relationship between colleagues and the relationship between being an academic and the tasks of teaching, research, and other knowledge-building activities.

A dichotomy of life is characterized in graduate school education (learning and teaching). One can become a scholar and, at the same time, become a “true believer” in the culture; one can learn from research⁵, and can learn to be a researcher - including the hierarchical rules that place one over others – competition for publication in the “right” journals, acceptance of a finite amount of material resources (competition for funding), competition for salary increments and promotion based upon “productivity” – all can become clearly conformed to a paradigm of disengagement. Now we talk about our “heroes” by noting that “she was published in that journal” or “he just received a huge research award.” These are our icons; but, is their work edifying anyone – including themselves? Two cases in point: (1) conversations with colleagues, especially throughout the US, note the difficulty of gaining tenure and a common (n of a few) theme – “I worked so hard to gain tenure, and after I got it I quit working” and (2) a “confession” (although meant as sound strategy) from an icon, who stated “I try, every two years, to get one article published in ... (enter the name of an important journal here). That is the only article I write. I could publish more, but I know the game. I quit doing research I was interested in and started to figure out a year ahead what topic would be ‘hot’.” To us, this person seems more sad than

least at the University of Texas, “The first paper the graduate student publishes contains the name of the supervisor only; the second paper has the supervisor’s name as main author and the graduate student as second author; the third has the graduate student as main author with the supervisor second; and, finally, the fourth paper contains only the graduate student’s name as single author.

⁵ It is profound how deeply philosophical research foundations can lead us – engaging notions of epistemology, axiology, and ontology. There is a lifetime of work explicating this area.

happy – strategy has replaced the joy of discovery and creation. Are we teaching our graduate students to thrive in a pedagogy of disengagement and, perhaps more disturbing, to accept and believe this is the way academic life should be lived⁶?

The disengagement of which we speak takes many forms. For example, in our own institutions it would be hard to argue against the growth in self-assertion, self-protection, formational separations, isolation, alienation, self-repression of thought, lack of space and time to engage in shared ideas, and lack of agency directed toward impulses toward community. We see a self-centered core as a basis of our human activities and the organizational politics writ individually on human actions. For example, it is not uncommon to hear honestly thoughtful professors strategizing to “capture” for them what seem like finite resources and rewards – as manifested in research grants and annual increments toward salary. A first-year education professor recently noted recently he had declined a chance to work with teachers in schools because his job was to “think and write theoretically, and engage in his own theoretical research” – which he implied was research done while being sequestered on campus, clearly outside the more common (vulgar) activities of teachers and students in schools.

Or, at a recent presentation, a first-year professor critiqued her student teacher for not being able to see the systemic and structural inequities present in the classroom and for only wishing to engage in conversation about the student teacher evaluation. The professor’s critique was based upon a theoretical frame-

⁶ Pope John Paul II would probably suggest that the antipathy here would stem from people choosing lower values over higher values. His philosophical work outlining values hierarchies suggests that lower values (such as materialism) are finite and conflicts over these lower values exist, in part, because of their finite nature. If I get this resource, you cannot. On the other hand, a higher value (such as conviviality or community) has no limits – that is we all can enjoy as much of it as we desire without denying that others experience it as well.

work which posited that meaning resided entirely in language and who failed to see she was engaging a culture (schools) where meaning did not lie in language, but in action. We are not arguing that this colleague was not well-meaning. But her manner was condescending and ignored the very idea of cultures she was engaging theoretically. She was watching a “student teacher” (where does language live in this nouned concept?) and this student teacher could only seem to focus on her own performance and could not seem to see the structural violence perpetrated on the class by patterns of behavior. What seems grossly unfair about this “story” is that the colleague did not seem to recognize the system of structural blindness perpetrated by the system of scrutiny and evaluation inherent in how the university constructed the visit in the first place – and the student teachers’ fatalistic codependence upon that system: “You are sitting in my class, making notes. Now you are sitting me down to talk seriously about me – this must be about my performance. After all, you were an audience to me – with the students, you faced only me, watching, noting, and ‘judging’. Now you will talk to me, and I know exactly the text and context of this talk – what else could be happening here? What else can this be but performance anxiety? Who are you kidding that this is about whether I saw any structural oppression of students? I was teaching about adverbs.”

Certainly, at the same time, many of these same thoughtful people decry hypocritical activities of others or spend time academically analyzing the complex adaptive nature of human and natural systems. This critique is not “to throw the first stone” at these young professors, but instead to blame us all who have lived in the academy. It is also to explain the complexity of the issues that face us. We didn’t mean for all this to happen; but something did happen rather quickly to us in the past thirty years, and the happening is powerfully consumptive. Thus, we engage in “per-

sonal university” activities – though separate from the discourse of our academic knowledge – that help build ideologies that rationalize a certain kind of poverty of spirit and a systemic “legalism” that enforces a socioeconomic order that can, and does, entrap us.

The university is hardly a simple institution, and the academy is a complex concept⁷. Both university and academy are filled with “office,” hierarchy, rewards and punishments, spirits and ghosts, institution, ideology, icons, religious belief, and tradition. We encounter these in slogans, symbols, and the ways we organize our social and our work activities. These define and dictate the modes of our cultural patterns and relationships. They define, for us, justice, wisdom, social values, the meaning of humanity, the status and roles of individuals, and the nature of our interactions. They provide us rationalization for our social orders. In short, they dominate because they form a system of domination we seldom think to challenge.

Although this system is a human construct, it is not always a conscious human construct; yet, it inevitably instructs us and serves as a basis for a pedagogy of disengagement. Here, the system as academy behaves immorally (Niebuhr, 1932), while singular souls within it struggle, and often fail (even of their own doing), to find another way to seek and live out a pedagogy of engagement that ultimately leads to hope. The systematic domination defines us a human actors – it takes on a life, identity, set of goals, and a dynamic all its own.

We have argued that a pedagogy of disengagement inhibits those of us who work in the academy. The inhibitors we have seen include (1) fatalism (no matter what is done, the end is determined); (2) depression of spirit (an underlying discouragement about life); (3) self-

⁷ Were we further in our analysis, we would probably be more fastidious in making sure that when we use the term *university* we use it to mean the place/site of our work, and when we use the word *academy* we use it to mean the conceptual idea of that site. But, early in our work we are not quite sure what to choose.

deprecation (believing oneself a loser who is unable to function in the culture); (4) a sense of powerlessness resulting from internalized oppression (one comes to believe and act as if the “oppressor’s beliefs and values express a reality that must be lived); (5) structures and values that have created a hegemony (we are unable to visualize options to our actions and lives); and, (6) self-centered fear that justifies deceitful and manipulative behavior (if we don’t out-produce, cheat, violate, or win over others, we will suffer).

Engagement

We believe many of us are wounded and live in a wounded system. We would like to suggest a different path, to take initiative in this wounded world, and to work to reconcile its violent, unjust, and abusive patterns. Our goal is to introduce a life of engagement as a real human possibility, as a truly new paradigm or the return of an old paradigm⁸. This paradigm of “enculturalization” can become the goal of teaching. By enculturalization, we mean the process of passing, from one generation to another generation, through formal education and broader socialization, the chosen aspects of a “life,” a life lived out in relation to the learner. This process works to integrate cultural characteristics in intended or accidental

⁸ We once read that Immanuel Kant would nightly dine with his graduate students, and during these evenings talk, play games, and take walks. Regardless of what one thinks of Kant’s philosophy, he obviously had a graciousness of spirit (or, in those days, an accommodating wife). We suspect, using the is/ought cosmology, that these graduate students also learned from these occasions about how life was and should be. It is not hard, as well, to find readings where the begetting of academics: for example, Jeffrey (2004) notes the work of Franz Brentano and indicates that Edmund Husserl was one of Brentano’s students who criticized and developed Brentano’s work; Edith Stein was one of Edmund Husserl’s students, whose work was influenced by Husserl; and that Dietrich von Hildebrand studied with Husserl, developing his thought in important ways. The point is that we don’t seem to live this way anymore.

ways through prolonged socialization within the bounds of a distinct cultural context. In other words, we are always teaching more than we are teaching – our systems speak as loudly as our words. The moral enterprise then becomes as, Louis Lutzbetak’s (1963) applied anthropology notes that, cooperation, rather than manipulation, works to influence a society’s pattern of behavior.

The value of community – or common unity – is shared “people-centered” activity. It is much easier to dominate and control. When only one voice speak, there is great external clarity. But clarity is not the goal of teaching; transformation, in our view, is the goal of teaching (Mezirow, 2000). A teacher must be “catalytic.” As chemists tell us, a catalytic agent induces a change without confounding or altering the molecular structure of the host elements.

Catalysis is the process of modification or releasing the host elements from inhibitive structures that act as obstructions; by doing so, *ultimately but indirectly*, one induces intrinsic changes in the host elements. The “inhibitive structures” of life are manifold, and teaching’s highest moral pursuit is to both modify and release the learner from domination. The transformative teaching life that is engagement is one keenly aware. As Vaclav Havel (1985) tells us, a better system does not automatically ensure a better life. In fact, he suggests, only creating a better life can develop a better system. Or put differently by the patriarchs:

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Dialogue is a method of social catalysis. First, it is an ideal. Second, it is a relationship. Only third is it an activity. And this activity is a common unity open and respectful of partnership – a partnership implied by Habermas’ (1984) four claims to validity we noted earlier.

The goal of a teacher is to help awaken the students to possibilities within their reach. One step is working together to eliminate unjust structures that are hegemonic within a culture, and replacing these with an alternative consciousness. The work must be done, in the Freirian sense, within a dialogical construct and organization – given to extended blocks of time. Dialogue, understood as such, becomes the transformative tool of the fully-present teacher. John Dewey (1938) noted that the means contain and condition the ends. Therefore, the centrality of dialogue as means becomes the Habermasian discourse where the moral and ethical (in part) is determined by the interactive process between persons. As an activity, it encourages the literacy of possibilities.

In a transformative paradigm, human intervention is indirect and vicarious. It is indirect in the sense that we cannot go into a situation with a set of pre-constructed solutions that we impose on the situation. It is vicarious in the sense that we must become partners with those whom we would seek to serve as guides and facilitators of dialogical space. We, as teachers, serve our students.

As servants, we must take upon ourselves the basic cultural identity of those whom we would serve. We must incarnate our work with stories and cultures that our students understand. Then, we must participate together with the goal of creating an engaged and reconciled community. Aristotle ~334-323 BCE (1989) noted that humans are social animals distinguished by rationality. Though philosophers through the ages have worked to discount Aristotle, in at least one sense Aristotle is correct. Social cooperation, based on friendship and mutual self-interest, is rational – in that it makes sense when you consider it. As we engage the culture, and the learners within it, we need to view it emically – from the inside – rather than imposing foreign cultural norms and meanings from the outside as an immediate basis of judgment. We must also

note that we are part of that culture. To put it simply, to act vocationally as a teacher we need a pedagogy of engagement that implies “consideration of” the presence of others.

A Critique of Philosophy

We believe that one reason academics are unhappy is because their lives are lived embedded within philosophies that do not allow the possibility of efficacious agency. That is, we are critiquing those late 20th century and the early 21st century philosophies that seem to have captured our minds while simultaneously chaining us to often-unexamined fundamental values. These values grind our ethical action to a halt. As simply as we can state it, seldom are there ethical places to go from neither these philosophies nor little reason to try. We believe that at the heart of current educational philosophies, such as some writers in complexity science and some branches of critical theory, are the beliefs that humans are not agents, cannot be willful in making change, and cannot be involved in “human acts”. We can only be involved in “actions that happen to humans.” Agency disappears with the post-structural deconstruction of any morally imbued meta-narrative.

For example, postmodern and post-structural thought has led to increasingly declaim ideological commitments about the value of meta-narratives. Consider the ontological relationship between concepts of personal narrative (which allow an intrinsic human telos) and their groundings in meta-narratives. Is it possible to have personal narratives without meta-narratives? How does an “actor” come to gain a sense of purpose (divine or otherwise, and what sense of purpose lacks divinity?) that constitutes movement towards creating a personally meaningful human life?

There is general agreement that social and technological changes of the 20th and now 21st century were born of modernist temper but paradoxically eroded key modernist assump-

tions, particularly those regarding personal agency, personal value, and instrumental reason. Feminist scholars (e.g., Luepnitz, 1988) have added their own critique of implicit paternalism that works to reestablish power hierarchies without considering disparities experienced between women and men. Many critical philosophies have engaged extensive debates about the nature of power hidden within accepted practices. Post-structural “life” has rejected meta-narratives on ideological grounds, suggesting that broad understandings embraced by a culture that form inherited contexts and meanings should give way to more particular narratives that individuals may tell about their cultures and about themselves.

Writings by critics such as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979/1984) and Michel Foucault (1980) have gone hand-in-hand with a belief in social constructionism that questions many established and comfortable ideas. Anderson (1997) suggests that postmodern thought represents a broad challenge to and a cultural shift away from fixed meta-narratives, privileged discourses, universal truths, objective reality, language as representational, and the scientific criterion of knowledge as objective and fixed. Whether these are true or not true (ironically) is not our point: instead, our point is that these critiques are uncomfortable spaces to live – hope and purpose is disrupted.

So, when Lyotard (1979/1984, p. xxiv) defines the postmodern temper as “incredulity toward metanarratives” and Foucault (White & Epston, 1990) talks of “privileged discourses,” we are left uncomfortable in the wake of this accusation that seems to point directly to us. Basically we know that society allows the ivory-towered academy (and those of us who live there) to exist and engage in the modernist temperament of engaging in privileged discourse. Furthermore, consider where the postmodern narrative of “social constructionism,” as defined by the following all but universally accepted four ideas, really puts us: (1) realities are socially constructed; (2) realities

are constituted using language; (3) realities are organized and maintained using narrative; and (4) there are no essential truths. One might be tempted to cynically ask: if there is no essential truth and we are left to socially construct our own realities, why can’t we seem to construct a reality that makes us happy?

Our theorizing is not utilitarian, nor do we presuppose that the “facts” we describe are valueless. Instead, we espouse a set of values and the normative conclusions that arise from those said and described facts, based upon what we see as a chasm between “is” and “ought.” We also believe that our facts (what we know) already contain our values. We believe this is true of the entire academy, which will make the quest to reclaim a greater presence with our vocations all that much more difficult. Similar to pragmatists such as Richard Rorty (1991), we believe there is a social construction to the knowledge in which we live and work and that we have had a hand in this construction. We also believe that this is why the quest to reclaim a greater engagement with our vocations is even possible.

This stance, and the knowledge claims that assess action *in situ*, is inherently ethical. The stance is ethical because it recognizes and elevates human agency. Our desire to explain might put us out of step with many colleagues, but we believe that drawing word pictures of the issues will help us understand our difficulties. Like Sokolowski (2000), we believe that “the core doctrine in phenomenology is the teaching that every act of consciousness we perform and every experience that we have is intentional: it is essentially ‘conscious of,’ or an ‘experience of’ something or other” (p. 8). We are then saying that intentional acts of engagement will help us improve our work.

We are also saying that there is intentionality to the philosophies in which we engage. Intentionality is the general orientation of consciousness toward objects. Daniel Dennett (1997) suggests that intentionality has an in-

voluntary and we suggest learned (even though that learning might remain unconscious) element. Intentionality is the way our minds simply (and without conscious meaning to) focus on the thousands of things that happen to us every day – the common ways we live in our world.

Sokolowski (2000) suggests that involuntary intentionality makes our minds “public,” because this intentionality connects us to things in the social world and allows us to explore how things are revealed to us in structures that shape consciousness. In other words, what we believe without conscious acts of the will essentially shapes how we react to our social world. Going back to Whitehead (1925), these are the things we take for granted. Our point is that, if we engage the social world essentially as victims (“acts that happen to humans”) and things happen to us without connection to our ability to shape them, the acridness of victimhood comes to overwhelm us in a deep psychological cynicism, from which there is no escape and no rational choice except to become deeply unhappy.

Because we believe we socially construct our world, the knowledge that proceeds from construction always has intentionality. It shapes us. In Thomistic terms, operation follows being.⁹ Our conscious actions originate in our persons. Our being is needed because, without it, we fall victim to the “subjectivism and relativism” characterizing much of modern philosophy (Jeffreys, 2004, p. 42). This subjectivism finds itself grounded in a sort of solipsism of self-evident individuality. That is, we live in a system that expects us to act, as academics, for our selves in the business of self-promotion and means that we act against community and the agency of actions in those communities. The system houses created rub-

⁹ Perhaps this point expresses the single point of difference in praxis from Christianity and Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism. Christianity posits that being shapes actions; many other religious ideas focus less on doctrine and more time on ritual or practice – believing that actions shape personhood.

rics (salary and promotions, star systems, research funds that seem finite, etc.) that promote these beliefs. So, we find ourselves, as with others, both alone and cynical – two less than joyful experiences. Compounding this state of affairs is the issue of time. When we come to feel alone, without hope of agency¹⁰ (cynical), and without time to change things or think of how we might change things, we also become desperately unhappy – a deeply personal emotion that seems to permeate our lives as academics.

Not all philosophies lead to despair. Accepting that it is possible to live morally within a place is a reinstatement of hope in agency and in self-determination. As noted earlier, we are not even saying that our analysis is “true;” we are only saying that social constructing of knowledge in one way (as opposed to the other) will make us happier. One “philosophy of action” is found in Pope John Paul II’s work (both as Pope John Paul II and as Karl Wojtyla). Pope John Paul II notes, “the moral life consists of attaining the truth in all our actions and behavior” (1993, p. 91). Pope John II (1993) also notes that the “most evident feature in an act of will is the efficacy in the awareness of the acting person in the act of will” (p. 8).

For John Paul II, this self-determined will is fundamental to ethical value and is the foundation of his “philosophy of action.” John Paul II highlights the Thomist distinction between “human acts” (acts we do with knowledge and

¹⁰ It is interesting to attend a conference and note how derivative much of the work seems. That is, there is what seems an excessive linking (a sort of citation envy) to others’ (“key” thinkers’) work. What becomes interesting is that ideas cited were actually original ideas – those cited had creative ideas, but the presenters have not allowed themselves the same activity. If Northrup Frye (*Creation and Recreation*, 1980) is correct, the human need to be creative has been co-opted by a sort of jigsaw puzzling of other people’s pieces and ideas into an idea. Perhaps we feel the inability to create and think for ourselves. If so, to what effect? Once again, agency escapes our work.

free will) and “acts of the human” (things that simply happen to us) that we alluded to earlier. To expand, when something happens to someone, there is no experience of efficacy – no power. Only by altering one’s environment (a transitive action), can one alter his or her character (an intransitive action).

A dog might cover a bone and, by newly creating a pile of dirt, cause a person to trip and break an arm; but that dog can hardly be said to be evil. On the other hand, a person who literally shapes the physical world (for example, working on a levee to thwart flooding) and, by doing so, reshapes dirt to save lives can be said to be acting in kindness and charity. That person is, according to John Paul II, also reshaping his values and his person in positive ways. The person has engaged in self-determining actions that are chosen because they are valued; and, because he does, he has become, as John Paul II (1993) notes, more of a “somebody.” This act is willful, and this “drama of the will” has been central to human life throughout history and cultures (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 275). What one might expect a religious leader to say, perhaps; but, filled with common sense to us.

In religious language, not surprisingly Catholic and Christian, John Paul II calls such actions “love.” And, whether talk of love in philosophy makes one in the academy “goofy” or not, for such a ubiquitous concept it has, as Nota (1983, p. 195) notes, hardly been a topic of 20th century philosophers. We find little has changed in the 25 years since Nota made the piercing diagnosis. Complexity speaks little of love, or at least abstractly. Post-structural love is absent.¹¹ Freud might talk of love, but his talk in our reading is biological and psychological – to be studied not experienced. The people responsible for the discovery of the double-helical structure of DNA in 1953 – Francis Crick, Rosalind Franklin, Linus Pauling, James Watson and Maurice Wilkins –

¹¹ As Slavoj Žižek (1997) has put it: “Love Thy Neighbour? No thanks.”

suggest that the body itself is a “lab” for DNA. Where then is love here?

In this article, we have spoken about engagement, by which we mean being there with and for others. We will speak only a bit about love, since Pope John Paul II reminded us of it. We start by suggesting that love, however, is not so foreign to educational thought. It is fundamentally embodied in the willful and ethical actions of teachers toward students and, in some ways, academics towards their own areas of study as in “I love to read in my area.” Something brought us to this place where we (once) “loved” teaching or thinking or researching or writing. There is an “opposite law to that of effort where effort may exhaust itself and come to rest, whereas love either remains the same or increases” (Scheler, 1957, p. 158). In other words, we love those things (especially teaching as a scholarship among the professions) that we engage without effort, although the things we love do require work; but love shows itself in doing what comes naturally for us to do. In all its forms, love relates one to a “mutual relationship among persons.”

Teachers as Transformational Intellectuals

Perhaps those who have read much of Henry Giroux will disagree, but we find Giroux’s writing about teacher agency and educational reform hopeful. In many ways, Giroux’s ideas coincide with our own ideas and we give the reviewers of this article, in the spirit of this project, full credit for their insights into this matter. We have chosen to engage Giroux’s work as a result of these reviewers’ suggestions. When Giroux wrote *Teachers As Intellectuals* (1988), he began to apply social theory to the everyday challenges of schooling as a way to shape practical insights within the work of critical pedagogy. In 1985 (a), Giroux wrote about teachers as “transformative intellectuals.” And, al-

though his writing is generally about K-12 teachers, his ideas speak to our work at the academy. Giroux believes an educational crisis exists that stems from the disempowerment of teachers at all levels and their inability to shape the conditions of their work. He critiques the “proletarianization” of teacher work that reduces teachers to specialized technicians within a bureaucracy, and defends teachers as transformative intellectuals whose scholarly practice is the service of educating thoughtful, active citizens.

Specifically, Giroux (1985b) notes the threat of instrumental ideologies that emphasize a technocratic approach to teacher work (we have noted this ideology in the work of academics who publish specific articles for specific journals for the direct purposes of academic recognition, remuneration and promotion). We agree with Giroux that academics can become preoccupied with “working the system” in technocratic and instrumental ways and, thus, in turn be worked by the system. We suspect Giroux would agree that, when the work of academics is controlled and structured – for example in formalized judgments of who gets rewarded at the academy, work becomes slave to management techniques that eliminate critique about how one lives and works within the academy. As a result, the theoretical assumption that guides the behavior of academics is control toward shaping consistent, predictable products. Thus, the deskilling of academics undermines the potential for critical inquiry and engaged academic life – what we believe Giroux calls in his writing “citizenship.”

As a result, teaching, research and service (the holy trinity of sorts) becomes depoliticized acts reduced to “getting ahead.” But “getting ahead” means “falling behind” when the effect is to deskill or remove academics from processes of deliberation and reflection. More specifically, such actions militate against the potential richness that

occurs when academics with different histories, experiences, ideas, cultures, and talents discuss together their work. In this context, although he was writing almost 25 years ago, Giroux argues that teachers must, as “transformative intellectuals,” raise serious questions about what they teach, how they teach, and the larger goals for which they strive – including the purposes and conditions of the academy.

Central to becoming transformative intellectuals is to combine the pedagogical and the political. This means making critical reflection and action part of a fundamental social project to help develop a deep and abiding faith in the struggle to overcome economic, political and social injustices, and to further humanize ourselves for the struggle. Giroux’s early 1980s rhetorical flair aside, we believe such work has current value. We disagree only with the extent to which Giroux (1988) implies teachers (and we add those within the academy) already are metacognitive about their own agency. He writes as if teachers understand the hegemony in which they live and work: we believe most of us are less aware of this hegemony than he credits. We also believe that, before we can aid anyone else, we must address our own agency. Only then can our teaching become political to the extent that it intervenes in the ethical responsibility of incarnating the idea exposed by Paulo Freire – that life is conditioned but not determined.

Freire’s critical pedagogical practice did not transfer knowledge but created possibilities, encouraged human agency, provided conditions for self-determination, and struggled for a society (and we add a culture) that is both autonomous and democratic. Thus, we return to our hopeful pedagogy of engagement – what Giroux would call a pedagogy that embodies emancipatory political interests that sees us all as critical agents; that makes knowledge problematic; that utilizes critical and affirming dialogue;

and that works for a qualitatively better world. If Giroux is correct, and we believe he is, transformative intellectuals seek to “voice” learning by developing a critical language that outlines the problems of everyday life, particularly those related to pedagogical experiences connected to educational practice.

We appreciate Giroux’s (2003) note that transformative intellectuals must develop a hopeful discourse that unites the language of critique with the language of possibility, all working toward the goal of change. Giroux (2003) notes Judith Butler’s suggestion that, for her, there is more hope in the world when people question the taken for granted, especially about their own humanity. Hope links critical knowledge to democratic social change, and allows us to engage in critique, dialogue, and an open-ended struggle for social improvement.

Steps to Successful Pedagogies of Engagement

We offer, in its infancy, some suggestions about how we as academics might overcome our cynicism and lack of hope. Although we have spent perhaps excessive time deconstructing what we have called a pedagogy of disengagement, we will not speak so much about how to beat out disengagement. Instead, we will metaphorically accept and engage a law of physics – two things may not occupy the same space at the same time. We understand that there are flaws with this physical metaphor, but in its infancy it seems fruitful. In other words, we believe that filling our lives with a pedagogy of engagement will naturally push away and ward off a pedagogy of domination.

In addition to this posture, we acknowledge and recognize those insights offered by reviewers of this article, who have engaged us in the very discourse we seek about our work as academics as well as what this article advoc-

ates— the re-scripting of our work through dialogue. Our reviewers rightfully questioned the simplistic nature of our naïve propositions. And, we earlier acknowledged that we held the naïve hope that this article might engender further conversation about this important topic. Indeed, it has.

We acknowledge that this conversation is longstanding; and, our inadvertent exclusion of others directly engaged in examining how academic work has changed over the past several decades is not to suggest that we have claim to powerful new insights. Rather the opposite. We humbly recognize the work of other academics problematizing academic despair and reformulating new visions as “purveyors of warranted hope” (Walker, 2006). As authors, we think of the work of the American Association of University Professors and other organizations of comparable stature that are addressing the issues posed in this article.

Our plan calls for a 14-Step Program that, as imagined, does not cherish Step One of the famous 12-Step Program that says “I accept that I am not in control ...” The steps are not necessarily sequential but rather processural.

Step One: We acknowledge a profound sense of our own good fortune and an active gratitude for the opportunity we have as academics. We see our place in the academic life as an unearned gift in the sense of an entitlement, and we accept that being an academic carries a responsibility.

Step Two: We act with compassion towards others. Compassion (from the Latin) means “suffering with” – feeling empathy, identification, and sharing the experience of life with those with whom we work.

Step Three: We actively “name” our oppositions to systemic domination, and by doing so act in ways to move us towards justice (with colleagues, for example, and for our students). We seek to engage goals that promote working and learning in partnership or interdependence as opposed to independence. (As we have done here together as authors and grate-

fully utilizing the insights of our reviewers, we must teach, research, write, and serve together.)

Step Four: Our work must emphasize engaged praxis, not intellectual piety. That is, we accept the responsibility of an “ivory tower” responsible to a culture and a society.

Step Five: We must talk more to each other. Our impulse must be toward transformation through dialogue – to help change those and ourselves in pursuit of a better life.

Step Six: Our work must emphasize community (common unity). Community is inherently social and political, involving practices such as demonstrating respect for each other, responsibility and integrity in relationships, and service.

Step Seven: We must engage in cooperative acts committed to the long-term, with an active recognition that omni-competence is short-sighted. And, hard as it might be to do in a system that actively prizes omni-competence, we remain committed to working in partnerships and community even when the system creates little space for these.

Step Eight: Individuals (including ourselves) must be liberated (changed or transformed) from inherent and violent patterns of self-seeking in their professional and ultimately personal lives. This definition of violence includes all forms of deception, abuse, and manipulation of others for one’s own purposes. Such violence stems from alienation and fear, and is endemic to all humans and cultures – including (perhaps especially) from those in control who fear losing control.

Step Nine: We must act to remove fatalistic traditions and actions that stifle or repress hope and work to dismantle oppressive hierarchical social structures that create and maintain slavery and codependence. Teachers and students alike must learn and practice self-respect and respect for others.

Step Ten: Activities that effectively improve the quality of life for teachers and students must be vigorously discussed and introduced.

The goals we seek must be “incarnated” in ways students can understand. (All students, we suggest, understand patience, truth, caring actions, service, relationship, modesty, and respect.) We must engage students in open and constant evaluation of those shared goals – both as a way to improve our actions and as a way to formulate our visions.

Step Eleven: We must forgive ourselves and others when we all fail to live by an engaged pedagogy and therefore ethically. Because we are human, often our own perceived self-interest blocks our noble intentions and we are guilty of self-centered thoughts and actions. There are always frustrating constraints on individual efforts that seem to be self-defeating even when well-intended. This “law of unintended effects” [the warning against disorder – that almost any human action has unintended consequences or unexpected results] reminds us that, any time we do things, there may be unforeseen effects and, as teachers, we must beware – not so as to halt action but as to critique and evaluate our goals.

Step Twelve: We must not oversimplify the complexity of social or institutional systems and exalt an individual’s ability to triumph – especially first attempts – against systematic complexity. We know too well the deep nature of systematic violence, the power of hegemony, and transformations of our own abilities to weigh actions. Even intents come slowly and often amid much failure. We are all complicit with self-fulfilling presumptions that govern our social institutions and condition us as individuals.

Step Thirteen: We must understand that the system constrains both the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor’ who inhabit that system. The only option for both seems to be to use the system to “beat the system.” Our graduate students, for example, come to jealously seek and even emulate what seems to be our affluent, academic lifestyle – but, as noted by recent research that underscores the poverty of spirit within the academy by pointing out how many

of us simply are unhappy in our work, we all fall into a too-easy compliance with what is basically an unjust system that exacerbates our own – and ultimately – others' poverty.

Step Fourteen: Finally, we must change our orientation toward academic life and work. For teachers and others, there has been a lingering suspicion that too much emphasis on theory might encourage and produce an affected piety without ethical action or without obedience to our nobler intentions. We must engage in praxis.

Conclusion

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle ~334-323 BCE [1989] develops a theory of the good life (*eudaimonia*) for humans. “*Eudaimonia*” is perhaps best translated as flourishing or living well and doing well. So when Aristotle speaks of the good life as the happy life, he does not mean that the good life is merely one of feeling happy or amused. Rather, the good life for a person is the active life of functioning well in those ways that are essential and unique to humans.

In this article, we have tried to make the case that the culture of the academy is sick and needs to be healed. As a result, those of us who are living there are unhappy. The pervasive unhappiness is the result of a moral disease perpetrated by both the unconscious individual (the academic as person) and the academy itself. Both parties are at fault. We have pointed out some examples of this illness – self-focus, lack of creativity, lack of community, conflicts over material resources, deeply-embedded competition, deep cynicism, and a lack of vision for positive change. We are suggesting that the culture of the academy can be reclaimed and have given some simple examples of how that might be done on a personal and interpersonal level.

Although this article is only a beginning, we hope that we might encourage a conversation about our places of work, about our vocation,

and about how we might flourish within institutional spaces of teaching learning and knowledge creation. We appreciate the attention our work has been given by reviewers charged with reading and evaluating this work towards its inclusion in a refereed journal. Although we wish to engage the hearts and minds of our readers with the possibility of a new way of doing our work and the “reclamation of lost ideals,” as one of our reviewers has suggested, our suggestions for systemic change are limited to simple, although not simplistic, suggestions. We believe that any change must be cultural change – this includes changing our (1) language – the way we talk to each other and the words we use, (2) values and worldviews – not focusing on lesser values that are material but, instead, focusing on higher values, (3) our norms – the rules we have that help us relate to each other and the material world, (4) the way we live and behave – so as to build and sustain community, and (5) the way we create and use artifacts – building and creating “tools for conviviality.”

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