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Teaching and Learning in a Spirit of Friendship

William K. Rawlins

Although over a quarter of a century has passed, I remember taking the basic course in Communication as an undergraduate at the University of Delaware. The course was called “Com 255 — Fundamentals of Speech Communication,” and the format was what we communication educators commonly term “the hybrid course,” involving units on rhetorical and communication theory, interpersonal and small group communication, and information and practice concerning individual and group public presentations. I still remember much of the content of that course, and I recall us gathering writing samples from walkways and bathroom walls around campus for our group presentation on “Graffiti as Communication” (and noticing together and reporting how the graffiti differed in the women’s and men’s restrooms).

But what I remember most was being treated with respect and interest by the teacher of the course, an M.A. student named Ms. Paula Roberts. Having been raised in a conservative small town in rural southern Delaware in a nuclear family of a mother, father and four sons, I came to the course with virtually no understanding of what was then termed “Women’s Liberation.” In fact, when Paula first mentioned the ideas in class, my reaction was basically, “Huh?” In our class-

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room she thoughtfully engaged me as well as others about our ignorance and misgivings; and after class she took the time to listen and talk with me about these ideas, which were obviously shaking me to my core. Over the course of the semester, under her guidance and through our multiple occasions of speaking together inside and outside of class, my window on the world, my conceptions of myself, and my communication practices with other persons were altered and broadened.

I believe that all of us who teach the basic communication course share strong convictions about its potential for affecting our students in similar ways. I hope and surmise that each of us has stories to tell from our perspectives as teachers about the impact our course has had on students during the time we have taught it, as well as how teaching the course continues to improve and educate *us* as teachers and persons. For my part, I will say that some of the most striking and palpable changes I have witnessed in students during my career as an educator have transpired in and through the basic course. Frequently, students take our basic course very early in their college careers. They are excited; they are open. But typically they are also quite concerned about how they might appear when they speak in class. To greater and lesser degrees they are vulnerable.

In my opinion, these existential feelings are part of walking into any classroom although they may take on special significance in the basic course in communication, regardless of whether it is presented in the hybrid or public speaking format. Recognizing this, I want to consider how the ideals and practices of friendship can provide an edifying ethic for the interactions and relationships of educators and students. To this end I

examine: (1) three facets of friendship in the Western tradition; (2) four dialectical tensions of the educational friendship; (3) a collection of six virtues I associate with teaching as friendship; and (4) some limitations of the educational friendship that should be noted.

Three characteristics are associated with friendship in the Western tradition, namely affection, equality and mutuality (Aristotle, 1980; Brain, 1976). Friendship always involves a measure of affection for others, but from classical times different degrees and types of caring can characterize two different forms of friendship. On one hand, there is *eros*, a form of love toward particular persons that seeks exclusive and intimate bonds with them. By contrast, *philia* is a more out-reaching regard for others, associated with a friendship based on good will and wishing the other well for his or her own good. Further, when persons experiencing *philia* toward each other include a pursuit of the common good as part of their dealings, we can speak of political or civic friendship (Hutter, 1978). And while it is true that in smaller classes and over time through repeated individual contact, we can and do develop more particularized close friendships with students, my primary concern here is with fostering the climate of political friendship in our classes. Good will can be contagious (as, conversely, can bad will, distrust and bad faith), and performing our time together as an avowedly caring pursuit of the common good helps promote hospitable conditions for learning.

To anticipate possible concerns about quality and evaluation, in my experience caring for students does not mean diminished commitment to academic standards. When we care about students, our standards may

be *raised*, both our expectations of them and of ourselves in teaching them and evaluating their work.

Equality is a more difficult, if not structurally impossible, feature of friendship to achieve. Teachers possess rightful and (hopefully) learned authority in classes (Watt, 1982). We also embrace the responsibility for facilitating and evaluating students' learning while acknowledging our power to grade their performance. Despite this power, the spirit of friendship always promotes the search for "levelers" in relationships, that is, places or spaces for speaking as equals. The stance of friendship involves de-emphasizing the structural inequalities patterning teachers' relationships with students and highlighting at every opportunity the potential equality in our mutual desires to learn. Towards that end, for example, my syllabi have identified me for some years as "Co-Learner," rather than "Instructor," and students have remarked on the tone this establishes. Finally, both teachers and students must aspire to this stance for the mutuality of civic friendship to occur in our classes. As teachers we should seek to demonstrate and cultivate mutual respect, trust and good will. For example, I never request documentation from students for their absences or late work, etc. I trust in their word and hope that they in turn will trust mine and be honest with me.

Granting these three characteristics, pursuing educational friendship involves four dialectical tensions with space permitting only a brief review here (for discussion, see Rawlins, 1992; 2000). The Dialectic of the Freedom to be Independent and the Freedom to be Dependent addresses the critical concern of how much and in what ways freedom should be exercised in facilitating

learning. The stance of friendship encourages students' freedom to grow and take risks while simultaneously preserving their option to depend on the teacher's knowledge and experience when needed. But how do you give guidance without restraining choice too much? And how flexible and vulnerable can a teacher become without risking the student's confidence in his or her grasp of the issues? We must not force students into independence if they are not ready, nor should we tacitly socialize them into being overly dependent on us or others.

The Dialectic of Affection and Instrumentality formulates the issue of how much teachers are permitted to care for students and how much this caring can occur as an end in itself versus as a means to the goals of education. I contend that we should care for each of our students, even if only through the generalized good will and positive feeling conveyed in a large lecture course. Of course, in smaller classes particularized caring and confirmation are possible through the various ways we respond to and interact with our students. It is a worthy practice to enlarge the circle of caring in today's violent and distracted world as well as to try to make students feel good about themselves. We are in their trust.

The Dialectic of Judgment and Acceptance addresses the ongoing challenges involved in communicating acceptance and recognition of students as persons while fulfilling our responsibilities for evaluating their performances. As is the case with all friends, I believe that when persons feel that a teacher wishes them well and truly cares about them and that her or his evaluative standards have been developed and communicated in this manner, grading can be conducted in a spirit of learning and concern for improvement. A key issue here

is whether abstract standards, which may be utilized in good faith, are emphasized to the neglect of a caring stance toward students.

Finally, the Dialectic of Expressiveness and Protectiveness acknowledges the tensions between encouraging the expression of vital and tough truths to keep ourselves honest as a community of inquirers, while at the same time being respectful and discreet about matters that might hurt or threaten others. This is a delicate line to walk that once again requires thoughtful performances and sometimes intervention by teachers, but always in a spirit of friendship and the possibility of living respectfully with our differences.

While recognizing these inherent and persistent dialectical tensions, I would like to celebrate six virtues aspired to in educational friendship. (1) *Encouraging the practices and classroom climate of a fair-minded, respectful, and caring political community*. A classroom is a public context for inquiring and thinking together and for performing our identities. It is a political space enhanced by the stance of friendship. As Arendt (1958) observed,

What love is in its own, narrowly circumscribed sphere, respect is in the larger domain of human affairs. Respect, not unlike the Aristotelian *philia politike*, is a kind of 'friendship' without intimacy and without closeness; it is regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us. (p. 243)

(2) *Connecting course-related learning to the lives we are living*. Teachers are encouraged to be involved persons interacting with other persons, telling stories that dramatize their relationship to the matters under con-

sideration, and linking the material to their own lives as a model for students to do the same. Importantly, in telling these stories to each other, we don't separate facts from values or living from learning together. We recognize and respect the diversity of political convictions and religious sensibilities informing our presence and reasons for being in our classroom together.

(3) *Taking seriously the temporal registers of classroom discourse.* Too often, classroom discourse finds itself confined to a limiting temporal orientation. For example, there is authority associated with the *past* and established facts, the way things have (always) been done. There is power derived from tradition in teaching. While prior ways of speaking often contextualize our present ways, we should consider the extent to which a teacher's and discipline's traditions should dictate a student's future. There are also risks with too much talk about an enduring *present*. Such discourse may function and be heard by students as apologies for the status quo. Repeated descriptions of what is can begin to sound like constraining conceptions of what should or ought to be. Emphasizing present practices may inadvertently encourage conceptions and skills for fitting into predetermined situations and a normalized sense of what currently exists. A final temporal discourse addresses the *future* and possibilities yet to come. It is a language of making choices (in the richest senses of the words) and changing one's personal and social contexts. Speaking in this way, the classroom becomes a place for *praxis*, for trying to talk about and go about our selves and our worlds differently than they currently are or have been in the past.

(4) *Being sensitive to the narrative qualities of learners' lives.* The teaching friendship wants to hear how languages, voices, and events of the past both limit and enable the present. We want to talk about their practical and moral legacies for our classroom conversations and for the communities we are creating. As in all friendships, we want to listen to the particulars and details of other persons' stories, to understand their meanings for the teller and the reasons for their telling. Learning in a spirit of friendship involves exploring the opportunities that different versions of the present afford for individually and collectively authoring our futures.

(5) *Pursuing dialogue in teaching and sharing knowledge.* Dialogue composes the intellectual heart of teaching and sharing knowledge in a spirit of friendship. Teaching as friendship learns from Bakhtin (1981) that all language use is an emergent, generative, and contested project. In Stewart and Zediker's (2000) words, a dialogical stance involves "letting the other happen to me while holding my own ground" (p. 232). Learning involves real and spirited interaction, with conversation addressing issues that matter, asking questions leading to more questions, creating choices, and taking chances. A love of conversation enlivens the practices of this educational outlook.

(6) *Emphasizing the intrinsic importance of classroom interactions and conversations with students.* Reflecting Bakhtin's (1993) insistence on the ethical import of "once-occurrence," every moment of teaching is conceived as a rich and unique opportunity to live in learning and friendship with students and to validate them as persons. We need to listen thoughtfully to stu-

dents when they are speaking and to meet them where they are. Our attention to detail matters when we are addressing students. How carefully are we listening to what is being said (or reading what is written)? What does our posture and tone of voice say about our regard for any student we encounter? What is occurring on the identity level of our discourse? Who are we allowing ourselves to be in our words with each other? What kinds of examples of respectful interaction and regard do we perform for our community of learners? I believe the benefits of this approach to education are immediately redeemable; we do not need to wait to experience or realize the value of what we are learning together.

Despite its virtues, there are limitations to the practices of educational friendship described here. First, the contingent and relational qualities of our subject positions can simultaneously allow and disallow teachers and students to speak with each other in certain ways. As in all political circumstances, the participating teachers' and students' personal attributes, identities, and cultural backgrounds affect the concrete accomplishment of educational friendship. Relative ages, races, ethnicities, gender, sexual orientations, and social and professional statuses can markedly influence the opportunities for and perceptions of this way of teaching. Even so, I do not mean to speak here as categorically as it may sound. I strongly believe and hope that every person has a choice in how to address others in the moments they share of being alive. However, personal and community prejudices can affect our choices knowingly or in spite of our efforts to get beyond them.

Second, it may be argued that a fundamental, structural inequality inimical to friendship between teachers

and students persists. Under these conditions, the educational friendship can mystify students, with real differences obscured and the teacher feigning affection for students and acting in their best interests from a power position while actually pursuing self-serving goals. This critique might further contend that teachers own their superior positions and therefore students understand the nature of the traditional relationship. I would respond to these valid concerns in a few ways. First, the approach to teaching and learning I discuss here is not for everybody. Many teachers, as well as students, may feel more secure and effective in traditional roles. It is indeed imperative for all teachers to reflect continually and critically on their stances and actions toward students undertaken in the name of education (Brookfield, 1995). As a classically asymmetrical situation, there is always the potential for bad faith and exploitation, but these are not inherent faults, in my opinion. Finally, like dialogue within parenting and therapy relationships, teaching may only achieve intermittent moments of real friendship, of self- and other-recognizing good will pervading a community (Cissna & Anderson, 1998). Even if these moments are temporary, I still believe the stance and political climate of educational friendship are worth attempting to foster a learning community.

Communicating as educational friends is a risky undertaking. Teachers risk vulnerability when they speak more openly about and encourage students to question the reasons for pedagogical decisions and the connection of course material to their lives. The ambiguity of cultural scripts for friendship can make it difficult to draw clear boundaries for actions and discourse. In short, this approach may impose unexpected emotional labor on

both teachers and students. The injunction for teachers to care about and respect their students and for students to regard the teacher and fellow learners likewise (or act as if they do) can become additional responsibilities of class membership. Meanwhile, it is difficult for teachers and students to feel certain about how everyone else is experiencing their side of the friendship. Cultivating and sustaining the mutual trust and good will necessary for educational friendship can be a delicate, comprehensive, and ongoing challenge.

Despite the constraints, I believe that we can practice teaching and learning in a spirit of friendship, as a caring relationship with students that aspires to speaking and inquiring as equals and encourages shared responsibility for learning together. Celebrating educational friendship promotes edifying communicative stances of teachers with individual students and toward classes as collectives. I feel reverence for the privilege of being in a university classroom as a co-learner, which I try to convey to fellow students in my classes. I feel ecstatic about the joys of thinking, reading, speaking, and learning together inside and outside of classroom settings. I try to model and facilitate those joys of co-learning in every way I can and in a spirit of friendship with students. Clear thinking, speaking, and writing are counterparts so I try to demonstrate and encourage vivid, informed, thoughtful, and creative thinking and self-expression in my courses.

Students should feel safe taking intellectual risks so that they may learn something new. Accordingly, I emphasize good will and respectful interaction between persons in my classes. I want students to feel that their presence in our classroom community matters and that

their words will be heard and valued. I try to encourage a dialogical spirit in my classes. I am deeply concerned with our treatment and regard for one another as well as the subject matter.

It is vital in our basic communication course for students to connect what we are learning together with their everyday lives. Encouraging and developing well-chosen examples in our conversations and presentations enhances this process. I believe that much of what we teach in the communication field is immensely valuable to society. I also strongly believe that every single person makes a difference, and in our classrooms and writings we have the opportunity to cultivate and recognize that potential.

Toward these ends, I have tried to demonstrate my good will and my friendship by becoming the best listener I can be and to hear something of significance whenever a student speaks. I also begin every course with the assertion that no question is too big or too small, and I try to behave in ways that affirm this belief. In my judgment, learning about communication best occurs in a social setting that aspires to excellence in communication practices and that encourages self-respect and respect for others.

Teaching in the spirit of friendship as I have described it is not a step-by-step method or a handy solution. Instead, it is a risky approach toward facilitating learning that involves conscientious and disciplined practices, persistent orientations and sensitivities, and lived convictions. The rewards of these activities in our basic course (as elsewhere) are their ongoing accomplishment, enriched interactions with fellow learners leading to enhanced humanity and education.

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