

Teaching History is talking history

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Like many teachers, my early practice was in equal parts reiteration and repudiation of the models to which I had been exposed as a student. As a consequence of my own shyness I took great efforts not to place students in uncomfortable positions, particularly with regard to speaking in class. In retrospect, I can appreciate that I did not encourage or provide adequate opportunities for discussion. As I designed and reflected on my own pedagogic initiatives, it became clear that discussion underpinned the learning taking place in all classroom activities. Brookfield and Preskill have thoroughly and perspicaciously enumerated the myriad learning benefits accruing from the use of “discussion as a way of teaching”; and I am now convinced that it is integral to the learning process. Thus, I attempt to create a classroom in which students are encouraged to talk and feel comfortable doing so.

Between 2001 and 2005 I taught in a variety of papers on the Tauranga campus invariably to classes of between 10 and 20 students. A substantial number of these students were mature-aged and, in the main, more committed and enthused than the average student. Upon reflection, this was an excellent environment in which to commence a fulltime teaching career. It enabled the development of an unusual degree of personal familiarity with students and between students. Such conditions encourage empathy, mutual assistance, creativity and risk-taking. My experience on the Tauranga campus confirmed my instinct that learning best occurs in intimate and supportive environments in which ignorance and vulnerability are regarded as qualifications rather than disqualifications for learning.

My teaching of the skills and sensitivities of the Historian accords with Pratt’s “Apprenticeship Perspective” wherein “teaching is the process of enculturating learners into a specific community”. This community includes the wider community of professional historians as well as its subset, the immediate classroom community. These communities of historians have their own norms of procedure and conceptions of truth. Truth is the outcome of dialogue within these communities and is always provisional. In the specific classroom community I attempt to create a situation in which the pursuit of this truth is foregrounded. As Parker J. Palmer says, “...to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced” (p. 153). This entails both the minimalisation of egoism and the acceptance of those subjectivities which necessitate dialogue.



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Through classroom discussion, I hope that students derive a sense of the thought processes and sensitivities of a more experienced practitioner of historical analysis and communication. Pratt’s “Apprenticeship Perspective” supposes that “authentic” learning can only occur in its proper “context” or “place of...application”. As a fundamentally discursive and discussive discipline, then, one of History’s ‘real life’ places of application is clearly the classroom community.

All summative and formative assessment items are designed to provide an opportunity to evidence those essential skills and sensitivities of the historian which are demonstrated and practised in all classes. These are: a critical and empathetic engagement both with historical sources and with other historians’ use of these, as well as a sense of the provisional, contested and constructed nature of all historical interpretation and analysis, including (especially) one’s own. Lectures are students’ first point of contact with me; it is my most regular and extensive opportunity to model for them the fundamental skills of the historian. Lectures are conducted as discussions with myself, with the evidence and with other historiographical points of view. It is a discussion in which students are invited to participate. In other classes and modes of assessment, students are encouraged to emulate this model. Final exams provide the opportunity for students to exhibit their competency in, and familiarity with, the exercise of this scholarly-social, discursive, reflective skill set.

As a teacher, my objective has always been to minimise the elements of luck and fear associated with exams and give students the largest possible scope to show me what they have learned rather than what they haven’t learned. One strategy in this regard is to have students contribute to the construction of the final exam. I have often spent a whole class midway through the semester discussing with students the kind of exam questions they believe it appropriate to ask with relation to the material we have covered to that point. We discuss and modify these in terms of the stipulated teaching and learning objectives of the paper and I then include these questions on the final exam. Students respond enthusiastically to this active involvement in the construction of their own assessment. It is also an excellent (if surreptitious!) form of revision.

References

Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.