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THE INVITATION

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One of the key aspects of the relationship (transaction?) between a vampire and its (potential) victim is an invitation. Once the victim (or whoever the vampire is interested in) is safely guarded inside his or her private home, the vampire cannot violate that intimate space unless expressively invited to do so. The vampire can linger waiting for his/her victim, stand in front of the door seductively or longingly looking at his/her victim, but the vampire's desire or intention cannot be fulfilled without an invitation. A clearly expressed one.

Talking about vampires is evidently not the most suitable way to talk or to think about teaching or what goes in a classroom. But I couldn't stop thinking about them when a couple of semesters ago, I signed up for a TLI seminar with Ken Bain through Bryn Mawr College's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) and our first discussion was about the invitation that happens in a successful classroom. I am not saying that teaching or being a teacher (or, for that matter, a student) is anything like being a vampire or his/her victim. Or perhaps it is, but that would be a topic of reflection for some other time or place. Returning to my earlier association, the emphasis on the idea of an invitation was a very intriguing one and, especially, the need of its expression. Most importantly, it got me thinking about what this invitation consists of, how it happens (or should happen), and why it matters it is clearly articulated in the setting of a classroom.

Thinking and talking about teaching is always a paradoxical experience. Having now completed almost two decades of interacting with students, I find that taking time to actually reflect on what goes on inside a class and to share this experience with others is always a mix of the familiar and the new. Many topics of discussion, suggestions and ideas sound, I confess, too familiar to actually pay attention to. But suddenly, in one turn of a story, an anecdote, or the beginning of an idea, the world I inhabit with such familiarity becomes alien in ways that transforms and renews my teaching into not only a new adventure, but an explorer's journey into the unknown. This feeling of turning something so familiar into something totally unknown happened during our TLI seminar discussions as the first invitation happened.

We were all invited to write a syllabus. The familiarity of a syllabus as a plan or a program, an organization of thought or materials was quickly lost when the exercise was to envision this well-known piece of writing as an invitation, as a way to create a learning environment. How does one turn dates and months, readings and assignments into an invitation? What sort of transformation is necessary to start breaking the notion of demand or contract between the students and the professor that goes on in the laying down of a syllabus? I should clarify that these words do not come from my own definitions of the syllabus but ones that I have picked up along my teaching career; terms like assessment, learning objectives, protection, and accountability. What happens if those words are not really what goes on (or should go on) in the writing of a syllabus?

But, then, what is a syllabus? Something so familiar turned into an unknown object demands a definition. I quickly turn to a dictionary: "A list of the main subjects in a course of study." The list is here and has always been, but where is the invitation? As the second invitation was

extended to us, to share our own syllabi, other questions surfaced. How to imagine anew something so known? How to share it with others? How does one write this invitation? And, perhaps more importantly, how is that invitation accepted? We teachers often talk about learning environments and how to create them. But is this space enough? Where is the expressed invitation to actually step into this space? Or how can one make sure that this invitation is accepted? Maybe the question of the “invitation” is, as we learned to reflect during our seminar, more of a promise. The acceptance of the invitation is, in other words, a promise made to the students, what they will be doing when they accept this invitation. This distinction is important as we are moving from learning objectives to a beginning of a conversation.

Conversation and teaching seem at first ideas at odds. But the conversation that takes place in teaching is not so much about what is being said to each other, but rather the idea of an exchange happening between the students and the professor. To identify this exchange, to value this communication in order to serve the mutual interests of students and instructor inside the classroom is what we should never forget. To remember the importance of this connection, syllabi should be created as a space where we as teachers are able to establish communication with our students, to observe how they, when explicitly invited to learn, accept or decline this gesture. A space where one should “observe” how students are reacting to the material presented to them. Between example and theory, emphasize on what they eventually “pick up.” Teaching should not happen in parallel spaces or movements. Teachers and students should merge at some point, as they cannot go on without ever intellectually meet at some point. Is this “aha” moment when the invitation has finally been accepted or when the effort to clearly express this invitation is finally being paid off?

After a semester of these discussions I now approach my syllabus writing ritual carefully, as if I were wandering again and again into unknown territory. What are the parameters of this blank space? Is it limited to a piece of paper or can it be extended to institutional terms? Where is the invitation? What is the promise? Who else should be invited? And what is the language that constructs this invitation allowing the connection between teacher and student?

I am seeing now that thinking about this invitation has produced more questions than answers. But perhaps this is also the point of the invitation. A good invite always answers in advance many questions one might have: why?, when?, what time?, who can I bring?, what is for?, what should we prepare for?, what should we bring?, how much does it cost? And, in order to preemptively satisfy these questions, one ought to first think what they would be.