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Matthew R. Caires

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The Moral Conversation: Moving from Theory to Practice

Matthew R. Caires

During his graduate school experience at The University of Vermont, the author was exposed to the ideal of fostering moral conversations in the college classroom. Arguably one of the most powerful theories he took away from Vermont, the author moved this ideal into practice this past academic year. The author enjoyed the opportunity to organize his course (Introduction to University Life) around the tenets of the moral conversation. This article summarizes the successes and challenges of integrating the moral conversation into a classroom with first-year students.

Each year, several university faculty, staff and administrators are asked at the University of Wyoming to teach a section of University Studies (UNST) 1000, a one-credit course dedicated to introducing first-year students to university life. As a new Assistant Dean of Students, I was invited in fall 2001 to co-teach a section of University Studies with the Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management, Sara Alexson. I saw this as an opportunity to get to know first-year students while simultaneously developing a relationship with another member of the Division of Student Affairs. Sara is a dynamic and energetic senior administrator with unlimited energy and a wealth of professional experience in student services. I have less professional experience in the field, come from a more theoretical background, and am considerably younger. Given these characteristics, I thought our blend of experience and background would complement each other well in the classroom.

As a first-year staff member, I had many responsibilities outside of our class to keep me occupied. Managing the activities of the university's Greek community, providing financial oversight and advisement for the student government association, and supervising four professional staff members in the Division of Student Affairs certainly kept my plate full. Therefore, Sara took the lead in developing the course expectations and requirements. I agreed to enhance our course development by contributing appropriate student development theory and experiential activities. Each week we would alternate serving as the lead team teacher, according to our individual strengths, and how our interests aligned with the designated outcomes for that week.

In general, I think that Sara and I crafted a quality classroom experience for our students. We introduced concepts such as personal balance, study skills, time management, campus resources, campus substance abuse, personal amorous relationships, and a myriad of other transitional issues that face first-year students. Given that our class met in fall 2001, many of our classroom discussions were shaped by what occurred on September 11th. At the conclusion of this semester, I suspected that most of our students had a beneficial experience in our course; my suspicions were supported by exemplary teacher evaluations that the students submitted.

Personally, I enjoyed teaching this course because it was an opportunity to get to know Sara and the first-year students, as well as to gain a better understanding of the University Studies department. Nevertheless, at the completion of the course, I felt a bit unsatisfied with what we were able to accomplish as a learning community. Although the issues we covered in class were certainly important, I felt the course curriculum was too broad and emphasized too many different issues as opposed to a few, quality concepts. As a result, when I was approached to teach another section of University Studies in the following spring semester, I accepted. I saw this as a chance to reinvent my course.

Learning About Theory

I have always liked the idea of someday having my own classroom to further explore the ideals within the moral conversation, which I learned during my graduate school experience. Robert Nash, a Professor in the Department of Integrated Professional Studies at the University of Vermont, introduced me to this concept that “emphasizes the *manner* in which seminar conversers will talk about texts during the semester, as much as it stresses the importance of the *meanings* contained in the texts” (Nash, 1996, p. 85). With the potential to

Matthew R. Caires received his Master of Education from The University of Vermont in 2000. While at UVM, he served two years as a member of the Board of Trustees. He currently serves as the Assistant Dean of Students at the University of Wyoming.

develop my own course of University Studies, I saw an opportunity to apply what I learned about the moral conversation in Vermont and move it from theory into practice. I used Nash's concepts behind the moral conversation to guide and shape my course outcomes and objectives. Examples of the moral conversation concepts I used to develop my course include: 1) Find the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse; then, and only then, should you find the truth in what you espouse and the error in what you oppose; 2) Stand up for your beliefs without standing over the beliefs of others; 3) Conversations, when done well and with attention to detail, always leave the participants with a richer, deeper language for constructing truth and understanding (Nash, 1996, p. 85).

Before developing the syllabus, I reviewed the necessary course requirements and objectives as outlined by the department. Overall, University Studies 1000 classes are designed "to improve students' academic performance and facilitate successful transition to and retention in the University of Wyoming" (University of Wyoming First-Year Program, 2002). With fairly general requirements and plenty of flexibility in course objectives, I developed course outcomes around three important concepts for success as an undergraduate: reading, writing, and critical thinking. With these three course objectives in mind and with the covenant of promoting a classroom environment guided by moral conversation, I crafted the syllabus (see Appendix for complete syllabus).

Moving Into Practice

Upon introducing this syllabus on the first day of class, and after listening to the sighs of disbelief and deep swallows from the students, I had my first inclination of what I had gotten myself into by developing the course in this manner. Fairly unanimously, the students objected to my course expectations and outcomes. The students were under the impression that this class was intended to be "a walk in the park," or an "easy break from the rest of our difficult classes." I explained, "This section of University Studies is intended to challenge and prepare you for the rigors of university life." The students responded that they already knew everything necessary to succeed at the University, and who was I, a middle-aged professional far removed from my own college experience, to tell them what was needed for success in college?

I responded that I, too, had once been in college, and graduate school, and that the most important components to my past academic success were practicing three fundamental elements of university life: reading, writing, and critical thinking. Hence, I tried to explain, "I am supporting your academic growth by providing opportunities to practice and explore these fundamental tenets of university life." With an overwhelming "oh" from the class, our time on the first day together had nearly expired. I concluded the first day with a piece of advice, my section of University Studies would require significantly more work than the other sections currently being offered. Therefore, after review of the syllabus, if individual needs did not align well with my section, any student was free to drop my class and enroll in an alternative section.

I did promise, however, that for those students who returned to my class the following week and adhered to the course requirements as outlined in the syllabus, they would not only have a fulfilling experience this semester, they would leave my class better prepared for the future rigors of their collegiate experience. Their first assignment was to read Nash's article on the moral conversation and be prepared the next week to hear the only lecture of the semester on the postmodern university.

The following week, I arrived about ten minutes before the start of class. Although optimistic, I was not sure how many students would return to my section. About three minutes before the start of class, and with only one student in attendance, I could feel the beads of sweat gathering on my forehead. But then, a flood of students arrived just as the bell rang indicating the beginning of class. I had ten students return, not bad considering that I had exposed the original 17 students to several challenging ideas the previous week.

This class was the only session dedicated to lecturing to the students. The rest of the semester was devoted to using our time together as a community of learners to discuss, analyze, support, and oppose different ideas and concepts generated by students from weekly assigned readings. I began the second class by detailing how many higher education institutions, be it private or public, teaching or research, urban or rural, exist with the same end of creating and developing knowledge and truth.

Who has the ability to create knowledge and truth? Why do they have this capacity? How do we know this truth is an absolute truth and a truth for everyone? These are the types of questions considered during the course, and hopefully for the students throughout their time at the University. As the ability to create and develop knowledge and truth has evolved throughout our pre-modern, modern, and now postmodern history, the breadth of individuals who have been granted the ability to create truth has expanded. Throughout our history, people of different races, gender, sexual orientations, socio-economic backgrounds, and spiritual leanings have increased the world's collective knowledge and truth. Because of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1994) that has existed throughout the history of humankind, these traditionally oppressed groups have been denied the ability to create knowledge and truth.

Colleges and universities are a product of this postmodern evolution. Today, higher education institutions are comprised of many underrepresented and historically oppressed populations that add, through research and writing, their unique perspective to our society's broad understanding of truth. Because of the diversification of individuals who are involved in research, it has become increasingly difficult to establish a fundamental truth, or a grand narrative that fits every individual's personal experience. There rarely, if ever, exists a "capital-T" truth at a university that is "one-size-fits-all," that everyone can support as his or her truth. As the academy continues to grow globally, the less likely we are to find the one "truth" that all members of the world community can support.

Referring to Nash's article, I suggested to the class that our challenge was to create an environment where different ideas, experiences, and perspectives come together in a way that enriches our collective wisdom and our personal growth. Our charge, then, for the remainder of the semester was to read the assigned texts and come together as a learning community to discuss the varying ideas and truths that each student brought to the conversation. My goal for our conversations was that they were respectful, inclusive, and in-line with the tenets of the moral conversation. Ideally, all those participating in discussions would first find the truth in what they oppose and the error in what they espouse. Then, and only then, could they find the truth in what they espouse and the error in what they oppose. The key to our success, as a community of learners, was our cooperative ability to enrich each other by standing up for the beliefs that we hold dear, without standing over the beliefs of the other members of our community (Nash, 1996, p. 89).

I'll be honest. At the completion of that second day of class, I'm not sure if the students understood my message. At the end of my lecture, there were no questions, only blank stares. Luckily for me, our time together had expired for the second week and all that was left was assigning the three chapters from our first text. The following week, to my surprise, eight students returned for class. While our learning community had shrunk to little more than half its original size, I believed that these students were eager to learn and willing to work hard.

As the teacher in this course, after providing the background for the class, I decided to take less of a participatory role in the ensuing classroom discussions. My hope was that the students, who ideally were provoked throughout the week by the assigned reading, would lead our classroom discussion. During our third class, in a circle so the classroom participants could easily see and hear each other, I began the discussion with an initial question about the assigned text. After asking the first question, it was apparent that these students completed their assigned reading and were eager to discuss their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives.

For the most part, our weekly classroom discussions were lively. While some weeks our conversations were more enthusiastic than others, overall the students faithfully completed their assigned reading and came to class prepared to discuss the ideas in the texts. I selected our two texts specifically to expose the students to new, and at times, controversial ideas and concepts. Several concepts that were discussed in the texts included reversing the patriarchal paradigm to promote women as the dominant gender, racial segregation, environmental degradation and sustainability, religious atheism, sexual promiscuity, unfettered sexual relationships, and adultery. A few of the more controversial topics we reviewed include the legalization of marijuana, the downfall of the human race through the agricultural revolution, the elimination of professional sports, and the adverse effects of television, automobiles, and microwaves on our society.

As one can imagine, some of our discussions became heated. My job was to ensure that the conversations were always balanced, fair, and equally represented. My contributions were limited; I added, at limited times, a slightly different or alternative perspective, ensuring the students would grow and their thinking would be

complicated. My goal was to make certain that as many voices were heard and perspectives espoused as possible. Almost weekly, a member of the class would express a thought or an idea that was unpopular. For example, the student from metropolitan Denver suggested that marijuana should be legalized (a radical notion for most Wyoming citizens). Another example was the suggestion by a single mother that a woman could achieve success in any leadership position that a man could, including President of the United States. Throughout the course, the students improved their ability to hear divergent opinions without instantly denouncing them as uneducated or wrong.

From Practice to Reflection

The highlight of the course came when I read the students' papers. At the completion of each book, I asked the students to write a five- to ten-page paper on any concept that was expressed in the texts or discussed in class. The papers were graded on clarity, writing proficiency, and evidence of integrating the text and classroom discussions into their writing. The two papers constituted over 90% of their final grade.

The students submitted outstanding papers. Most, if not all, were written as personal narratives about concepts or ideas that they supported or adamantly opposed. Most of the students were strong writers and it was evident that they took time in preparing their final paper. I read each paper, noted any grammatical errors, and wrote a one- or two-page response to each student on my thoughts about their writing. I learned more from the students' papers than from any other aspect of the course.

After assigning them a grade and handing back their papers, each student had the opportunity to share what she or he had written with the rest of the class. This gave every student the chance to become the authority on their writing, and gave voice to the students who were not as vocal in class.

I learned a great deal during my second experience as a teacher in a university course. I took away different perspectives on the texts, learned more about the practice of a moral conversation, and gained a snapshot into the lives and experiences of my eight students. My ultimate hope is that the students took away as much from this class as I did.

While satisfying to read the students' evaluations of my course, what was most impressive was reading the different lessons each student gained from their participation. Over half of the students explicitly mentioned the ideals of the moral conversation as concepts they would take with them at the completion of the course, and almost every student discussed the importance of learning about other perspectives. In time, with practice and dedication to the values of the moral conversation, hopefully these eight students will teach the ideals they learned in my course to others in their classes and the individuals they come into contact with after graduation.

As for me, I learned some important lessons throughout this teaching experience, especially concerning the moral conversation. While I was the "expert" within my classroom, I learned that I, too, needed to practice cultivating the precepts and tenets that make up the moral conversation. I found it difficult for me during our classroom discussions to hold forth, and to not allow my own hermeneutical perspective to creep into and influence our conversations (although, at times, I felt compelled to do so).

My model being Robert Nash, I would frequently reflect throughout the semester on how Robert utilized the moral conversation within his classroom, and how deft he was at using this principle. Of course, Robert has enjoyed years of practice of applying the moral conversation within his courses. That, I think, is the most important lesson I learned from this experience; that the moral conversation is at its best when it is honed over years of practice and attention to detail.

I am convinced that, in time, I, too, will be able to refine and cultivate my use of the moral conversation within the university classroom. During each future experience, I suspect, I will gain new knowledge and skills to effectively utilize this teaching principle. I believe these experiences will culminate, possibly after a lifetime of nurturing, into a deeper understanding and appreciation for how the moral conversation can over time, student by student, redefine how we discuss conflicting perspectives on campus, within our country, and across our globe.

APPENDIX

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

As a member of our academic community, I believe that you will find your experience at the University of Wyoming to be intellectually challenging and personally fulfilling. As a means to enhance your academic success, the institution has created this course, University Studies 1000, to further prepare you for success as an undergraduate. The major objective of University Studies 1000 is to provide entering students with skills and strategies that contribute to college success. To accomplish this objective, this course will introduce students to topics such as:

- student responsibility for college success through active participation in the learning process
- student responsibility for meeting the expectations of an academic environment at the University of Wyoming
- learning and study strategies that enhance the probability of academic success
- personal change, facilitated by communication skills, goal setting, personal values, building relationships, and decision making
- opportunities to learn about campus and community resources
- experiences with living in a diverse society

I constructed this course around these objectives, while allowing for some flexibility in the syllabus to incorporate feedback from all students in the class. I envision our class to be highly participatory, and while I am here to facilitate the classroom discussions, I would like all students to actively participate. Our classroom environment will be informal, although I ask that every member of the class demonstrate respect and appreciation for the diverse opinions of others.

The reading and writing expectations in my class will reflect the fact that you will only receive one (1) credit for successfully completing this course. Nevertheless, you will be required to complete some reading and writing. And yes, as some of your peers will declare, my University Studies course is generally a bit more rigorous than other sections of UNST. However, if you attend class and participate in the classroom discussions each week, complete the required reading, think and reflect critically about the issues raised in class, take your writing seriously and make this class a priority, I believe that this course will considerably enrich your academic experience while adequately preparing you for the other challenges ahead at the University.

COURSE CONTENT:

One of the most powerful concepts that we will weave into our classroom discussions this spring is achieving the goal of living and learning at a post-modern University (we will go over various definitions during the second day of class, including a definition of postmodernism). Throughout this course, you will hear me repeatedly discussing concepts of postmodernism, hermeneutics and a hermeneutical perspective, and the creation and dissemination of knowledge and truth. The questions for me that are most important about a postmodern perspective, or narrative, are not the *what* or the *when*, but the *how* and the *why*. During this course, we will constantly strive to improve *how* and *why* we discuss challenging ideas in class. Yet, ease your mind; if these concepts are new to you, we will discuss them at length at the beginning of the course. I plan to give a brief lesson on postmodernism and hermeneutics during our second class session.

Another extremely significant concept from a postmodern perspective is the value and power of language. As we construct, analyze, discuss, and oppose various ideas in class, I cannot stress enough the importance of using respectful and inclusive language to represent your distinct personal perspective. Furthermore, I recommend that we all make strides throughout the semester to challenge each other regarding the traditional and mainstream language used in class.

Because our classroom conversations will center on the assigned readings for each week, I must accentuate how important completing your reading each week will be for your success in this course. I've only assigned

two books this semester, and while some of you might argue this is a bit much for a one (1) credit course, I assure you that you'll find the reading to be enlightening and provocative. The assigned reading in this course will be much different from courses that you have attended in the past.

Overall, it is my hope that we will be able to embrace the ideal of incorporating *moral conversations* into our classroom discussions (you'll soon have a better understanding of this concept after reading Nash's article, which is your first reading assignment in this course). If done well, with attention to detail and richness of content, I believe that your classroom experience in this course will enhance your academic and co-curricular preparedness throughout your time at the University of Wyoming. I expect that each class period will be an effective use of time, and that we, as a community of learners, will grow and learn from the rich stories shared by each one of us.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND PUBLICATION:

Callenbach, E. (1975). *Ecotopia: A novel*. Bantam Books, New York, NY.

Nash, R. J. (1996). Fostering moral conversations in the college classroom. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 7(1), 83-105.

Quinn, D. (1992). *Ismael: An adventure of the mind and the spirit*. Bantam Books, New York, NY.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING:

(all of which have influenced our course curriculum)

Tuesdays with Morrie – Mitch Albom

On Education - John Dewey

On Liberty - J. S. Mill

Desert Solitaire - Edward Abbey

A Nietzsche Reader - Friedrich Nietzsche

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance - Robert Pirsig

Walden - Henry David Thoreau

Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom – bell hooks

Four arguments for the elimination of television – Jerry Mander

Empowering education – Ira Shor

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS:

As you know, this course is designed to acclimate you, as a student, to the requirements of University life. Therefore, I will be assessing your performance in this course based upon the following four criteria:

- Comprehension of the readings
- Successful completion of the writing assignments

- Completion of the other various assignments
- Participation in the classroom discussions

While I do not give points for attending class (remember, you are a student at the University, and therefore, you have the ultimate decision to attend class or not) I will be assessing your ability to integrate our classroom discussions into your papers. From my perspective, you will have a much better chance to succeed in this course if you attend class on a regular basis, complete the readings prior to the class, and participate in the subsequent discussions.

EXTRA CREDIT:

For those of you who would like to earn additional points throughout the semester, I would be happy to discuss various options on how to earn extra credit. Usually this will include attending a campus meeting or event surrounding a cultural celebration. There will be a small writing requirement associated with receiving extra credit. Please feel free to discuss your ideas with me before or after class.

References

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