University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives | Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

1994

"If You Can Fake That...": A Reflection on the Morality of Teaching

David A. Hoekema
Calvin College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Higher Education and Teaching Commons, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons

Hoekema, David A., ""If You Can Fake That...": A Reflection on the Morality of Teaching" (1994). *Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives*. 94.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives/94

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 5, Number 5, 1993-94

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

"If You Can Fake That..." A Reflection on the Morality of Teaching

David A. Hoekema, ***Calvin College***

Some years ago I attended the retirement dinner of a revered senior colleague, a man whose dedication to the study of literature was exceeded only by his dedication to his students. "I can sum up most of what I have learned from my years of teaching by observing that one thing is essential to good teaching," he said in his valedictory speech, "and that is honesty. If you can fake that, then you've got it made."

His intent was ironic, for he was a teacher who faked nothing. Yet his remark holds more truth than may initially appear. Paradoxical as it may seem, I believe I have known a few colleagues who have indeed learned to fake honesty. Such individuals may communicate an impression of personal concern that masks attempts at exploitation. Or they may present the calculated, affected persona of a suffering soul in need of human comfort, thus inducing students to a kind of self-disclosure out of place in the academy.

Students who believe they have been admitted by such professors to a rare sort of communion are sadly deceived. Such pretended openness may work no ill, particularly if the students have at least some awareness of the game. But it may work deep and lasting harm in the lives of those who, on awakening from their comforting dream, find their trust betrayed. Such manipulation, fortunately, is rare, and genuine honesty is more the norm.

What has gone wrong in situations in which there is dishonesty and manipulation? The diagnosis is not easy, for the signs of impropriety are subtle. The same tactics regularly deployed in the service of deceit and manipulation - expressions of personal concern, encouragement of student engagement, interaction that is personal as well as professional - are also characteristic of the best teachers. But the aspects of the morality of teaching of concern here become evident with close observation of the overall pattern of interaction between teacher and learner.

How can we identify a professor who is genuinely open and honest in the classroom? What are the traits of an instructor who both earns and deserves students' trust? Among them, I suggest, are the following:

Engagement with the subject. Honest instructors demonstrate a thorough command of the content of the course, including the ways current scholarship is changing the understanding of that content. Professors whose lectures change little from year to year, while new approaches and research challenge the received understandings of the discipline, demonstrate an irresponsibility that betrays student trust, while another instructor's enthusiasm invites students to commit themselves to serious study, expecting that their effort will enable them to understand what motivates their professor's interest.

Engagement with the students. An instructor earns students trust by listening to them-to their questions, their anxieties, their ideas-and responding honestly. Some instructors have the gift for relating to students in the freewheeling and informal manner of a peer, while others maintain more distance. Each of these patterns has its dangers-the former may skirt the bounds of propriety, the latter degenerate into aloofness-but each can convey a real interest in students.

Engagement with teaching. Instructors who regard teaching as a burdensome accompaniment to pursuit of their true vocation in the research lab or library may be effective teachers in many ways-more effective, sometimes, than a colleague whose love for teaching has caused him to neglect research and professional development. Good teachers must dedicate themselves to scholarship, both the

scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of research, for these two activities are not inconsistent but support and enhance each other. With rare exceptions, the very best teachers --- those who engage students most effectively in their disciplines, and in the task of learning itself --- are also excellent researchers. The improvement of teaching requires that at every level of academia we must both emphasize and demonstrate the mutually beneficial links between scholarly work and scholarly teaching.

Willingness to be a person as well as a professor. Trust is nurtured by instructors who offer themselves to their students as whole and mature persons, not merely as purveyors of knowledge. They do this by taking an interest in students' welfare and by communicating to students a sense of what is important in their lives, both within and outside the academy. The appropriate boundaries of such openness are a matter of judgment, but between the extremes of saying too much and too little about personal matters lies a zone of openness that acknowledges the professional aspect of the relationship and yet includes the personal.

Openness about fundamental personal commitments. Many college students struggle with issues of religious and personal identity, sexuality, and maturity. Good teachers help them in their struggle by providing examples of how these issues can be faced and resolved. Once again, judgment is needed, and candor can degenerate into impropriety. In this respect, we can find extremes of every sort in the academy today. In some classes at some universities, students are subtly ridiculed if they do not embrace their instructor's views. In other classes at other universities students dare not identify themselves as gay, or as religious believers, in the face of their professors' virulent prejudices. The ideal classroom situation is one in which the honesty of the instructor- and vigilance against closed-mindedness- evokes a similar openness in students. Such an atmosphere nourishes growth in every dimension of the person: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

Respect for students' individual judgment. This is a necessary complement to an instructor's willingness to talk about his own religious, political, and personal identity. There is an ever-present danger that the instructor's position of authority may turn discussion

into indoctrination. It is not sufficient simply to state that students should form their own judgments. It is also essential, when topics of deep personal importance arise, to structure the classroom in such a way that students' independent thinking is both nourished and recognized. Here, too, tactics need to be adapted to the institution, to the instructor, and to the subject matter. At a church-related college, particularly one where many students share a common religious background, students may be all too ready to take an instructor's judgment on matters of politics or religion as authoritative. At a state university the difficulty may be just the opposite: students may be so inured to the cacophony of religious or sexual politics around them that they dismiss any deep commitment on the part of instructors or peers as a delusion. The ideal classroom situation in either situation is one that challenges each student, whatever prejudices he or she may have brought to the classroom, to explore matters of personal and social value in a serious and thoughtful way.

I add one more trait that makes for trust, mundane as it may seem in comparison to the others mentioned: **Not talking all of the time**. A simple but basic requirement for mutuality in the classroom is the instructor's willingness to give students a voice in their learning. Just how this translates into classroom procedures varies with circumstances. The amount of time spent in guided discussion in introductory philosophy might be unworkable in organic chemistry. Yet even where lectures predominate, a skillful instructor stops from time to time and invites students to reflect.

Vivid in my memory is one of my own undergraduate philosophy class, taught by a specialist in Descartes who died a few months ago. He walked into the classroom, several books under his arm, and announced, in a downcast tone, "I was up until 2 this morning trying to figure out what Leibniz is trying to say in the text I assigned you, and I'm sorry to say I really can't make sense of it yet. So today's class is optional--if you have a calculus test, please go and study for it. But if some of you want to stick around, we'll look at some passages together and see if we can make sense of them."

A few students sheepishly moved to pack up their books, and the instructor encouraged them- "I'm not kidding- I don't want you to stay if you have something you need to work on." Then he sat at the

lecture table and, in a slow and dispirited way, began reading some passages aloud. But from time to time, as he suggested a way of relating them to each other and students offered their suggestions, he leaped up and ran to the blackboard to write out a sentence or two. Sometimes he erased them soon afterward; sometimes he let them stand.

By the end of the hour, to be honest, I had gained very little understanding of Leibniz. My instructor's confusion was real, and the overall import of the texts was difficult to untangle. But I had learned something about the vocation of philosophy, of being both a teacher and a student of philosophy, that I have never forgotten: that the study of philosophical texts can be difficult and frustrating even for an expert. And I had seen a teacher honest enough to admit he was not able to offer very much help, yet open enough to invite others to join in his slow search for a satisfactory understanding.

In a sense, all that I have said in these brief comments is an elucidation of the observation quoted at the outset of this piece. Effective teaching-that cannot only inform but transform-is impossible without honesty. A teacher who trusts students, and whose students return the same trust, is a teacher who knows subject, students, and self. And those traits, in the end, cannot be faked.