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Don't Go There: When to Abandon Lesson Plans and Venture, Humbly, Into Ground Zero

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When to abandon lesson plans and venture, humbly, into Ground Zero.

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The events of September 11th, 2001 provoked an immediate and impassioned debate about classroom practice between two academics writing in *The Modern Language Association Newsletter* shortly after the disaster. Both were lecturers of literature and one, MLA President Sylvia Molloy, wrote about how she had opted to allow her students to use substantial class time to discuss the attacks on the World Trade Center and its implications. As she describes it, the discussion was ostensibly related to certain stories of Jorge Luis Borges but, she writes, these "provided substance for one of the most thoughtful debates I have ever had in a class, a debate where literature and the events of 11 September profitably intersected, where notions of courage, cowardice, betrayal, resentment, loyalty, oppression, and deceit were discussed in many different (at times conflicting) contexts, a debate in which we all learned something about one another, something about ourselves" (Molloy 3).

Writing in response, Felicia Ackerman objected to Molloy's use of classroom time to "share feelings" and facilitate self-knowledge. Instead, Ackerman had used her class time on that day to discuss the previously assigned text, insisting that "like most people, students are already interested in themselves. My aim in teaching is to stimulate their interest in other things, without the need to give these things therapeutic application to students' personal lives or feelings about current events" (Ackerman 30).

Officious in tone, perhaps, but pedagogically sound, right?

In a different article, this one about the language classroom specifically, Scott Thornbury recounts how, early in his teaching career, he was cautioned by his boss in Cairo not to mention Egypt's "October 6th War." He says that, "like many subjects (sex, alcohol, and politics in general) the War – and its outcomes – were off limits" (Thornbury 35). His students, however, were not nearly so circumspect and insisted upon talking politics with their teachers, thereby triggering, as Thornbury proudly writes, "some lively language productive discussions: a case of the learners subverting the curriculum by seizing control of the discourse agenda" (Thornbury 35).

Given the "language productive" outcome of Thornbury's permissive approach, his more democratic stance would likewise appear to be pedagogically sound.

But still, Ackerman's sentiments remain convincing: spontaneous or digressive classroom discussion, however welcome, should never cross a line into group therapy, group counselling, or social work. We language and literature teachers may be sensitive, articulate folk, but psychotherapy and conflict resolution are clearly outside our remit.

Surely, though, there must be some clear justification for allowing either literary or linguistic course content or, for that matter, the course content of any other academic discipline from astronomy, to biology, to chemistry or zoology, to prompt 'real-life' musings in the classroom. Indeed, many scholars and professionals even see the classroom as a legitimate forum for, if not social work, outright social engineering. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's famous *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969) comes to mind. As do any number of feminist, Marxist, or new historicist critical writings related to teaching. And if many of us disapprove, nonetheless, of teachers using their positions of authority to grind their own social or

political axes, most of us will agree despite ourselves that there is simply no such thing as an ideology-free classroom, any more than there is such a thing as an ideology-free newsroom, an ideology-free boardroom, or even an ideology-free laundry room (detergent being a politically contested commodity). Or, as Professor Rod Ellis succinctly puts it, "the way English is taught implicitly disseminates the cultural values of the person doing the teaching" (Ellis 1).

Indeed. But on what grounds can we, especially those of us who are language teachers, actively and legitimately *encourage* the inclusion of our students' lived experiences and perceptions in our classroom procedures? And, once we have ventured in this direction, how can we prevent our own natural didacticism as educators from seeking to shape the personal, moral, or ethical values and outlooks of our students?

The simple and, I feel, too facile response to the first of my questions is that we can allow all manner of personal, political, social or moral reflection in the language classroom simply on the grounds that *any* communication in the target language is worthwhile communication. But such a position, if adopted without caution, self-awareness, or indeed humility, risks the degeneration of classroom language practice into unstructured free-for-all: free-for-all that occurs at the expense of real or, dare I say, 'measurable' learning. In other words, planning and strategy is required of us as teachers even when we let students dictate the agenda. The role of facilitator, therefore, remains very much ours whenever we permit our classrooms to become venues of free and opinionated exchange.

A less facile response to my first question, then, would be one which presumes that the in-class sharing of students' lived experiences and perceptions is valuable only when, or at least primarily when, it is encouraged in the spirit of asking

questions, more so than in the hope of answering them. The less we as teachers are interested in the substantive outcomes of our students debates and exchanges, and the more we are interested in their abilities *to* debate, the more legitimate our practice. And one of the ways in which we can prevent our own didacticism from seeking to shape student opinion, or 'correct' student values, or otherwise therapeutically respond to students' real-life concerns, is by, first, declaring to our students our own subjectivity. We must wholeheartedly admit to them that we have orientations, mentalities, sympathies of our own -- admit especially that we are not entirely aware of the constructed-ness of many of our assumptions -- and then proceed in ways that keep our teaching emphasis squarely on the process of questioning, rather than on the finality of answering. This is where our humility must come into play.

I recently asked students in an undergraduate English Language course called "Written Expression & Textual Analysis" to write a short essay that, using sources, would contrast two opposing points of view and then arrive at a recommendation or solution of some sort. They are International Business and Language Students, and I make every effort to come prepared. So I readily suggested some likely topics as the opposing airline management styles of Ryanair's Michael O'Leary and Virgin's Richard Branson, or conflicting mass opinion about the World Trade Organisation. *They* then suggested I explain what was meant by the hundreds of VOTE NO and VOTE YES signs all over the city of Dublin in relation to the abortion referendum that week. I never even saw it coming. For the next quarter of an hour, I found myself trying to neutrally delineate -- for two Chinese students, four French, and three Italians -- an intelligible outline of current Irish engagement with what is no less than an existentially complex dilemma. They could not have been more absorbed by the topic. They struggled with vocabulary in order to pose questions, sometimes

consulting each other in their mother tongues, and then venturing another comment. What ensued for the next half an hour was certainly, to use Thornbury's phrase, "language productive."

But it was also emotionally thorny and culturally risky. The Chinese students couldn't quite grasp why the topic was controversial to begin with, abortion being entirely legal and commonplace in China. The Italians couldn't quite grasp the Chinese students' incomprehension. The French students were interested in exploring the strong religious sentiments of many Italian students they'd met. Toward the end of the session, I tried to get the group to somehow categorise for hypothetical writing purposes the numerous perspectives and viewpoints they'd raised. I wished I had been better prepared. But even though I didn't quite know how to quickly harness the critical energy that erupted in class that day, I am certain that I effectively kept my own views from the students and that my determined neutrality allowed their critical enquiry to flourish. And ultimately, it is the opportunity for critical enquiry that (if we are so inclined) provides the pedagogical rationale for allowing socially, morally, or politically controversial issues into the classroom.

No doubt certain kinds of courses lend themselves better than others to 'real world' penetration – language and literature courses more so than accountancy, perhaps, or Business English more so than English for Special Purposes. But if there are any subjects out there currently being taught that bear no relation to life as we live it, subjects that prompt *no* consideration of social, ethical, moral, or philosophical significance, then perhaps we must ask ourselves why such subjects are being taught at all. And if, as is more likely the case, there are no such subjects, and since, as is certainly the case, there is simply no such thing as an ideology-free, value-free, 'vacuum-packed' classroom, then we might as well go ahead and make the classroom

a critically empowering venue for students. *What* they're critical of isn't out business; *that* they're critical certainly can be.

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Additional Reading

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