

It's Time to End 'Courseocentrism'

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It's often said that one of the great failings of American higher education is that teaching fails to get the respect it deserves. It seems to me, however, that, especially in the humanities, the current academic generation is significantly more dedicated to teaching than most of us were when I started out in this profession in the early sixties. The real problem, as I see it, is that the way we think about teaching needs to change.

At a time when amazing new forms of connectivity are made possible by new digital technologies and when much of the best recent work in the humanities has made us more aware of the social and collective nature of intellectual work, we still think of teaching in ways that are narrowly private and individualistic, as something we do in isolated classrooms with little or no knowledge of what our colleagues are doing in the next classroom or the next building and little chance for each other's courses to become reference points in our own. Indeed, we betray our assumption that teaching is by nature a solo act in our unreflecting use of "the classroom" as a synecdoche or shorthand for all teaching and learning, as if "the way we teach now" were reducible to "the way I teach now."

The isolated, privatized classroom is itself a product of a more affluent era for American universities, a luxury made possible by the generous economic support they enjoyed during the first two-thirds of the 20th century. In this heady economic climate, a university could grow by expanding its playing field, proliferating new courses, fields, subfields, and scholarly perspectives while giving each enough separate space to ward off unproductive turf wars. To make a long story short, we became terrific at adding exciting new theories, fields, texts, cultures, and courses to the mix, but we've been challenged, to say the least, when it comes to connecting what we've added. Interdisciplinary programs have helped make some connections, but ultimately they have reproduced fragmentation rather than lessened it, since interdisciplinary programs tend to be disconnected from each other as well as from the disciplines. And now that we don't have the financial luxury to keep adding on -- as is seen in our alarming overdependence on underpaid and overworked adjuncts -- we need to get a lot better at putting the components into dialogue, which means getting on the same page in our teaching in ways we lack practice at and may find uncomfortable.

Exhorting you to "get on the same page" may sound strange coming from me, since, if you know nothing else about me, you probably know that I've been arguing for years that we should ["teach the conflicts,"](#) putting our controversies at the center of our courses and programs, and I've often complained that we hide our disagreements from our students or reveal them only in fleeting glimpses. But I want to argue that, as much as we do conceal our disagreements from students, we also conceal our agreements from them as well as from ourselves. And teaching in non-communicating black boxes helps prevent us from discovering and taking advantage of the fact that in fundamental ways, as I will argue in a moment, we already are on the same page.

I believe that our experience of teaching in hermetically sealed classrooms makes us -- to coin a word -- "courseocentric." Courseocentrism -- like its ethno-, ego-, and Euro- counterparts -- is a kind of tunnel vision

in which our little part of the world becomes the whole. We get so used to the restricted confines of our own courses that we become oblivious to the fact -- or simply uninterested in it -- that students are enrolled in other courses whose teachers at any moment may be undercutting our most cherished beliefs. As my retired colleague Larry Poston recently observed, there is something remarkable about the “almost entire lack of interest we manifest as a profession in what is going on in our colleagues' classes.”

To get on the same page, of course, we would need to know something about each other's teaching and the ways of thinking behind it, and such knowledge might lead to embarrassing disagreements. So perhaps the less we know about each other the better. It's not surprising, then, that instead of asking us to try to get on the same page in our teaching, universities assume that each of us will figure out how to teach our subjects on our own.

This assumption is understandable, since many of us became academics in the first place because we liked figuring things out on our own and were good at it. I myself certainly appreciate my classroom freedom, and am not about to ask that I be made to submit a lesson plan to my department head, a curriculum committee, or a district supervisor, as many high school teachers must do. I think I understand why untenured and adjunct faculty members may feel that the classroom is a relatively safe zone that would be threatened if their colleagues knew more about their teaching. I know that on my own really bad days as a teacher I'm relieved that the train wreck has been witnessed only by my students and not my senior colleagues and deans.

Still, I can't help wondering if our professionalism and our prestige would be fatally compromised if we had to coordinate our teaching the way high school faculties often do. I also suspect that we overestimate the safety our classroom privacy confers, and that more transparency and collaboration in our teaching would not only help students make better sense of us, but would ultimately be as safe for the most vulnerable among us as a curriculum that lets us hide out from each other.

The learning community model is one obvious way to go, but an excellent first step would be to pair first year composition and general education courses, as many colleges and universities now do. A step beyond that would be to pair some science and humanities courses and courses in ancient and modern periods. If we don't make such pairings, students will lose sight of the contrasts and continuities that define the sciences and humanities and differentiate the ancient from the modern. We're also missing an opportunity every time a big period course isn't co-taught by colleagues from several different disciplines. Then, too, the more we are part of a team, the less easily replaceable we become -- a fact that could provide more job security to adjunct faculty members.

The trouble with leaving it up to each of us to figure things out on our own is that it really means leaving it up to our students to figure us out on their own. The assumption is that if we all teach our courses conscientiously, each of us making sure our demands are as clear and transparent as possible, our students will make coherent sense of our diverse perspectives and will eventually be socialized into our intellectual community. The problem is that, no matter how transparent each course is, as long as we know little about our colleagues' courses our students figure to come away with confusingly mixed messages that will be hard to make sense of without more help than we are providing. As the educational thinker Joseph Tussman once put it, all the

courses in a program may be admirably coherent, “but a collection of coherent courses may be simply an incoherent collection.”

It would take too much space to list all the confusingly mixed messages students get from an average set of humanities courses in an average academic day. College students have already coped with such mixed messages on making the transition from high school, when what had been called “Language Arts” mysteriously evaporated and morphed into foreign languages and “English” -- a word that is itself far from helpful or self-explanatory. Once in college, a student can go from one teacher who passionately believes that interpretations of literary texts are correct or incorrect -- or at least more correct or incorrect than other interpretations -- to another teacher who smiles or rolls his or her eyes at the naivete of such a belief; or from one teacher who expects undergraduates to analyze literature by using a rigorous methodology and terminology to another who thinks it sufficient if they learn to appreciate books in whatever way is comfortable to them; or from one teacher who discourages students from summarizing, telling them, “I’ve already read the text -- I want to know what you think,” to another who says, “I don’t care what you think, I want to see how carefully you’ve read the text.” No wonder students often come up and ask, “Do you want my ideas in this paper or just a summary of the reading?” And I do not even mention the discrepancies between the humanities and science and business.

Our classrooms allow us on the faculty to tune each other out, but our students don’t have that luxury. They consequently develop their own protective forms of coursecentrism, adapting to a compartmentalized curriculum by mentally compartmentalizing us. I’m thinking of the familiar student practice of “psyching out” successive teachers and giving each of us whatever we seem to want even if it flatly contradicts what the last teacher wanted. Students thus learn to become relativists at ten a.m. and objectivists after lunch. We often complain about the cynicism of this shape-shifting act, but arguably it is precisely the behavior our curricular mixed messages encourage. Since the disjunctions between courses prevent them from forming an intelligible collectivity, students end up concluding that the only way they can figure us out is one at a time. This virtually means starting over from scratch in every new course.

Some defend this mixed message curriculum as a healthy cognitive workout regimen, an antidote to dogmatic certainty, or even as the perfect training for dealing with the ambiguities, instabilities, and unpredictable changes of life in the 21st century. And the high achieving minority of students do flourish under this curriculum, since they are able to synthesize its disparate views or summarize the places where they conflict, creating on their own the connected conversation that the curriculum obscures and thus entering it as insiders. These high achievers detect the places where their diverse courses converge and therefore experience the redundancy and reinforcement our minds need, according to information scientists, to make sense of the world. But for the struggling majority, the discontinuities from one course to the next tend to erase this redundancy and reinforcement, leading them to come away with a greatly exaggerated picture of the differences between faculty members, disciplines, and fields while missing the common practices underneath. When taking courses becomes a process of serially giving your teachers whatever they seem to want -- assuming you can figure out what that is to begin with -- jumping through hoops replaces deep socialization into the intellectual community. In other words, the disconnect between courses and teachers ultimately reproduces itself in a disconnect between students and academic culture itself.

Coursecentrism thus goes far toward explaining the apathy and disengagement that educational researchers have found in reports like the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#). It also helps explain the finding of less well publicized studies that students who learn a subject well enough to get a good grade in a course often fail when they are asked to apply what they learned to a context outside the course. In one study discussed by Howard Gardner in his book *The Unschooled Mind*, elementary school students who did well on tests that required them to know that the earth is spherical and revolves around the sun reverted to their earlier flat earth beliefs when tested after the course. Their learning was apparently so tied to the course in which they'd learned it that once the course was over they quickly forgot it and regressed to their pre-educated understandings. As my correspondent Jim Salvucci put it, "What you learn in a course stays in the course."

Again, however, underlying the great diversity and difference in the substantive content of today's academic intellectual culture lies an important area of common ground with respect to its fundamental practices, though this common ground is hidden both from students and teachers by the disconnection of courses. Whether we follow Lacan or Leavis, we would not have gotten very far in the university unless we had mastered the fundamentals of reading, analysis, and argument, of summarizing others and using them to define our own ideas, that comprise what we now call "critical thinking skills." It is this implicit agreement on core practices -- as distinct from the content of our ideas -- that explains why colleagues who otherwise have little in common tend to agree overwhelmingly on who the good students are. But our separation from each other in the curriculum prevents us from discovering the existence of these practices and thus alerting students of their existence.

This failure to recognize our common ground has marked the culture war debates that have embroiled us since the mid-1980s. As I have argued elsewhere, we became so caught up in the conflicts over which books should be taught and how that we lost sight of the fact that for most American students -- again with the exception of the high-achieving few -- the great stumbling block has always been the culture of books and book discussion as such, regardless which side gets to draw up the reading list. And today we are still so caught up in the battles between traditional and trendy versions of intellectual culture that we lose sight of the fact that to most students it is the nebulousness of intellectual culture itself that is the problem, whether the form this culture comes in is traditional or trendy.

I have elsewhere described coming up against this problem myself in a course in which I had juxtaposed assigned readings by the arch-traditionalist Allan Bloom and the radical African American feminist bell hooks. To any academic insider, Bloom and hooks are so far apart ideologically as to be on different planets, but I realized that for some of my students they were virtually indistinguishable, both using an obscure academic language to discuss problems the students had a hard time seeing as problems. In a succinct formulation of the point that Michael Bérubé offered me after hearing a talk in which I struggled to articulate it, any two eggheads, no matter how far apart ideologically, will always be far closer to each other than to non-eggheads. Again, the reason is that eggheads -- intellectuals -- whether they are on the Left or the Right, are defined and differentiated from outsiders by their membership in a common culture of ideas and arguments, a common culture that our curricular mixed messages hide from our students and our non-communicating courses hide from us.

I'm often told that I'm naïve in thinking that academics will ever willingly consent to coordinate their courses across their partisan divisions, much less argue with each other in the ways such coordination might require. I am told that, whether rightly or wrongly, arguing out our differences just isn't the way the academic world works. Yet it's striking to me that we argue out our differences all the time when we review each other's books and articles and engage each other in our publications and professional conferences.

In fact, I'm always shocked by the contrast between the academic conference scene, with its intense and lively -- if often acrimonious debates -- and our isolation from each other when we go back home. It's not uncommon at a conference for me to run into a colleague from my own department whom I've passed in the hallways for years and discover that we have common interests we never suspected. I wonder why we had to travel hundreds of miles to have a conversation about the professional issues we care most about, but it's apparently the fact that we care about them that makes them too risky for home consumption. It's as if academic conference culture itself came into existence to satisfy a desire for intellectual community that wasn't met by campus culture -- a fact that might guide us in changing campus culture. When I reflect that I've probably learned more about how to be an academic at conferences than I ever did in graduate school, I'm all the more convinced that there has to be a better way to organize intellectual life for educational purposes than dicing it into non-communicating courses.

I mentioned earlier that such courses are at odds with the new forms of connectivity enabled by our new electronic technology. They are also at odds with the most sophisticated and original work in the humanities during the last generation, which has taught us that what seem to be free-standing identities—whether they be texts or selves -- are produced by collective structures of discourse and representation. It seems we have deconstructed the autonomous, self-authorizing subject and the autonomous, self-authorizing literary work. It's time we got around to deconstructing the autonomous, self-authorizing course.