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How Teachers Need to Deal with the Seen, the Unseen, the Improbable,

MARSHALL GREGORY

and the Nearly Imponderable

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The seen

In the teaching seminars and workshops I have been directing for more than twenty-five years, teachers consistently identify the following classroom issues as the most visible and vivid for them:

- Issues of authority: "Do my students grant me the authority that I deserve?"
- Issues of likability: "Do my students like me as a person—do they find me entertaining, funny, and charming?"
- Issues of coverage: "How am I going to cover all the material on the syllabus?"
- Issues of classroom participation: "Why aren't more students eager to talk—why does this one student never shut up?"
- Issues of student resistance: "Why do so many students not like this wonderful material I'm presenting, and why do they not study harder to learn it?"
- Issues of competing demands: "If I spend as much time preparing for classes and grading papers as I think I should, how am I ever going to have time to do the scholarly work that I need for tenure or promotion?"

I would be the last to say that these "seen" issues are unimportant, but I am distressed by the extent to which many teachers seem to spend all their time obsessing over them as if they were the only compelling items on their teaching agenda. Classrooms' visible variables are what philosophers would call a *necessary* part of all teaching, but they are far from being a *sufficient* ground of good teaching.

One consequence of failing to see the subtler classroom variables is that many teachers find themselves persistently frustrated in diagnosing the causes of classroom dysfunctions. If

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this state of affairs never improves, some will eventually lose heart and start just going through the motions. Another consequence is that a few teachers begin to blame their students, which is the first step toward becoming one of those teachers who spends an entire career becoming increasingly bitter and contemptuous about such heinous student crimes as "entitlement," "laziness," "poor spelling," and "using Google for everything"—as if we faculty members never act entitled, feel lazy, make spelling errors, or use Google.

The unseen

Student passions, student fears, and student motives are among the many components of classroom dynamics that exist outside the range of the visible and that thus remain opaque to many teachers. Also invisible are the education narratives from movies and television that fill students' heads with unrealistic expectations about both teachers and learning. The mostly unseen component that I want to focus on here, however, derives from the fact that teaching is always first and foremost a *social* relationship. Whatever social dynamics develop between students and teachers are more important than whatever happens between students and teachers on the academic front. This is true because teacher-student social relations act as a gateway that, when closed, makes students' access to academic content seem unduly difficult if not fearsome, but that, when open, invites students to claim the academic content as their own.

Many teachers will immediately and urgently (if not defensively) reply that they are fully aware that the classroom is a site of ongoing social relationships: "I always take care to be respectful and pleasant to my students." But this level of social awareness is little more than a matter of manners. While having good manners in classrooms is never a trivial matter, it is not a source of prolonged or analytical reflection about how social relations can and usually do dominate classroom interactions. The dynamics of social relationships can yield telling and rich insights about the dynamics that govern teacher-student relations and set students up for either engagement or nonengagement with academic and intellectual content. Taking this perspective, for example, suddenly makes visible the often unseen fact that students' ethical judgments about teachers occupy the foreground of students' thinking, even as teachers are concentrating on quite different matters such as their own authority, disciplinary coverage, academic standards, and student silences.

Less than five minutes after meeting a new teacher, students do what we all do less than five minutes after meeting any new person, namely, run rapidly through a checklist of ethical criteria as a way of assessing the new person and deciding whether we will want to spend time in his or her company. The items in our checklist tend to pop up in our minds as questions: Is this person honest—is he or she going to tell me the truth? Is this person fair—is he or she person going to treat me justly? Is this person generous—is he or she going to share materials, ideas, or companionship with me? Is this person compassionate and kind—is he or she going to help me if I am in trouble? Is this a person of self-control or self-indulgence—is he or she capable of keeping a focus on me and my interests alongside a focus on his or her own interests?

The fact that the ethical inferences we make about new people are sometimes wrong never leads us to stop making such judgments about the next new person we meet. We treat these ethical judgments as nondiscretionary; it is more important to us to make them than always to make them correctly. Nor does making ethical judgments mean that we will never change our minds. Because we run through our ethical checklist so rapidly, almost intuitively, we may seldom realize that we are always doing it. The fact that we do so unselfconsciously indicates how deeply programmed we are for this kind of cognition.

Whether our friends, lovers, spouses, and colleagues tell us the truth, show us compassion, and treat us with fairness has everything to do with how open we are to their influence. And if this is true about our relations with friends, lovers, spouses, and colleagues, it is also true about our relations with students. This is perhaps the biggest unseen elephant in the undergraduate classroom. Students are open to our influence and instruction precisely to the degree that they see us, their teachers, as trustworthy ethical agents: honest, compassionate, generous, civil, respectful, self-controlled, and fair. It's not that students are always right in the judgments they make about us, and it's not

that they don't care whether we are professionally accomplished. Ethical evaluation is simply the foundation of all social relationships.

When first encountering a new class, many teachers are not worried about this reality (even though they should be) because they don't *see* it. Instead, they ask themselves self-absorbed questions such as, do these students see me as the true expert that I aspire to be? Do they accept my authority? Do they recognize how smart I am? Are they going to work hard to learn the stuff I'm teaching? What many teachers see, in other words, is *themselves* as reflected in the mirror of their own concerns. They do not see that their students are busy making ethical evaluations. As a result, there is an immediate and potentially destructive disjunction between teachers' and students' concerns. If teachers and students are not forming their expectations of classroom dynamics on the same grounds, it follows that many misunderstandings, not to mention potential resentments and dismissals on both sides, will inevitably occur.

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The improbable

While all of us would accept "educator" as an accurate descriptive term for what we do, few of us actually enter classrooms *as* educators. We enter instead as disciplinary specialists—biochemists, urban sociologists, Dickens scholars, evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists, or whatever—and we fail to recognize that *the structure of knowledge in our specialties is not the same thing and will never be the same thing as a philosophy of education*. We commonly slide our disciplinary knowledge into the space that should be occupied by a philosophy of education and then barrel along, ignoring the fact that we have performed a dishonest sleight of hand on both ourselves and our students.

Instead of developing a philosophy of education, many faculty members rely on feeble clichés and well-worn bromides. If I ask any faculty member to tell me what's important about his or her discipline, I get eight or nine coherent, well-developed paragraphs before they even take a breath. But if I ask what's educational about education, I am lucky to get four lame sentences. The inability to answer this question in any developed, nuanced, or complex way points to a deep but mostly hidden spot of intellectual softness at the center of our profession.

When students ask their own version of my question, it comes out as two questions: Why do I have to take this course? And why will X—this disciplinary material that you, my teacher, are so lathered about—be valuable to me later on in life? Some teachers react resentfully because they hear these questions as disrespectful or hostile. When *I* ask faculty members what's educational about education, I don't get resentment, but I do get clichés. I have been told countless times, for example, that the goal of education is to make students "well-rounded" or to turn students into "critical thinkers." If I am really unlucky, I get the cheesiest cliché of the lot: "students need to be able to talk about something besides work at cocktail parties." If it is not a scandal it is certainly troubling, even dumbfounding, that educators cannot say what's educational about education. If teachers and students walk into college classrooms possessing no developed theory of education, then no one can set things up from the beginning of a course in such a way that all the participants share some common notion of what's educational about education and how the disciplinary specialty of *this* course fits into *that* educational agenda.

The nearly imponderable

In addition to dealing with the seen, the unseen, and the improbable, teachers also need to learn how to deal with the nearly imponderable, those issues about learning, identity, selfhood, and autonomy that are hugely difficult for all of us to think about. As agents in a pluralistic society and as teachers who say we value the life of the mind, we cannot simply put the terms of our interactions with other people—especially students—on autopilot. Most of us think that critical intelligence lies at the heart of our personal and professional integrity. Most of us think that we cannot be good persons unless we are actively considering how the choices we make turn us into the persons we become. And finally, most of think that we cannot be good teachers if we agree to think only what our powerful chiefs or our social traditions or our religious priests tell us to think.

As teachers, most of us share a deep intuition telling us that critical autonomy is a profoundly important goal of living, both for us and for our students. By critical autonomy I mean the cognitive and intellectual transcendence that allows us to inspect our entire existence in the same way that the power of introspection allows us to inspect our cognition: as if from above and with some degree of objectivity. The objectivity we can achieve by means of critical autonomy is never absolute, but, with practice and hard work, we can employ it well enough at least to avoid leading lives based merely on internal impulse or external programming. Critical autonomy is also our primary tool for avoiding lives dominated by fantasy, illusion, and rationalization.

Critical autonomy is a hugely difficult state of cognitive and intellectual maturity to achieve, must less maintain. We are never completely successful in deploying it against every temptation to indulge in self-deception, impulse, and social programming. Yet critical autonomy is perhaps *the* crucial feature of an educated mind because it allows us to critique the terms of our own existence. Exercising critical autonomy means that we do not accept the status quo at any level of life as natural, as inevitable, or as mere common sense exempt from interrogation and criticism. We do not exempt from

criticism our beliefs, our purchasing habits, our social attitudes, our current political order, the structure of our own desires, or anything else.

Critical autonomy is perhaps *the* crucial feature of an educated mind

It is crucially important for us—as educators, not as disciplinary specialists—to help our students achieve some robust power of critical autonomy. Our students stand in a small existential space—as, indeed, do we all—that can, if properly cultivated, become a space of freedom and autonomy. The cultivation of this space, however, is always contested because the space itself is positioned between two huge walls that are always coming toward each other and threatening to squeeze out all freedom and autonomy. Our students stand in radical vulnerability to these great walls of pressure unless we, their teachers, help them think about their position in life and give them the tools to resist.

One great wall pushing toward our students is composed of nature, our own human nature as shaped in large part by our evolutionary history, our brain structure, our perceptual

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system, and our physiological configuration. To be thoroughly squeezed into this wall is to become an unreflective creature of impulses, appetites, needs, and desires. The other great wall is composed of culture, the entire range of cultural programming that begins shaping our perceptions and tweaking our desires almost from the moment we are born. To be thoroughly squeezed into this wall is to become an unreflective creature of whatever cultural forces get to us first or most vividly.

When and if these two great walls meet, the space for freedom and autonomy disappears. When this happens to teachers, we become soulless professionals—perhaps successful, but never questioning the terms by which we acquired our success. When this happens to students, they can go through an entire college *experience* without getting a genuine college *education*, for they will never realize what opportunities for freedom and autonomy they have missed. If, indeed, their noneducational college experience has primed them to do well in the corporate world, they may think that college has worked wonderfully well for them. But without the ability to critique the terms of our existence, all of us are stuck with whatever we happen to get in life because we have no genuine criteria, other than material goods and physical sensation, for evaluating the superiority or inferiority of one mode of life over another.

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Do we merely help our students succeed? Do we merely enable them to "go along to get along"? If so, we are doing what most of them and their parents think they want us to do. We are doing exactly what they keep pressuring us to do, namely, preparing those who are our students now to fit in as citizens and workers later. If, however, we teach students that the most important thing they can learn in college is how to critique the terms of their own existence, then we have to admit that we are preparing them *not* to fit in. We have to admit that an education for critical autonomy is a countercultural project. To some extent, we are preparing our students *not* to be happy in the everyday sense of the term. We know that we can make life easier for our students if we just help them fit in, teach them how to swim in groups like schooling fish. After all, the only achievements that truly depend on critical autonomy are excellence and truth, and in the worlds of marketing, politics, and getting-and-spending, excellence and truth are viewed as discretionary commodities—if not as downright counterproductive for worldly success. Are we sure that we want to saddle our students with a passion for excellence and a commitment to truth? It will be sure to cost them something socially and financially, and most of our students, not to mention their parents, think that college should produce a payoff, not a cost.

When I say that critical autonomy *costs*, I mean that it forces us to live always with uncomfortable degrees of complexity, ambiguity, deferred gratification, more questions than answers, intellectual dissonance, moral humility, and tolerance for the ideas of people we dislike. If we teach students to view critical autonomy as just another casual skill in the pocket of the liberally educated graduate, then our students will never deploy critical autonomy when anything serious is at stake; they will only deploy it in social contexts where it will cost them nothing in the way of material rewards, social recognition, or professional reputation.

Teaching critical autonomy also costs. My deepest instincts as a teacher tell me that this is what I ought to be doing with my time and energy, that helping my students become critically autonomous agents is a job worth getting up for in the morning and staying up late for at night. Yet I cannot help but wonder by what right I as a teacher—or, for that matter, you as a teacher—insinuate myself into students' lives and teach them to question the status quo, common sense, their values, their society's values, their self-identity, the difference between

what *people* say is true and what the *evidence* says is true, and so on. If the main thing my students and their parents want from me is to teach how to "go along to get along," who am I to say they are wrong? What do I think the contemporary emphasis on "accountability" is all about? And since when do *I* despise getting along? Since when am I unconcerned about my annual raise or my professional reputation or whether I drive a nice car? How do I configure a practically achievable, professionally responsible, and morally defensible set of teacherly practices when these two aims—the teaching of critical autonomy and the aim of going along to get along—exist at such odds with each other, and yet each appeals to me intensely for validation and implementation? These are not just problems of professional roles and personal integrity; they are existential problems of great complexity and great subtlety.

I try to show my students that the structure of their desires is the surest predictor of the kinds of persons they will turn out to be

Perhaps the persistent wrestling with these problems is itself the point. Arguably, it helps prevent us from becoming ideological, hidebound, intolerant, glib thinkers. Persistent wrestling with nearly imponderable problems keeps us on the lookout for insights, not answers, and it increases our openness to other people's views and ideas. It also confers two other, vastly valuable benefits. First, it simply makes us better wrestlers. The more we think about these problems, the better we get at holding their nuances and complexities in our minds all at once, balanced against each other although always in motion. Second—and here is where the metaphor begins to break down—if practiced as a mode of life instead of deployed as a utilitarian skill, the persistent wrestling can sometimes become a set of moves that possesses its own beauty and grace as the moves show themselves to be the material manifestation of the otherwise invisible life of the mind.

How, then, do I justify being more concerned about my students' critical autonomy than their future income? The answer is that I *don't* justify it—at least not in glib, self-satisfied terms. I am concerned about my future income, and my students are not contemptible moneygrubbers because they are concerned about theirs. At the same time, however, I try to show my students that the structure of their desires is the surest predictor of the kinds of persons they will turn out to be, and that if all they care about is their future income, they will indeed become contemptible moneygrubbers simply because they lack the ethical imagination and the social vision to become anything else.

In the end, I do not always know how to balance what we owe Caesar against what we owe our ideals and our future levels of development, especially our *students'* future levels of development. But there are a few things I do know, and I try to use these as guides for where I invest my concern and for how I comport myself. First, I know the world can be better than it is. Much of the world's terrible suffering, mayhem, and destruction could be alleviated overnight if only we cared enough. Second, I know the world will never become better if all of us sit around waiting for an anointed savior or the guy next door. Third, I know that people with educated minds who can endure ambiguity, tolerate differences, use evidence, make arguments, and analyze the subcomponent parts of complex structures offer the world its best resources for creating the modes and mechanisms of improvement. Fourth, I know that people who operate in the world as critically autonomous agents offer the world the irreplaceably important benefit of challenging the rest of us to think, feel, and judge in new ways. And, finally, I know that conscientious and dedicated teachers who spark their students' minds, who call to their students' most honorable and decent instincts, and who know how simultaneously to challenge and support their students can sometimes make all the difference. □

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