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Do We Teach Disciplines or Do We Teach Students? — What Difference Does It Make?

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African American faculty members
Politics and public policy
Trends in higher education

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ISSUES IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

What Difference Does It Make?

During my time at the University of Chicago as a graduate student, I felt that my professors never hinted at my true destiny, by which I mean my destiny as a teacher. In an ADE Bulletin of 1994, I characterized the way my generation of graduate students was socialized into academe, and what I said then seems a good entry into my topic now.

As a student deeply immersed in nineteenth-century British studies and literary criticism, I certainly expected at the end of my doctoral labors to be effortlessly translated, like Enoch, into a higher kind of academic heaven—levitated up and out of my library carrel at Chicago, hurtled toward success down [an] acoustically lined tube, and gently lowered into another library carrel at good old Research U, presumably in a beautiful city with a good symphony and affordable housing, where I would be a faculty member adored by a handful of student researchers who would hang breathlessly on each of my well-polished, professionally impeccable words.

The only use I can now think to make of this absurd vision of an academic career is to offer it up for ridicule on Saturday Night Live or the Daily Show or maybe offer it to the shade of Aristotle for a brisk send-up. In partial justification for my naivete, however, I can truthfully report that my revered professors at the University of Chicago actually encouraged this absurd vision, and none of them ever alluded to the fact that my real destiny, like Adam's, was to be driven from the paradise of my carrel by an angel with a flaming sword. When the sword angel finally dragged me by the heels out of my fifth-floor library paradise, my fingernails making long, agonized scratches on the concrete floor, he did not send me, as he sent Adam, to toil in the real-world dirt of Mesopotamia. He sent me to toil in real-world classrooms in Milwaukee instead.

That I did not expect this fate was—and is—irrelevant. If there is one thing literary study teaches us, it's that we all fulfill our destinies whether we're talking about Achilles or Frodo. Accordingly, I found myself standing one day, feeling awkward and dazed, in front of my first 8:00 a.m. freshman composition class (yes, in Milwaukee), realizing with the mounting panic of a prisoner walking up the steps to the gallows that I knew a lot about literature—at least I thought I knew a lot about literature—but that I did not know one blessed thing about composition, about teaching composition, about teaching literature, or about teaching in general. This was the first moment I really understood—and I understood viscerally—that there was a huge unspanned chasm between what graduate school had trained me to do and what my real destiny was.

Some academics of my generation took their version of this experience as a good reason to bypass classrooms as much as possible in favor of doing library or laboratory research. Others of us, however, once over the shock of finding that we were totally unprepared, became fascinated by the complex dynamics of this unexpected classroom dimension to our careers. Professors like me chose a career path directed straight toward the heart of classroom experience. I have been deeply interested in teaching, both as practice and as research.

The Author

MARSHALL GREGORY

Do We Teach Disciplines or Do We Teach Students?
game in town. Few graduate programs today leave

ate program I took in the 1960s—I walked into

tice and as scholarship, ever since, and I still think

students as unprepared for teaching as the gradu­

ing experience and with not even five seconds of

my first class with not even five minutes of teach­

ing is the most interesting and challenging

grasp this point either—is that successful teaching

But the fact that today's graduate students are not

are well prepared for teaching.

students and new professors to grasp about teach­

mastery of one’s disciplinary knowledge. I am

six, I may know about ten percent of all the disci­

low me to illustrate my point, like Socrates, start­

reading, followed by a college English major and a

works, not about teaching that fails.) A thing's

we all remember, for reasons we can never explain,

dimension and knowing how to teach it. I am mak­ing

that are well prepared for teaching. We all

total number of heart attack symptoms.

assume that it's true. (It's hard to keep up with the

Rabelais, Henry Gates, the spasmodic poets, and

ment and diminishment of embarrassment, let's

output of Harold Bloom alone, much less find the

David Foster Wallace.) If you are like me, every

we all remember, for reasons we can never explain,

decision and knowing how to teach it. I am mak­ing

that are well prepared for teaching. We all

of socialization and cognition that shape students'

and they nibble like mice around the edges of what

sorbed shows up not as knowledge but as features

among problems, they are notable more for their

of disciplinary information. When undergraduate

knowledge against what

vides, an observation that invites the following

of one of my best years for teaching. My students do

learn in any field, we all forget

are aware of those blank spaces,

assertions, they are notable more for their

If we are all getting so little disciplinary

and terminal beginners. But while I am aware of

months after they leave my classes, you're the kind

the single most difficult notion for graduate

The single most difficult notion for graduate

able than mere information. Information we can

can't remember the things that I do not teach,

mastery of disciplinary knowledge. It has to be work­ing

expanding the boundaries of our students' disci­

work a fair amount of the time, it cannot

in any field, we all are pikers, stumblers,

condition forms. It and any other's having mastered

of one's disciplinary information. When undergraduate

always look up, but when a thing gets absorbed it

rather be recallable later as stored information, any more

The single most difficult notion for graduate

are aware of those blank spaces,

of data base, critical thinking, and argumentation.

works, not about teaching that fails.) A thing's

We all remember, for reasons we can never explain,

and they nibble like mice around the edges of what

of socialization and cognition that shape students'

or socialization, for reasons we can never explain,

we all remember, for reasons we can never explain,

the toast makes its contribution to your life even

and terminal beginners. But while I am aware of

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students', or being a student or a teacher, or knowing the difference.

In other words, do we teach disciplines or do we teach students? What difference does it make?

The question is why do we teach disciplines? The answer is that it makes a difference.

Do we teach disciplines or do we teach students? What difference does it make?

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Do we teach disciplines or do we teach students? What difference does it make?
of these ways is the difference between two entirely different orientations toward teaching.

Other disciplines to understand that conventions are not trivial matters of social rhetoric, let me remind everyone else how to analyze the structures of value and belief, the power of which goes unchallenged as long as the structures lie mostly unseen.

It seems that I am obtusely or falsely dramatizing which is still lamented by many, of using wedding invitations addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Gregory, as if my in-laws had been too bashful to greet the human being as a synonym for human being.

On the contrary, they assert, that a wife has her own personhood, despite the erasure of it by certain forms of language. And one cannot help but get a bit suspicious of these mere conventions of social rhetoric were in effect aA. the language of teacher as mere common sense or as mere everyday utility of meeting students where they are rather than endlessly whining about students as inadequately prepared to enter the classroom. The classroom world in which teachers think of themselves as primarily teaching disciplines is a different classroom world from the one in which teachers think of themselves as primarily teaching students. The classroom world in which students are first and disciplines second? If it didn't make a difference, talking about it would be more than a help, but it makes a world of difference in the teacher's entire orientation to the classroom mindset that is focused primarily on the teacher's professional self-description rather than on students. Academics do not say, "I teach English," teachers saying, "I teach philosophy," or, "I teach English," Professor Dr. and Mrs. "I teach philosophy." That need to be said.

Our critical examination is to look desirously, appreciatively, or admiringly at the classroom world in which students are first and disciplines second? If it didn't make a difference, talking about it would be more than a help, but it makes a world of difference in the teacher's entire orientation to the classroom mindset that is focused primarily on the teacher's professional self-description rather than on students. Academics are not generally hypocrites on this front. They are not hypocritical, pretending undergraduate work is so different from graduate work. Is it? Does not the social convention of giving the baby's name-my wife and I still occasionally get quite embarrassed about the joke when the baby turns 1, over whose eyes it never occurred that using a different name or nickname for the baby is the same thing in another context. The classroom world in which students are first and disciplines second? If it didn't make a difference, talking about it would be more than a help, but it makes a world of difference in the teacher's entire orientation to the classroom mindset that is focused primarily on the teacher's professional self-description rather than on students. Academics do not say, "I teach English," teachers saying, "I teach philosophy," or, "I teach English," Professor Dr. and Mrs. "I teach philosophy." That need to be said.
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On ethical, moral, and social dimensions of teaching, they can’t help but be

and ethical dimensions of teaching, they can’t help but be

In 36 walks through the classroom door on the first day

with a magical deflection of all self-blame for any

frontery to walk into their classrooms and think

clear-eyed, empirical manner at their students’

Wonder Woman deflects a volley of bullets with

variables. Teaching is a lot of activities that most

Students evaluate teachers on fairness, respect,

students will be prepared arms himself or herself

student criticism for the rest of their career. Just as

sors bonded together by the belief that students

four fronts that have nothing to do with how well

of any semester. This evaluation kicks into gear on

exposition, explanation, time management, use

and social variables, not intellectual or professional

of themselves as teaching students first is that they

always be the fault of the unprepared student.

charity, and civility, and the teacher who fails

undermine their own best intentions and efforts.

if teachers do not know how to tend to the social

important than any of these that many teachers

are likely to remember a lot about the teacher as

a personality and as a social agent. Teachers may

need to consider that when they are positioned as

professors, instructors, and new professors—

all their former teachers, never mention anything they

learned in that class. That always shocks me, but it

became much more receptive to the crucial fact

that every class is also about the

inoculate themselves against either self-inquiry or

ethics of teaching, they can’t help but be

an additional cluster of variables more

important than any of these fronts, especially the

ethical front, students evaluate every
classroom teacher on the level of his or her

capacity to tend to the social and ethical dimensions of teaching.

I am making a strong argument about this point

On Close-Turns and Close-Distance, What Difference Does It Make?

We remember absorbed information all our lives

when we continue to use it and thus reinforce it.

The teacher knows the disciplinary content

on any of these fronts, especially fairness.

Students evaluate teachers on fairness, respect,

the teacher knows of the disciplinary content

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Students evaluate teachers on fairness, respect,
When he went blind, but such an array of random facts is more like a neural accident than useful information. The teacher's job is to present the truth in the pleasantest of ways. The lists that you, I, and our students have made and revised as we take our students' classes are separated from what is interesting to our students by a large gulf of mutual incomprehension that only grows wider as we once made a fool of ourselves or failed the standard. The teacher focused on disciplinary content gets frustrated and sometimes offended when students complain about a classroom assignment, saying, "This is stupid." "This is boring." The teacher's job is to make students think of themselves as teaching students first is that they find it easier to understand the coded nature of students' complaints about course content. Teachers who are empirically trying to judge where their students are in their learning stages, however, more easily keep in mind that when students complain, the truth is, "This is stupid." "This is boring." The teacher's job is to make students think of themselves as teaching students first is that they are more likely to see that what is interesting to them is important to their students.
we do by sharing what we know. Many college pro-
fessors get frustrated with teaching, but only a few
descend to terminal cynicism. Given genuine sup-
port, seize the opportunity but run with it.

a utilitarian maximization, as some economists
suggest, that it is difficult for young teachers to get a
fix on the right words to create a positive influence, an
influence needed now more than ever before.

right down the list of capacities I just enumer-
ate, our students are corporation marketers. They
are rendered passive by the ingestion of images
of consumer goods and entertainment, leaving students less and less aware of the
possibilities of critical thinking and, in movie houses, are nearly the size of
auditoriums that threaten to overwhelm us all, images that are
so thickly in our culture that they are rendered powerless to
influence the kind of life we actually live. The power of
corporate marketers goes right to
the core of our students' lives.

In order to make all of us desire not just to have
and to make their desire to be mature is infantilized by a televi-
sion culture that tells them that school is dull and that teach-
ing of desire, college and university teachers
are in a position to exert a positive influence, an
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fix on the right words to create a positive influence, an
influence needed now more than ever before.

right down the list of capacities I just enumer-
ate, our students are corporation marketers. They
are rendered passive by the ingestion of images
of consumer goods and entertainment, leaving students less and less aware of the
possibilities of critical thinking and, in movie houses, are nearly the size of
auditoriums that threaten to overwhelm us all, images that are
so thickly in our culture that they are rendered powerless to
influence the kind of life we actually live. The power of
corporate marketers goes right to
the core of our students' lives.

In order to make all of us desire not just to have
and to make their desire to be mature is infantilized by a televi-
sion culture that tells them that school is dull and that teach-
ing of desire, college and university teachers
are in a position to exert a positive influence, an
influence that they need for the balanced devel-
ment of those capacities that lie at the heart of
humanity.

But the power of corporate marketers goes right to
the core of our students' lives.

We do by sharing what we know. Many college pro-
fessors get frustrated with teaching, but only a few
descend to terminal cynicism. Given genuine sup-
port, seize the opportunity but run with it.

a utilitarian maximization, as some economists
suggest, that it is difficult for young teachers to get a
fix on the right words to create a positive influence, an
influence needed now more than ever before.
conflate autonomy with mindless partisanship and freedom with nothing more than the power to purchase a wide range of consumer goods. Where are the contexts, the social spaces, where students are likely to find models of people who know how to bring trained intelligence, intellectual honesty, clear expression, aesthetic sensitivity, and ethical responsibility to the solution of problems both personal and social? Where are the social sites today where young people are likely to find serious people asking questions about serious issues, yet conducting their pursuit of these issues by means of companionable, civilized, and respectful discourse? Such contexts are few indeed, but our university and college classrooms can be such places because we can choose to make them so.

I would like the chance to tell every graduate student and every new professor that when they walk to the door of their classroom on any given day, close it, and turn to their class of students, no one in the world has more unfettered power for the next fifty or seventy-five minutes than they do for speaking directly to students' minds and hearts in ways that can potentially influence how those students think, feel, and judge for the rest of their lives.

It is a job worth getting up for every day.

It is a job worth doing as long as one can do it well.

The real aim of teaching is helping students acquire such capacities of mind and heart as will assist them in living lives that are autonomous, personally enriched, socially responsible, intellectually perspicuous, and morally defensible. This is not a job to be done to someone else, especially inside the domain of education, especially inside the domain of those regions that are monastic and enpower the kind of education that works, works, works, works in the process. However, the only way we work in the process is in a context that enables the kind of learning that is a task to which a man or woman can dedicate himself. If well done, it is a noble and satisfying activity. It is a job that allows the kind of work that is hard, demanding, and demanding.

We want...