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In Praise of Passionate, Opinionated Teaching

By MARK OPPENHEIMER

Americans dissatisfied with higher education typically have one of two gripes. Either the problem is the curriculum, which might be too liberal or too conservative, too changeful or too stodgy, too current or too retrograde, too utilitarian or too useless; or the problem is the university's structure, which often is deemed too businesslike and soulless.

The first critique, the curricular one, began to surface in the United States in the 19th century, when colleges moved gingerly away from classical and seminary curricula toward the liberal arts, and then began to integrate with technical and scientific schools. Most anxiety about higher education today remains focused on curricular matters: what books are required to be read.

The second critique, that universities are run like businesses, also is not new. In 1927 the historian Bernard DeVoto wrote in *Harper's Monthly* about a student who had written a letter explaining his disillusionment with traditional schooling. "I have learned," the anonymous boy wrote, "that running a university is a damned good business and the most respected con-game in the world."

While the first critique was popular in the 1980s, when it ignited debates about the canon and political correctness, the second is in vogue now. Universities do appear more than ever like large companies, as they seek to patent inventions and team up with biotechnology firms, become more revenue-driven, engage with student and faculty unions, and employ "vice presidents for finance" and the like.

Both of those critiques are important, but they are trivial in comparison with my chief complaint: that college and graduate-school teaching is quite bad, and bad in a particular way.

Leaving aside for the moment my ornery opinion, it is fascinating to note that discussions of pedagogy are relatively rare in higher education. Even though pedagogical matters dominate debates about elementary and secondary education, practically to the exclusion of curricular content, they are considered beneath the dignity of the academy, for two reasons.

First, scholars tend to assume that it is their scholarship that matters, and that fine teaching will flow necessarily from their knowledge of the subject matter. The fact that tenure decisions depend mostly on published output reinforces the belief that scholarship is primary.

Second, and more important, a consensus exists about what college pedagogy consists of: seminars, in which the professor's job is to elicit active student participation, and lectures, in which the professor delivers salient information in a relatively unbiased way, explaining difficult concepts, perhaps offering an interpretation of the facts but not advancing a strong polemic. While some institutions have experimented with small tutorials, following the English model, seminars and lectures remain standard in the American academy.

Here is the problem: As now practiced, neither the seminar nor the lecture encourages strong disagreements, whether between students and the professor or among students themselves. Seminar pedagogy tends to suppose that all opinions are equally valid, that "there's no such thing as a stupid question." Lectures, even when they are strident or opinionated, do not really allow for responses. This means that the average student graduates without ever having seen a good, knuckle-baring academic brawl. She has never heard one professor insult another, never heard a professor tell a student that his misunderstanding of the facts could have real consequences.

I find this fact extraordinarily sad. Disagreement is a prime engine for advancing human knowledge -- and besides, hearing boldly stated opinions is tremendous fun. For smart students to feel challenged, and for dull students to lose their cobwebs, they need to learn that academic subjects are both a matter of grave moral concern and a source of exhilaration, worth becoming overheated about. They learn this not by being invited to care, but by watching professors who manifestly do care. For the college professor, the proper pedagogic role is not as facilitator, coaxing children into thinking, but as role model, showing young men and women what a thinking mind looks like.

My suggestion that professors are too mild, not sufficiently opinionated, may at first sound ludicrous. It is well known that professors take their fields too seriously. They are too inclined to think that second-century Roman coinage is a matter of ultimate concern, too willing to end friendships over what Willa Cather's lesbianism might mean for her depictions of wheat fields. But while professors may get contrary at conferences and in journal articles, those same professors are often profoundly milquetoast in their classrooms, so eager to get in opposing points of view and to assure students that no opinion could be wholly wrong that they forget to have opinions themselves.

Yes, some professors are known for "advancing an agenda," which is thought to be a bad thing. But for the most part, they hold to the well-meaning liberal dogma that students ought to figure things out for themselves. That leads to the kind of teaching that all of us dread and yet engage in: "Very good. I see where you're coming from. Now, does anyone have another point of view?"

Younger children, of course, are often the first to notice a naked emperor. When I taught high school, some student would raise her (usually her) hand and say, "Why do you keep asking us what we think? You're supposed to be the expert." Or an even more direct challenge: "Why are you asking us what Poe means here? Don't you know?" She

was making two points: first, that my dishonesty in pretending not to know the answer, and in turning to them for "help in figuring this poem out," is an insult to the students, who know what game is being played and feel cheapened by having to join it; and second, that I as the teacher probably have more to teach them than they have to teach each other, and that their time would be more profitably spent listening to my answers -- or, if I have no certain answers, listening to me work through possible answers. Watching my mind publicly at work would teach them how to think better than would my asking them to flail about.

And yet this pedagogy of pretense gets more ingrained in college and is at its worst in graduate school. I actually had some wonderfully didactic teachers in high school, fewer in college, and almost none in graduate school, where the rule seemed to be that any expression of opinion on the part of professors would necessarily inhibit the graduate students, who were to be treated as budding scholars with equally valid opinions. Thus were we reduced to the absurdity of watching a world expert on, say, Russian history or African slavery asking us what we thought. While the professor thinks she is honoring her students by giving them the freedom to form their own opinions, she is condescending to them instead, by denying the possibility that they might be able to hear what she really thinks and still come to their own conclusions.

The classroom has been brought low this way by a combination of factors. Chief among them are a misreading of Socrates, thought to have been a mere asker of questions (even as his interlocutors always happened to arrive at the answer he hoped for); the progressive-education pedagogy, which has been ascendant at least since Dewey, Montessori, and the "child-centered classroom"; the political-correctness vogue of the 1980s and '90s, which could make it seem professionally unwise to hold certain opinions; and the mushy '70s value we call "consensus," a noble ideal that unfortunately is of little use in the hunt for truth.

Add, too, the niceness of American culture, where politesse and chumminess are essential values of manhood, and grace and charm of womanhood. Like our congressmen, who conceal their opinions behind cloaks of disclaimers and inarticulateness, and who thus appear invisible alongside the lusty swashbucklers of the British Parliament, our professors are afraid to say anything vexing or controversial. Forgive the male metaphor, but, in their classrooms at least, American professors have been neutered.

People often say that they remember the teacher in sixth grade who really drilled grammar into them: "I resented her then, but she gave me a gift that has lasted a lifetime." They remember her because she gave them the tools that served them so well in later classes. But I think they value her for another reason as well. Her commitment to good grammar (or correct spelling, or proper algebraic technique) represented more than just a utilitarian gift: It represented commitment to a principle. "Grammar matters," she was saying, or "algebra matters." And that commitment to principle is ennobling and pedagogically exciting even if the principle is unsound. Even if we decided, for example, that standard written English was a racist, imperialist, and nonsensical

paradigm, it is still invigorating and exciting to have a teacher who holds a wrong opinion strongly. The teacher's conviction touches that place in the human soul that hungers for purpose.

Ask yourself this question: Will a student learn more from a teacher slavishly devoted to "good grammar," who spends his time excoriating its foes and in so doing teaches students both sides of the debate, or from the teacher who simply refuses to teach grammar at all? I should think that both pro- and anti-grammar ideologues would prefer the first teacher, who in his way has brought his students into the debate and given them the tools to think critically about it.

The caveat is that such teachers must ensure that they hold their opinions with enough humility so that they can allow students the freedom to disagree -- therein lies the difference between pedantry and pedagogy. Saying what we believe to be right does not preclude the epistemic humility to accept that we might be wrong.

Nowadays it is the conservatives who are more likely to grab a classroom by its lapels and shake it into an enjoyable combativeness, because the conservatives are the ones on a mission. Once upon a time the Marxists were, then the queer theorists were, but now the conservatives are the outsiders -- in academe, anyway. And for their rabble-rousing, they remain unpopular. Harvey Mansfield, a government professor at Harvard, has been publicly accused of being sexist. Donald Kagan, a classical historian at Yale, was derided as a troglodyte for his defense of the Western canon. But the quality I am talking about can just as easily be found on the left, and probably best of all in the irreducible middle, or in the no man's land of eccentricity.

I once had a conversation with the editor and writer Adam Bellow about the computer scientist David Gelernter, one of whose books he had edited, and who had been among my favorite college professors. Gelernter taught a class called "Computer Science and the Modern Intellectual Agenda"; the syllabus dealt generally with questions about the limits of computers, about what computers could not do.

I took the class during my last term of college, in the spring of 1996, when the dot-com boom was flourishing and many smart people seemed to believe that computers would soon do everything, including the dinner dishes. Gelernter tried to be objective, but I am glad to say that he failed. His readings and lectures made it apparent that he feared that his students would place undue faith in technology, and that such faith would diminish our lives by making us less attentive to family, church, and simple pleasures.

The class profoundly transformed my thinking, but at the time I could not say why. It was my first exposure to genuine skepticism and, in a sense, to conservatism: Although I had read Burke, I had never before understood his warning that forward-looking be tempered by a reverence for the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Yet something more affected me, something about the style of thinking that Gelernter modeled. Bellow told me that it was quite simple: "David is an intellectual obsessive."

Bellow did not mean that entirely as a compliment. He agreed with me that some of the screeds Gelernter published in conservative magazines were somewhat ill tempered, and that he often set up straw men to knock down with unsavory glee. But Bellow convinced me that what Gelernter had, which many professors did not have, was an ability to fixate on an idea and become animated by it. Gelernter believed in the power of intellection to change the world, which is another way of saying that he is an intellectual -- so much of one that the actual content of his ideas might be of secondary importance. He believes in ideas, and for their sake he does not mind being gloriously, loudly wrong.

It occurred to me sometime after my conversation with Bellow that the three best professors I had in college were all intellectual obsessives, men who believed that ideas were to be held, not just curated. For the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, the idea was the Christian God and what it meant to worship him. For the late classicist Thomas Gould, who taught my introduction to ancient philosophy, the idea was atheism; he was as desperate to save us from Christianity as Wolterstorff was to follow its truth to distant corners.

Gould once handed out a copy of his unpublished paper "The Logical Superiority of Atheism to Agnosticism" -- the title gives one a sense of how powerful was his allergy to religion. In the last conversation I had with Gould, he remarked how happy he was that his fellow classicist Allan Bloom had died; Gould loathed the philosophy of Leo Strauss, and was always cheered by the death of one of Strauss's followers.

Imagine that -- telling a student he was happy that another scholar had died! How rude! But how radical -- here was a man who believed that ideas mattered that much. And for Gelernter, a religious Jew, what mattered was giving his students the tools to resist false idols, like technology or, it seemed, feminism. How he got his animus against feminism (and the 1960s, and liberals more generally) I will never know, but the intellectual tools he used to fight his battles are worth emulating, even if his battles were hardly worth winning.

Intellectual obsessives have points to make, and if these three had religious (or atheistic) fervor for their points, it was the students who gained. In a sense, teachers have to believe that they are saving souls, or at least pretend to believe it. If academics truly believed that the proper reading of Austen or Cather is of ultimate concern, they should have the courage to convince their students, not just their colleagues. I generally assume that the average mail carrier has a dash of Newman in him (Newman being the *Seinfeld* character who megalomaniacally declared, "He who controls the mail controls everything!"): He believes that his job matters, a lot. Professors should feel the same way: not just that teaching matters, but that teaching a certain point of view, at a certain time and place, can have good consequences, and may in fact be necessary.

That view does not reject the goal of getting students to "think for themselves," but it recognizes that students may learn to think for themselves by watching a judicious, judgmental mind at work. The

decision that convictions are worth holding precedes, and animates, the student's quest for the tools to form such convictions. We want to open students' minds, but we also want them to see that after they gain a certain intellectual maturity, their minds will close, somewhat, for that is what it means to hold beliefs. Far better, then, that students be exposed to professors who, in their wisdom, actually have some beliefs. If, on hearing what their professors think, the students disagree, then they can argue back. And isn't that what we really want?

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