Different Worlds in the Same Classroom: Students’ Evolution in Their Vision of Knowledge and Their Expectations of Teachers

I want to describe an orderly variety in the ways students in your classroom make sense—including their sense of what you should be doing to be a good teacher. We labor among our students’ individual differences daily, and yet the way these differences are categorized tends to mislabel the variables I have in mind. In the parlance of college pedagogy, the phrase “individual differences” usually refers to relatively stable characteristics of persons, such as academic ability, special talents or disabilities, or the more esoteric dispositions called “learning styles.” We are, of course, expected to accommodate all such differences in our teaching, perhaps by broadening our teaching styles, and you may anticipate that I am about to add to our burden.

My hope, rather is to lighten our burden, or at least to enlighten it. The variations I wish to describe are less static; they have a logical order, and most students tend to advance from one to another in response to teachings or readings that impinge on the boundaries of their intelligible universe of the moment. These variables are therefore more fun to address, and in my opinion often more determinant of what goes out of our classrooms than all the other individual differences put together. At the very least, an understanding of them makes intelligible many of those aberrations of the pedagogical relation that we must otherwise ascribe to a student’s stupidity or, more generously, to a clash of “personalities.”

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The Dissertation, From Conception To Delivery

Invited to discuss the writing of the dissertation—its stages, problems and pleasures, uses in one’s career, and the like—I found myself thinking in terms of experience: the experience of writing my own, and, later, of advising the writing of others. Memories of the first—of reading, formulation, research, writing, submissions, and revisions—remain exceptionally vivid after twenty-odd years (though they pale by comparison with memories of General Examinations), and they have, I realize, played a great role in shaping my behavior on the other side of the conference table. In attempting to share that experience here, I shall be practical, informal, and personal; my remarks part confession, part homily.

The question of what the dissertation “should” be is an intimidating one, to which there is obviously no single answer—not only because different people are writing in different fields, but because even within the same field there are various models and kinds. I don’t think a catalogue of these would be particularly useful. What I’ll be discussing is the kind that I know best and have had most to do with: dissertations in modern literature. There are, however, certain constants despite the variety of models and methodologies, as one realizes in confronting another question I’d like to try to answer: “What is the experience of doing one likely to be?” Situations do recur across disciplinary boundaries; in fact, they fall into patterns that literary scholars could almost call commonplaces.

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Because the writer of a dissertation is almost always engaging in that activity for the first time, he or she is likely to believe that the awful problems which surface along the way are unique and unprecedented, and that they must be signs of something gone alarmingly wrong. So the first and most useful thing to say about the dissertation process is that most problems—even (or especially) those that seem exclusively psychological—are perfectly normal, common, standard. I have in mind depression, panic, tedium, and the sense of being locked into what Hegel called “a bad infinity”—and they are likeliest to arise when the project is most potentially promising, which is to say most ambitious, most dependent on an initial intuition. Believing that this kind of maximalism in conception is to be recommended in most cases, because it will show the writer at her or his creative best—not only enhancing employment prospects but discovering something to the writer which is discoverable in no other way—I will be taking its presence for granted in most of what follows.

One begins, then, by selecting an area that is personally attractive; only later will this area be narrowed into something tractable—a topic. The two are quite distinct, though often confused with each other. Once the area has been identified—once you have decided that you think you’d like to write about Dickens or the Victorian novel or Leo Tolstoy—there follows a period that I regard as being particularly useful, though a bit unnerving. This is a period of preliminary immersion in the subject. One reads in and around the subject, extensively, seeking to estimate its dimensions, surveying what has been done by other scholars, noting problems and methodologies against the eventual selection of a particular problem and methodology that will mark the crystallization of a general subject area into a topic. This period is—and must be—attended by a certain, ultimately fruitful, confusion. (Confusion, in fact, is the first of the two main emotions that accompany the writing of a dissertation.) One hopes, of course, that it is not pure confusion, and one must believe that it will not prove endless, but will lead to another stage, marked by a sense of discovery. Clarity and tidiness appear last of all.

Meanwhile, as confusion begins to subside into discovery, you find yourself attempting to pursue all kinds of leads, and this becomes an emotional pursuit. (The first outline you make is likely to be ungainly in the extreme, and to need extensive pruning.) Nonetheless, the time that goes into this process of broad-ranging exploration is a valuable investment, because it will turn
The panic comes over you as you survey what all the others have done, and it is fueled by a numbing doubt that there can be intellectually broadening in a permanent way.

A major danger in this first period, of course, is that one interesting subject keeps leading to another. Typically, one delays. The delay comes in the name of the need to do more research, the need to "exhaust the subject." The fact is, however, that there are few subjects which, given the resources of Widener Library, are exhaustible in the lifetime of anybody. Moreover, the period of general inquiry, if allowed to go on too long, can generate a deepening confusion about your aims. It is only a deliberate decision that is going to reduce the confusion to manageable proportions and in time eliminate some of it. Thus it makes sense to establish a schedule which gives you a date by which to stop your preliminary researches. A need for further investigation is likely to arise in the course of writing, but then the need will be specific and finite. However much it goes against your temperament and temptations, then, it makes sense to pick an arbitrary point by which to stop exploring, so that you can begin to see what can be done with what you have found so far.

At this point the process of narrowing the subject into the topic begins, and that involves writing. Here confusion is likely to give way to panic. (It was so in my experience, though not in mine only, and from its recurrence I have come to regard panic as the inevitable concomitant of any kind of serious academic writing.) The panic comes over you as you survey what all the others have said and done, and it is fueled by a numbing doubt that there can be much worth adding, or, in any case, that you are the one to add it. When this doubt appears, what is important is to know both that it is absolutely normal and that it is on no account to be trusted, because writing is not a matter of "saying" but of doing: it is a process, with its own logic and its own mysteries—a process of discovery and creation. You need to have faith in this process, no matter how much it may go against the temperamental grain. Generations of students have found that in (and only in) the agonizing confrontation with the blank paper, something worth saying emerges.

My own experience teaches me also that this process of writing has to be more regular than most of us who are not compulsive personalities believe is normal or even possible. I personally recommend what I enforced on myself for the first time in writing my dissertation: a daily minimum quota. You decide how many days a week you are going to write. Whether it turns out to be five or six days a week is an optional matter (though bear in mind that time off is both necessary and valuable). The important thing is to choose a modest quota—for me it was, and remains, three double-spaced pages—and not to quit writing until you have met it. I found, after making such a resolution, that there would be days when, having started at eight in the morning, I had my three pages by noon; sometimes I would quit, sometimes I would go on. But there were other days when, late into the evening, I would find myself, filled with loathing and despair, contemplating the middle of page two. On those occasions I would force myself to stay at the typewriter until I had turned out another page and a half of what I was sure was wretched prose. When you are very depressed with your output, it may be well not to reread it on the morrow, so as not to inhibit further writing. Just go on. What you can discover (I can't guarantee this, but it is what I discovered) is that when you reread a substantial chunk of your manuscript at the month's end, the eighty to ninety pages you have achieved show an unsuspected consistency, making it difficult to differentiate the writing of the bad, depressed days from that of the good, easy ones. Bear in mind, then, as you write, that you can always revise later, and that forgoing ahead on schedule is likely to reveal a certain subliminal continuity—which can be considered its reward.

People usually postpone writing the introduction until the end, and that is appropriate because projects change in the course of writing. So the first submission you make to your thesis adviser is likely to be your second chapter. A certain nervousness attends first submissions, since we are all trying to convince ourselves as
well as our advisers that we are likely to be brilliant scholars. This nervousness comes out in odd ways. I recall one writer, for example, who, worried that his chapter was too short, sandwiched an obelisk-like triple-spaced column of typing between extravagantly generous margins to turn a meager twenty-five pages into what he hoped would seem a more acceptable fifty. It did not. Renato Poggioli spotted my ruse even as the pages were being handed across the table. It is better, as I then learned from his ill-concealed amusement, not to try to camouflage inadequacies, blemishes and non sequiturs. And I went on to learn that the best of all is to underline them, to ask “Where should the argument go from here?” or “Is this point best saved for development in another chapter?” If your adviser reads carefully, he’ll see what you are up to; if he does not read carefully, you must help him and yourself by asking for the advice you need, the more pointedly the better. I should have asked: “Is this chapter too short? If so, what else should go into it?” That is what I needed to know, and didn’t.

Once confronted with their first (and, for the moment, only) reader, some dissertation-writers worry about writing for that single individual. That worry—that intention—should be avoided at all costs, if, and to the extent that, your conception of the job you are doing implies an eventual reader of a different sort. What is most important in any case is that you have some hypothetical reader in mind, whether she or he be a fellow professional or a nonprofessional, because what you take for granted, what you spell out (and the way you spell it out) will all depend on the nature of your ideal addressee. Indeed, as a good deal of recent literary theory has made us realize, every style implies a particular addressee, and vice versa. The matter is simply too important to be settled by default.

In saying this, I am recommending that you think of yourself as an author, whether or not you are aiming at publication, for even if you are not, the vaunted exercise of producing a long manuscript can only thereby gain a valuable dimension. To be sure, advisers must also approve what they are given; negotiation is therefore essential. If you suspect that your supervisor’s desiderata in matters of style and conception may differ from your own, discuss these matters frankly with her or him. You may well discover common ground. If you do not—if you find yourself compelled to make concessions which you’re not convinced you should make—then keep a record of your preferred versions with an eye to

restoring them in any postdissertation revisions for publication.

I do believe very strongly that it is important for writers of dissertations not only to preserve an independent stance but also to take independent initiatives in eliciting comments and advice. This is good preparation for being an autonomous scholar, and the sooner you start, the better. Moreover, it’s necessary imme-
diately, in the dissertation process. Communication between super-
visor and dissertant is never, or very seldom, as full as it should be, given the preoccupations and anxieties of both parties, and given human lapses of memory (about which I will say more in a moment). If you want specific responses to something you’ve written and don’t get them, ask for them. Or better yet, anticipate what you’d like advice about and put the questions in writing: e.g., “I wasn’t sure about the point on page 42; would appreciate your comments.” Or, “Is the tone of section iii right?” Specific questions are much likelier to get answered if they are in writing. The trouble with oral questions is that they get lost.

This brings me to a few brief comments on the other side of the relationship: that is, the negotiation as seen from the point of view of the reader. A candidate’s awareness of some of these facets can ease a good many potential frictions and misunderstandings. What I hear my colleagues complaining about, and what I have frequently observed myself, is the situation in which a student keeps promising to turn something in. These promises may be all that is received over a period of months or even years. Yet when some part of the manuscript is eventually delivered, it is often accompanied by an extraordinary impatience: “Can we talk about it the day after tomorrow?” And the student feels aggrieved when that proves impossible. Here it’s useful to remember that supervisors reading dissertations usually have more than one to read; they have term papers, committee meetings, lectures, writing of their own—all sorts of other professional obligations, together with all the kinds of impediments to rapid and efficient work that you yourself may have encountered. And they are likely to have aging equipment in the way of attention and memory. It is easy to overestimate your professors.

Indeed, many professors are amazed at the assumptions about our mnemonic skills that graduate students seem to be making in handing in chapters and pieces of chapters. It sometimes happens that a dissertation writer turns in one-third of, say, chapter three, which on the outline was broken down into (a), (b), and (c). The
The pissertation first third, (a), came in in August 1982; now in April 1984 the writer submits (b) and (c), and each section is numbered from page 1 all over again with no indication of the context, what came before, where this fits in the general scheme, whether the context was altered. The expectation clearly is that the reader will have committed the outline to memory, and that he or she remembers almost verbatim the point at which the writer stopped two and a half years before. Alas, few of us will have done so. Be tolerant of our frailties: Number your pages, and number them consecutively. Put good headings on what you are submitting, and little explanatory notes about what precedes and is to follow it. Try to submit sections and chapters in order. (In the situation cited above, the best plan would be to submit a new xerox of part (a), so the continuity can be assessed.) Give your reader enough material to decide whether your snippets really support an argument, and whether they are on the same scale as what came before. It is very important, in other words, simply to be clear and explicit about what it is you are handing over, where it belongs and what the problems are from your point of view.

I have identified in my own mind two schools of reading or supervision of dissertations. The first is the school of enough rope. In the view of its adherents, the candidate is demonstrating her or his first large independent piece of work, and independence should be maximized. If the completed job doesn't add up, the candidate can be so advised—or simply told, "It's a little disappointing but it will do." Faculty who take this view tend, by and large, to make minimal comments, very often about grammar, and to withhold comment on broader questions of strategy and organization. But even they can be pushed. If you ask direct questions and ask them forcefully and often enough, you are likely to get direct answers. In such cases, incidentally, I would strongly urge written rather than oral questions. The more serious the question, the likelier it is to require more reflection than always can be mustered in the course of a conversation. So a carefully phrased question on paper may produce a more considered answer in the same form or at the next meeting.

The alternative approach to reading dissertations is really that of a serious editor, who inspects everything from commas and semi-colons through organization and argumentation. Probably that approach is encountered more rarely, given the increasing demands even on faculty who would like to practice it. In any case, I think that both approaches are legitimate and can be productive—particularly if the writer takes the sort of responsibility I have recommended for his or her side of the transaction.

About publishing—a separate subject and a complex one—I would only point out that it may be a mistake to regard publication of your entire dissertation as being always the optimum outcome. It is in many cases better to publish only the strongest and newest parts. Most of what we do is uneven, especially the first time around. Try to highlight quality: make articles out of your best chapters. But remember that academic ethics frowns on delivering as a public lecture what one has already committed to print. It may therefore behoove you to keep some of your best things out of print for a while to use on such occasions. These will come up when you are looking for a job and they will come up after you've got one. In short, when the dissertation is complete there is a good deal to be said for reserving some of it for use in the Darwinian academic struggle to which its successful completion will have admitted you.

Good luck.