William A. Perry

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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Profile

Adena Rosmarin

The Art of Leading a Discussion

C. Roland (Chris) Christensen, Walnut University Professor, is one of Harvard's admired teachers. He is also well known, at Harvard and beyond, as a teacher of teachers. Since 1976 he has been giving a course in discussion-leadership skills to instructors from all over the University—a diverse and select group that has included faculty from most of the professional schools, and, from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the head of the largest course in the College, a number of Senior Tutors, several Head Tutors, many Mellon Fellows, Teaching Fellows and faculty. In the fall of 1985, he will be giving the course exclusively for faculty in the FAS—Editor

In C. Roland Christensen's teaching seminar, we learned in two different ways. The more overt way is a unique kind of textual analysis, which is performed on a "case": a pedagogic problem that is phrased as an incomplete narrative. The assigned task is to propose and justify a solution or ending. A class, however, typically produces more than one solution or ending, so a debate ensues: Which is better? Why? The answers are perhaps conclusive, perhaps not. What matters is not the achievement of a single or "right" reading but rather the generation of readings and the communal judgment of those readings.

But we also learned by watching this performance, by observing Christensen teach and ourselves learn. Each member of the seminar is thus both performer and observer—as is Christensen himself. Such duality seems difficult, but, with practice, we found ourselves shifting roles and perspectives with surprising facility.

And the more proficient we became at this back-and-forth movement, the more we learned. Among other things, we learned that observation is not a passive or neutral state. Like the more overt performances of the seminar—the reading, discussing, and judging of cases—the watching of these performances is itself an act: an event that has consequences and, moreover, that can itself be discussed. The heuristic form of the seminar thus became part of its "content," its methodology one of its recurrent topics. In other words, we learned that it is not only possible but instructive to be of two minds at once. The built-in self-consciousness of teaching ourselves how to teach kept our minds both open and critical, equally ready to entertain alternatives and to analyze those alternatives.

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Christensen would begin each class with a five- to ten-minute reassessment of the last class, a mini-lecture that transformed us from disparate individuals back into the communal organism that we were when we last met. Then two members of the seminar would "lead off," presenting their analyses of the assigned case. General discussion would follow. Because we did not know beforehand who would be called on, we all came prepared. Christensen, however, would choose the two before he began his reassessment; five to ten minutes is sufficient to gather one's thoughts if one is prepared but not enough if one has walked in "cold." We learned to be ready to be surprised. Class would end with Christensen summing up his reactions both to the case and to the class. He would also anticipate the next case. These openings and closings framed and linked our classes, making them at once self-contained and part of a sequence. Put otherwise, the "story" of our seminar had a structure or plot. It possessed the formal dynamics of beginning and ending as well as the affective dynamics of anticipation and surprise.

Between the beginning and end, however, lies the elusive middle: the endlessly variable discussion that is at once the primary topic of the seminar and its primary event. Despite this variability, however, we were always asking one question: what makes a discussion "good"? One answer that stands out in my mind is Christensen's emphasis on emotional control. He taught, both by statement and by act, that each class (meaning each group of people as well as each of their meetings) has an emotional tone that is not only not incidental and random but, instead, is always consequential and potentially designed. For example, to "heat up" a.

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class: be particular rather than general; call on individuals who face each other in the discussion circle; call on students who tend to make personal and opinionated statements rather than analytic or reflexive ones. In general, the greater the abstraction and the fewer the adjectives, the cooler the tone. Moreover, the timing of this emotional peak is as important as its actual happening. If it comes too soon the rest of the class period will seem anticlimactic, a time for looking at the watch and out the window. If it comes too late, the chance to make sense of it, to reflect upon the strategies that make it happen, is lost. The class ends without concluding, and we walk out without the very lesson we gathered to learn.

Another answer to the question of what makes a discussion "good" is the seminar's reiterated and dramatized lesson that students and statements are not only what they seem. As in life, statements in class often carry many messages in addition to the obvious or denotative. A statement, in other words, is not only a statement but also an act. We learned to look for this performative "content," for all the reasons that, in addition to truth-saying, impel people to say what they do. For example: hostile statements, especially those that come early in the semester, usually enact not hostility to you but, rather, to your role, and your statements should "perform" your awareness of and response to this fact. Moreover, as Christensen repeatedly emphasized, the hostile student is an invaluable if not always entirely manageable catalyst. Such students can and should be used to "dramatize" your classes, not allowed to ruin them. The idea is to let their energy bounce off you onto the rest of the class, to turn their pointed antagonism into a communal agon, the pedagogic triumph we call a "lively debate."

The seminar also taught that physical things are important. Your movements and gestures can focus a discussion, reveal or conceal your attitude, give you time to think, break or build tension, and, in sum, create or alter any mood. Moving toward one student and away from another, sitting on the desk, standing up, taking your jacket off and rolling up your sleeves, walking to the window and looking out, making notes as a student talks, checking your watch—all can shift the mood, pace, and even the conclusions of the class. Once again, we learned that things are neither as incidental nor as random as they seem; that, in particular, every physical act is part of the always developing contract a teacher makes with the class, a contract that at once resists change and makes any change significant. Dress and address are also part of this contract. Christensen, for example, set the "discussion group" atmosphere by removing his jacket (I sometimes wondered if he put on his jacket when leaving his office just so he could take it off in class), by seating us in a circle, by putting everyone on a first-name basis.

Of course, the driving and directional energy of any good discussion class comes from the teacher's questions. And the best questions are those that seem as spontaneous as they are probing, that seem to be spur-of-the-moment responses to the classroom drama. In other words, they are the very questions that seem most immune to pedagogic analysis. Christensen, however, showed us that this spontaneity can itself be conceptualized and planned. Hence, his "typology of questions." First, the exploratory questions: What are the "facts"? What went wrong? What can be done? Then, the challenge or testing questions: Are these solutions or interpretations adequate to the problem? Are others possible? Where might these plans go wrong? Next, the contextual and relational questions, the "weaving devices" that at once broaden the perspective of the class and begin the process of tying things together: How is this solution like that solution? How is it different? What kinds of solutions do we have? (This last question is especially effective when schematized on the board.) Then come the "priority" questions: Which is the best solution? Why? Finally, the concluding and conceptualizing questions: what have we learned? What are the principles involved in the choices we made? How do they relate to choices we've made in previous classes? The most important thing to remember about questions, however, is this: "A good question is never answered." It always has offspring. It always engenders more questions and thus more thought.

Good questions are undeniably hard to come by. But good responses are even trickier: harder to plan out in advance and more difficult to predict in the midst. The cardinal rule here is that some response is inevitable: no matter what you do or don't do, say or don't say, you are responding. Still, you do have several basic choices. Will you respond to stated content or performed content? Will you respond by passing the question or statement on to the class? Or will you answer it yourself? In the last instance you may: (1) restate "neutrally," a "neutrality" that is itself a kind of comment; (2) restate but also add or qualify; (3) noticeably reword in order to turn the discussion; (4) put your response on the board. This last act, of course, always involves at least one of the previous three. But whatever you do, always keep in mind that any verbal
response slows the class down. Thus, the less you say in the early stages of discussion the better. The idea is to build momentum.

Speaking of momentum: don't call on the student who has had his or her hand up for a long time. Unfair as this may seem to the individual in question, it is eminently fair to the class, for, as Christensen points out, when the hand goes up the brain goes off. Students mentally stop the discussion at the moment they think of their comment, and discussions, like conversations, are sensitive to the ongoing moment. In his own class, Christensen would often solve the problem of unfairness and, at the same time, teach us how to notice and handle the problem: when he called upon a student who had been waiting for an unusually long time to speak, he would ask, “Have we gone past your comment?” This insight into the radical temporality and organicism of all “talk” characterizes both Christensen’s attention to practical detail and his power to generalize such details, making them teachable.

Finally, the case method. The case is the text, the topic, the sine qua non of this seminar. But cases, like students and their comments, are more complex than they seem. On the one hand, a case needs to be read "naively" as a "slice of life." It must seem to be real in order for its reader to take it seriously and make the analogy to life. On the other hand, a case is not a slice of life. It is a pedagogic, manifestly rhetorical, and often devious instrument: an interpretation of life that is designed to instruct its readers. The difficult status of a case/text can be expressed theoretically either as an ontological ambivalence—it is at once what it seems and more than it seems—or as a heuristic complexity. In practice, however, this difficulty means that the reader of a case/text must understand it as the coincident “speech” of two narrators: one who “tells it like it is” and one who tells this telling for a reason.

This doubleness is frequently encountered in literary texts. The narration of Nelly in Wuthering Heights, for example, is not simply a means of representing the Cathy-Heathcliff story. It is also meant to be understood as Nelly’s attempt to argue the importance of her role in that story, and, at the same time, as her attempt to displace onto others the guilt she incurred by playing that role. Parables and fables even more obviously exemplify this narratorial doubleness: they are meant to be taken as real and as designed. They mirror the world, but they also point a moral or, as we might say, make a case.

Reading with an eye to this narratorial doubleness, then, is not unusual per se. We are simply not used to reading non-literary texts in this way. Nevertheless, the most important interpretive lesson taught in Christensen’s seminar was precisely the importance of this double vision. If we see only naively, attend only to appearances, we never learn how to “see” the performative complexity of texts or, for that matter, of events. Because the fact that something is true is never sufficient reason for saying or writing it, because there is always also a purpose, a full understanding of a case requires that we not only solve the particular problem it poses but also that we attend to the case-author’s reasons for posing this problem. What, in sum, is the problem-solving lesson we are meant to learn?

We end, then, where we began: with a complex, perhaps paradoxical act. Just as in teaching ourselves how to teach we were always both performing and watching that performance, trying to analyze and conceptualize it, so in reading a case we are always both encountering life and watching that encounter, trying to discover its raison d’être. This juxtaposition, of course, suggests a more than incidental relationship between our reflexive activity as members of a teaching seminar and the reflexive act of reading a case. Indeed, I would posit their virtual identity as self-conscious interpretive acts and, further, suggest that in this identity lies the deepest art of the seminar. Just as discussing what we were doing as students and teachers taught us how to do it better, so discussing the heuristic purposefulness of cases taught us how to read them better. These were the discussions, then, that taught the largest lesson of the discussion seminar: whether reading an event or reading a text, the goal is never simply a knowing-that but always also a knowing-how.2

Endnotes

1 A group of participants from the course has produced a collection of essays on teaching: The Art and Craft of Teaching, edited by Margaret Morganoth Guille (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

2 The distinction between “knowing-that” and “knowing-how” can be traced back to Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (London, 1949), pp. 25–61.

To learn more about the course, to find out who in your department has taken it, or to apply, call 495-1538.