A Return to Humanity in Teaching

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Author's Notes

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Author Biography

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In The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer (1998) writes, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). As Palmer (1998) suggests, teaching and identity are interwoven, making teaching an act of vulnerability. Despite this, we often create our courses in ways that protect us, and ultimately, create distance from the students we teach. This piece explores ways to return to the humanity in teaching by understanding ourselves and our students and using these collective understandings to create inclusive and responsive learning environments, regardless of course modality.

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In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) writes, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). As Palmer (1998) suggests, the relationship between teaching and identity are interwoven, making teaching an act of vulnerability that requires we understand our own identities, as well as those of our students. Despite this, we often create our courses in ways that protect us, and ultimately, create distance from the students we teach. As we reflect on learnings from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to reconsider course policies and practices that focus predominantly on imposing "structure or standards" or logistical difficulty (Supiano, 2022), and instead consider how we can work toward centering humanity in our courses. This piece explores ways to return to the humanity in teaching by understanding ourselves and our students and using these collective understandings to create inclusive and responsive learning environments, regardless of course modality. The approaches described have been intentionally chosen to be appropriate to anyone teaching students across the disciplines and regardless of course size, modality, or context.

Understanding Ourselves and Our Students

Reflecting on the influence our own identities and values have on the courses we teach is foundational to creating learning environments that are truly engaging,

inclusive, and equitable. As a first step, we might ask ourselves personal questions, such as: How does my identity/identities inform the dynamics in my classroom? What are the ways I might reveal my identity or express "selective vulnerability" (Hammond, 2014) while ensuring students can express their identities and their personal narratives? In what ways have my personal values influenced the course content and design? Do those aspects of course design privilege some student identities over others? Our responses to these reflective questions can help us begin to think about how we might humanize our pedagogy, which Pacansky-Brock et al. (2020) describe as "a pedagogical strategy that seeks to improve equity gaps by acknowledging the fact that learning environments are not neutral; rather, they often operate to reinforce a worldview that minoritizes some students" (p. 2). The four principles of humanized online teaching: trust, presence, awareness, and empathy (Pacansky-Brock, 2020) can help us think about how we might use our self-reflection to guide any design or redesign of our courses.

We might also consider Reflective Teaching (RT) to further our own personal understanding of ourselves as teachers and the impact of our teaching, from multiple vantage points. RT is a process of self-evaluation with the goal of continuous improvement (Brookfield, 2017). It involves examining pedagogical approaches, as well as the alignment of these approaches with personal beliefs about teaching and learning, and then identifying areas for improvement (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). RT consists of four lenses that "…correlate to processes of self-reflection, student feedback, peer assessment, and engagements with scholarly literature" (Miller, 2010, p. 1). RT is also action oriented, and to that end, rather than making adjustments at the beginning of a new semester, the instructor looks for ways to mediate challenges or issues in a class.

In addition to examining aspects of our identity and teaching through forms of reflective practice, it is also important to develop a deeper understanding of who our students are and how they identify. While there are many approaches that can be considered, to begin, we might consider administering a confidential beginning of course survey to collect "microdata about their [students'] individualized needs" (Pacansky-Brock, 2020, n.p.). For example, this type of "Who's in the Class?" (Addy et al., 2021) survey can be used to gather information about chosen name and pronouns, personal goals and commitments, access to the Internet, things the student is interested in and/or good at, and feelings or beliefs about the course and/or discipline (Killpack & Melón, 2020). Ultimately, survey responses can be used to better understand student identities and "diverse attributes" (Addy et al.,

2021, p. 1). However, this information can also provide an opportunity to examine course policies (e.g., attendance or participation, assignment due dates) and aspects of the course design and delivery to ensure all students can be successful in the course. Moreover, the information from student surveys can be used to identify areas where faculty might request resources from various campus offices or departments (Killpack & Melón, 2020).

Creating Inclusive and Responsive Learning Environments

In this section, we consider how we can apply what we have learned about ourselves and our students to create classes that are inclusive of and responsive to all students. The emphasis in this section is on small changes that are evidence-based and applicable across the disciplines and teaching modes and modalities. While not exhaustive, the approaches described might offer a place to begin. This section is comprised of two categories that are essential for inclusive classrooms: 1) Communicating Belonging and 2) Designing for Access and Inclusion.

Communicating Belonging

Syllabi are often the gateway into our courses—generally they are the first aspect of the course, other than the course description, that students interact with—and they communicate essential information about the course (e.g., course policies, grading criteria, assignments). At the same time, syllabi often provide the first opportunity to communicate inclusion and sense of belonging, and as such, it is important to examine the language used in course syllabi to identify acronyms or other terms that might not be accessible to or inclusive of all students. Statements of inclusion and accessibility are also foundational to communicating belonging, but rather than simply using language from a handbook or syllabus template, this information should be personalized with an explicit focus on language, tone, and scope (Möbus, 2020). Additionally, Savini (2021) suggests the inclusion of a statement valuing linguistic diversity. “Community guidelines,” which might be co-created between instructors and students, can also be important and powerful in the development of inclusive spaces. Fabiola Torres (n.d.), an Instructor of Ethnic Studies at Glendale Community College, includes an “Our Pact” section in her liquid syllabus (see the description of liquid syllabi below) that describes what students can expect from her and what she will expect from them. Torres’ pact demonstrates how instructors might use community guidelines to communicate shared expectations in their courses.

Designing for Access and Inclusion

Hogan and Sathy (2022) encourage us to consider who might be left behind in our courses, and how we can invite those students into our courses and communities. Statements of inclusion and the use of accessible (and inclusive) language in syllabi can begin to invite all students into our courses by making transparent expectations as well as the "hidden curriculum." To ensure all students have access to and feel included in our courses, instructors should consider how they can draw on the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines, which are designed to "ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities" (CAST, 2018., para 1). These approaches described in the guidelines focus on providing multiple means of engagement (the "Why" of learning), representation (the "What" of learning), and action and expression (the "How" of learning) (CAST, 2018). To begin taking a UDL approach in courses, instructors might consider providing students with options within individual course assignments.

In addition to UDL, the development of a liquid syllabus—a version of the syllabus that might include videos and/or other media to be embedded that is also accessible outside of a learning management system (LMS)—humanizes a course by providing a first introduction to the course and instructor in a form that is accessible from any device (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Liquid syllabi vary, but often contain welcome videos and messages from instructors, as well as descriptions of teaching philosophy, links to or information about course resources (e.g., formatting guides), expectations for success in the course, and other information. Liquid syllabi can also provide space for instructors to provide course information in different forms (e.g., infographics) and share details about course assignments and criteria for success beyond those in the syllabus and LMS. For example, instructors might use the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework to describe in further detail the task, purpose, and criteria for success for each assignment in the course (Winkelmes et al., 2016).

Conclusion

While the pandemic necessitated emergency remote teaching (O'Keefe et al., 2020), which, for many, resulted in the need to redesign courses to be taught online in a matter of days, there is much to be learned from this experience. As we move forward, we must use this opportunity to examine aspects of our courses and of our identities and values that ultimately impact student belonging and success. In this process we must make humanity central in our course design

and delivery, focusing on how we can be conductors, or as Palmer (1998) says, weavers—bringing together ourselves, our students, and our disciplinary content using methods that are inclusive and responsive to all students.

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