

Teaching as a Gift of Self-Knowledge Unto Oneself

9 July 2010

Everyone knows that good teaching is about imparting knowledge to students. Alas, teaching at its best is much, much more than that. It has to be, because good teaching at its best involves two more human beings interacting in a mutually respectful manner. And that fact alone suffices to get one beyond the portal of merely imparting knowledge. What is more, there are better and worse ways to impart knowledge to another. And teaching at its best is not—I repeat: is not—on the order of a god speaking to mere mortals. Rather, teaching at its best is much more about intellectual equals interacting with one another who merely differ in the amount of information they happen to possess at any given point in time. If these remarks are right, then being a teacher can be a veritable fountain of self-knowledge. This is especially so at the undergraduate level; and this essay shall be limited to undergraduate teaching.

Teaching at its best is an extraordinary indicator of the measure of a professor's trustworthiness. For with teaching at its best, the issue of trust will assert itself in ways that a professor will least expect and over which a professor simply has very little control. It is, for example, impossible for a professor to know whether her or his comportment and intellectual agility will inspire a deep and extraordinary instance of self-disclosure on the part of a student. And once that gate has been opened, a (decent) professor cannot simply slam the door shut and pretend that it was never opened in the first place.

Most significantly, though, there is the following conceptual truth: There can be no better indication that one is trust worthy than that from time to time intelligent people of good moral character should trust one. So, on the one hand, the trust is not coming from someone who is lacking in the ability have and exercise foresight. On the other,

the trust is not coming from someone whose own moral shortcomings make her or him vulnerable.

Some individuals are more than a little puzzled by my love for my students. Well, part of the answer is that over the years my students have been a wonderful barometer of my being trustworthy.

As I have adumbrated, the trust can manifest itself on a number of fronts. The trust may indicate that one can marvelously see beyond the student's ethnicity to her or his humanity. Or, the trust may indicate that one has been a fundamental fount of inspiration in the midst of difficult times. Or, the trust may indicate that one is not just formally accepting of a person's sexual configuration but that one is remarkably at-ease with the way in which a morally upstanding person identifies herself or himself sexually. Or, the trust may indicate a very salubrious bond of affection that means so much to the student's own flourishing. Then, of course, there is the trust that can occur between a professor and a student, where the issue of sexual attraction might be a factor. In this regard, the trust of my female students has been priceless.

Now, I taught one student who was easily regarded as one of the most gifted undergraduate students ever to receive a bachelor's degree from Syracuse University. The student's first course of his college career was Philosophy 191 with me; the student's very last course of his college career was my course American Slavery and the Holocaust. In all, the student took some 27 credits with me. Needless to say, that was an affirmation that I could not give myself.

The same holds for a student who showed up in my Philosophy 191 class after a considerable amount of tension between us in the Freshman Forum course that I taught. For the remainder of that student's undergraduate year, the person took numerous courses with me.

No matter how intellectually gifted a professor might be, a professor cannot affirm herself or himself in any of the ways mentioned in the preceding three paragraphs.

As the very term "self-knowledge" makes clear: To have self-knowledge is to have substantial insight into oneself that is very much warranted.

When it comes to being trust worthy and to the view that one is making a positive difference in the lives of others, warranted self-knowledge is not attained by mere sophisticated acts of ratiocination. Intellectual gymnastics do not warrant the view that one is trustworthy or that one is making a positive difference in the lives of others. Only the right kind of interaction with others will warrant that assessment. And teaching at its best provides countless many tidal waves of social interaction where such an assessment can be warranted. Otherwise, we would not have teaching at its best.

It is against the backdrop of the proceeding remarks that I am so very pleased that teaching is a fundamental aspect of my professional career. I often been struck by my clarity with regard to the kind of person that I am. It is with enormous gratitude that I say that I owe that clarity to so very many of the college students whom I have taught over the years.

At its best, undergraduate teaching is a veritable ocean of self-knowledge.