A Class Without a View:
A Cross-Cultural Challenge to Assumptions about Learning

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Abstract:

Based on our recent experience co-teaching a class in Budapest, Hungary, we offer a counter-narrative to the positive chronicles of culturally integrated teaching, and reflect on how our experience of failure revealed some of the timely challenges and deep issues facing higher education globally: student disengagement and lack of intrinsic motivation, and a cultural divide between teacher and student values about learning. As a result of our failed class and co-teaching experience, we propose an altered understanding of "what a class is," and address how "a deep dive into the why" of student learning might help reckon with, and build on, mutually appreciated standards of attention, motivation, and engagement.s

Key Words:

co-teaching, cross-cultural, global, failure, student motivation, student learning, student engagement, value of learning.

Introduction

Ours is a story of failure: both in teaching and in student learning. And while we do offer an instructive counter-narrative to the pervasively positive chronicles of globally and culturally integrated teaching, our larger aim is to show how radically transformative our failure was: it has led to an existential reconsideration of what a college class even *is*. We came to realize that the particular class we were teaching could not be salvaged with any standard curricular or pedagogical strategies or adjustments. National and pedagogical differences were not the actual problem, but they exposed the problem in full force. We were met head-on with the most profound problem facing higher education anywhere in the world: What *is* a class? What is it supposed to do? What is it able to do?

Our class serves like a geological core sample: drill down and a slender section captures wider strata and therein a whole environment. Our reflection focuses not just on "lessons learned" that might prevent future failures or lead to future successes, but also on understanding the changing environment of student values about learning. Collaborative teaching in a cross-cultural, global setting may cause just enough problems to unsettle some of the petrified assumptions about students in our classrooms no matter where in the world they are.

Beginning

All the plans had been laid for a successful literature course by any standards: a well-designed syllabus on a topic of contemporary relevance relating to an iconic author; innovative writing and research assignments; a cutting-edge mentoring program; and even an inventive oral performance capstone project so students would have a public scholarship product. And best of all, we would be team-teaching in Budapest, Hungary, one of us an American, one of us a Hungarian; both of us accomplished and experienced teachers with a track-record of team-teaching success together. So much success, in fact, that we sought to duplicate and enhance the 3-week course we had taught 10 years ago into a full-term course as part of a U.S. Fulbright teaching project. What could go wrong?

Assuming the course was failure-proof might have been, of course, the first step toward failure, but that would wrongly put the blame on our arrogance or inexperience. That is mostly not the case: we certainly would have benefitted from more careful consideration of Best Practices guides to co-teaching, such as Katherine M. Plank's excellent *Team-Teaching: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy* (2011) but we instead counted on our past successes with co-teaching, our strong friendship and ability to communicate well, often, and openly, our keen enthusiasm for the material, and *our* shared values about learning, literature, and the humanities.

Surely that should have been enough. But what worked ten years ago did not work now. To our astonishment, from the very first day, students were decidedly not engaged, would not willingly participate, did not like being taught by two people, and did not, would not respond to us or the pedagogies we tried. This is how it seemed to us because we did not get the reactions and interactions we wanted and expected from them. Despite hours of thoughtful conversation, reflection, experimenting, and redesigning, before and after almost every failed class meeting (which was all but 2 of

11), and no matter how we tried to rectify the problems—changing the classroom to facilitate debate and discussions, adapting and revising assignments, holding individual conferences, varying pedagogical tactics activities—in the end, the ship still sank. Or, we might say, it was sinking all along, and we just could not find the leaks or the right ways to stop them. As a result, students did not learn. Nor could we learn from them or from each other: instead of providing a venue for a free and productive exchange of ideas, classes at their best became polite and cautious gatherings of distant acquaintances, and at their worst nothing more than boring meetings of strangers who for some reason happened to end up in the same room. That is the definition of failure.

Cultural Educational Differences

We also failed to fully grasp and overcome some cultural educational differences, such as students' expectations towards their instructors, and instructors' expectations towards their students. The fact that we were teaching a mixed class with students at different stages of their studies (BA, MA), who were from different cultural backgrounds (Hungarian, US, UK,) and whose age varied from the early twenties to the mid-forties probably also contributed to a general air of awkwardness in class, making it difficult for students to progress, or at least to cope, at their own pace. The subject matter, the seventeenth-century poetry of John Milton, is formidable by any standards, but we had strategies for accommodating language challenges, and we both regularly teach the course with great success both in Hungary and in the U.S. So, we cannot blame the poet.

We were also coping with a severe lack of contact hours (the class convened only 11 times during a 12-week term), as is usual in the Hungarian higher education system where a normal course load may be 10-12 different courses which meet once weekly. Together, we could not find a way to connect with the students or get them to connect to the material, but we thought our connectedness to the subject would be contagious through our passion and enthusiasm—it always had been before—and so we thought we would somehow again join "self, subject, and student" in the life of the class through our identities (Palmer, 1997/2007).

The passivity of students was an important cross-cultural challenge. In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon world, and especially the US, passivity does not always signify disengagement or lack of interest. Students might feel intimidated by the presence of experts, and they might want to refrain from contribution in order to focus their attention on the instructor. However, in our case, this "positive" passivity was far outweighed by another, negative passivity which resulted partly from individual disengagement (not caring or not caring enough), and partly from the peculiarly indifferent atmosphere of the class (students did not seem to acknowledge each other's presence, they did not start debates, and were not interested in each other).

Discussion

We could compare our experience of co-teaching to a highly elaborate dance where participants know and expect their partners to act and react according to a strictly set choreography. We mutually respect and cherish each other's scholarship and critical positions, so we always graciously allowed the other to have their say, indeed, sometimes to the point of allowing the other to divert the focus of the class. The

situation was not helped by the sporadic presence of one of our senior colleagues who could join and rejoin this dance at his pleasure, possibly much to the students' confusion, and certainly to ours. Indeed, we so much internalized this choreography that we became blind to the possibility that students might not be able to follow our motions well, let alone that they listen to the beat of a different drum.

The solution might even have been as easy as establishing the team-teaching "roles and rules" to alleviate the confusion about authority and ownership. Or the solution might have been as simple as adjusting our cultural perceptions more insightfully to understand students' perceptions about being taught by two experts, both passionate and committed. Indeed, it is not at all certain that students had appreciated getting "2 for the price of 1," having two (sometimes three) experts in the classroom. For a Central European undergraduate this might have come through as unnecessary complication, or lack of order, rather than an unparalleled opportunity to learn. Given the varying levels of competence among the students, for some of them, it might have proved intimidating and annoying.

Separately, however, we knew and believed that if it were "*my* class," it would have been able to be redeemed or salvaged. And maybe if we'd discussed our different cultural and personal teaching styles more, we could have productively balanced out the American pedagogical constructivism's insistence on instructing through positive reinforcement, "active learning," and interactivity, with the Hungarian or Central-European-style seminar which is more like a "professional training": students are expected to do much of the work (in our case, reading and research) outside class, and the class periods serve for discussion and assessment of the results. But the students did not do the work outside of the class—neither the reading, nor the research. But finally, as team-teachers, we should have devised a single effective strategy to save our ship from sinking.

Reflection

Though we tried to resolve external educational differences, we did not recognize and adapt to the cultural difference within the microcosm of the classroom, between ourselves as learners and our students as learners. We failed to see clearly and acknowledge who our students were and what they needed, wanted, expected, and thus were willing to do as learners. We dealt with surface problems, not the underlying problem. We failed to communicate to students clearly and explicitly why we thought they should be motivated, and why they should at least try to adapt to our sense of the intrinsic value of and pleasure in learning. Instead, the two of us delved into in-class discussions with the enthusiasm of graduate students at a master-course, but refused to realize that those around us were simply on a different wavelength.

Instead of leading the students with our enthusiasm, we alienated them, erring by *assuming* shared values about learning, about both their extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for being in the class. We assumed (that) our students believed that people need to learn in order to succeed or advance professionally or academically (extrinsic motivation), and that they will find meaning, purpose, and sometimes pleasure from learning (intrinsic motivation). These were obsolete myths for many in this class.

Conclusions

Our experience taught us, in the end, that the real core of the problem may not just be about the how-to's, but about the *why*. Our challenge went beyond the usual challenges we face in teaching in the humanities and their perceived functional and applicable value, about which so many eloquent arguments have been put forth in recent decades. (Bate, 2011) (Nussbaum, 2014) (Zakaria, 2015) (Sandy, 2013). Our students were English majors in an English literature class, after all. But, how do we *motivate* students to learn if the value of learning humanities studies has been culturally and academically degraded so much that learning itself may be cast as largely "useless," or at least as serving only some ancillary purpose? (Pekrun, 2014) (Pekrun, R., Linnenbrink-Garcia, L. , 2012). Solution-based studies, such as those by Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia (et al.) on "adaptive motivation" offer instructional design. (Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2016). Others offer solutions to re-engage students toward learning and not just achievement. (Walker, C. O., Greene, B. A., & Mansell, R. A., 2006). Such insightful studies seek remedies to the root of the problem, not just its symptoms, and they will help us keep in step with our students.

Lack of student motivation reveals a deeper condition: what happens if a student simply does not know or respect *why*—even if they know how—learning in general has any *real* worth? Why then would higher education have any real worth? What if they don't care—not just about the subject, but about learning anything that does not interest, comfort, or entertain them? What if they don't want or like to be challenged? What if they are content and comfortable with the level of learning they already possess and content mastery is not their priority? After all, knowledge does not need to be *learned* to be useful: it can just be acquired. Its function is situational, even disposable. Why know anything, and go to the work of learning something when that something can be accessed almost instantly for any momentary need or situation, or that is only the appearance of a requisite credential, the entry fee into the next financial or professional life-stage.

It's too easy to say these students who don't know the value of learning should not be in college, or are "not college material"—because they *are* in college, they are in our classrooms, and so long as they enroll in our classes, it remains our pedagogical— perhaps even social, dare we say moral—responsibility to at least try to lead those students to care about learning. Our error was taking for granted that they did care, and it led to our miscalculations about where to find the leaks in our sinking ship.

In one student conference, a student helped identify the problem: the goal of a class, she said, is to fulfill one's needs—emotionally, spiritually, professionally, and maybe thereby, intellectually. If it doesn't fill this catalog of needs, what is its worth? A student like her needs to care, she said, before she is willing to learn. Care about what? "Care about myself," she said. "I need to know *why* I'm putting my energy into learning anything. I need to know why it matters to *me*…not just how it relates to me, but why learning it should matter to me." She was telling us that she thinks a class should educate the whole person. She was telling us that a class has to make the student feel valued—not that the material is valuable. A class first has to at least try to get students to see themselves as more than just potential workers or employees or civic contributors, and their knowledge as having more value than as a set of "transferable"

or "marketable" skills. For some students, that kind of vocabulary and mindset is soul-deadening, motivation-killing rather motivating.

So, a class may not be a place to presume automatically that all students fundamentally value learning as we know it and as we value it. One place to begin constructing a class is with an open discussion about the value of learning itself. Of course, it opens up the question to possible conflict, but regardless, the result will be deeper understanding, a demonstrated desire to learn. Listening to learn is always the first step toward understanding and respecting differences in any culture—globally or otherwise--and in this case the cultural differences within the classroom. Just as we engage in thoughtful practice as teachers, students need to engage in thoughtful practice as learners, and we need to build that practice into the infrastructure of a class. Not just self-reflection, or self-assessment, but a deep dive into *why.* The great humanist poet, John Milton, says that "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion…is but knowledge in the making." (Milton, 1644).

All this does not mean, however, that holding to high standards of mastery and achievement has to be or should be compromised. Giving attention directly to addressing student values about learning, and trying to adapt pedagogies, are not counterproductive to maintaining rigorous standards, but the avenue toward them. And of course, not all students will travel the road that leads to learning, and some ships will still sink, and some people will say that we are not in the business of saving souls and saving the world. But—weighing the option of looking the other way or trying our best, we prefer and choose to shape a world where strategies of adapting and evolving may serve as models. What if *we* don't try?

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