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# Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Teacherly Ethos

*Marshall Gregory*

## **Curriculum versus Pedagogy**

In considering how curriculum and teaching influence education, it is revealing to note that most faculty members treat curriculum the way bankers treat investments. They generally spend much time, planning, and careful thought on curricular matters—reasoning here, analyzing there, relying on experience, and carefully considering both the long-term and short-term dividends of knowledge—but when it comes to teaching, many faculty members operate less like bankers and more like barnstormers, flying by the seat of their pants and guiding themselves primarily by instinct or by repeating whatever worked yesterday. Few teachers feel that they have either the intellectual or professional grasp of teaching that they have of curriculum. Plato’s complaint about poets and politicians (as opposed to craftsmen or philosophers)—that they always operate by rules of thumb, even when they are brilliant, and thus can neither explain how they do what they do nor teach the doing of it to others—describes all teachers at least some of the time.

All teachers need to remember that exposing students to a well-thought-out curriculum is not the same thing as educating them, if educating them means, as I think it does, helping them learn how to integrate the contents of the curriculum into their minds, hearts, and everyday lives. Much of the time, academic considerations of education bracket off to the side the all-important fact that teaching not only influences but often determines what students *make* of the curriculum. A good illustration of my point is offered by

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Martha Nussbaum's fine book on liberal education, *Cultivating Humanity* (1997). While I agree with Nussbaum's argument about the value of integrating new foci of liberal arts education with the old foci, it is interesting that the whole book is argued in terms of curricular content. *Teaching* and *pedagogy* do not appear in the index, and the chapter titles—"Narrative Imagination," "Study of Non-Western Cultures," "African-American Studies," "Women's Studies," "Human Sexuality," and so on—reveal clearly the emphasis on curriculum rather than pedagogy.

It is important for teachers to remember that great texts, fine art, and liberating topics are not automatically or transparently great, fine, and liberating to most students. (In all honesty, this goes for most teachers as well.) Just like our students now, most of our own interests when we were students were not fired merely by coming into the presence of great art or great books or lofty topics. More likely than not, our interests were fired by the example of a teacher who seemed filled, somehow, with a special kind of life because of his or her love of a particular subject or discipline. As I look back, I realize that one commonality shared by all my favorite teachers is the way they seemed filled and animated by *presences*—by Jane Austen's power of language, by Kant's depth of thought, by Wollstonecraft's powerful arguments about the education of women, by the spirit of Bach's music, by whatever. In addition, I found that the larger life these presences gave my teachers was in itself compelling to me. I was drawn to this larger life the way iron filings are drawn to a magnet. Once there, I found myself delightfully attracted, pleasurably bonded.

In his most recent book, *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998: 21) says that "the power of our mentors . . . is in their capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives." This special power of teachers to infect others with the virus of their own passion for learning often gives teachers more power than they either realize or want. As Wayne Booth (1988: 298) says in *The Vocation of a Teacher*, "Anyone who embraces teaching as a vocation takes on considerable power with that embrace. . . . When college teachers are fully successful, they are successful beyond any of their conscious intentions about particular subjects: they make converts, they make souls that have been turned around to face a given way of being and moving in the world." Although everyone pays lip service to the value of "good teaching," few teachers (Booth is an obvious and well-known exception) take time to think deeply about this power, about the special opportunities it offers or the special responsibilities it imposes, but I think our avoidance has less to do with time than with the fact that we are not sure what to do with this power. We are not sure how best to employ it,

and we naturally shrink from fully facing the damage we might do if we fail to use it responsibly. So we think about curriculum instead. Indeed, we think so hard and exclusively about curriculum that we sometimes forget the obvious fact that curriculum seldom shapes anyone on its own but shapes us, instead, as a consequence of how we are *directed, informed, and led inside that curriculum by a teacher.*

An exaggerated and misguided belief in the automatic influence of great books and great art (evaluated apart from teaching) often lies at the heart of the confused and highly controversial accusations against liberal education made by thinkers such as George Steiner, who seem never to tire of pointing out that the liberal education received by many of Europe's political leaders in the early part of the twentieth century did nothing to prevent the Holocaust or the spread of fascism across Europe in the middle years of the century. The traditional belief going back at least to the Renaissance was that a classical curriculum automatically turned students into morally refined and sensitive persons. When that turned out not to be the case, the backlash against the imputed moral benefits of the classical liberal arts curriculum turned out to be strong and enduring.

We now know . . . that the formal excellence and numerical extension of education need not correlate with increased social stability and political rationality. . . . In other words, the libraries, museums, theatres, universities, research centers, in and through which the transmission of the humanities and of the sciences mainly takes place, can prosper next to the concentration camps. . . . Men such as Hans Frank who administered the "final solution" in Eastern Europe were avid connoisseurs and, in some instances, performers of Bach and Mozart. We know of personnel in the bureaucracy of the torturers and of the ovens who cultivated a knowledge of Goethe, a love of Rilke. (Steiner 1971: 77)

The presumption behind this and many similar accusations is that the content of education counts for everything or for nothing. What is never considered in such accusations—and insofar as I know, "never" is not an exaggeration—is the relationship between content and pedagogy. I am not claiming that good pedagogy would have made all the difference, that the Holocaust and the spread of fascism would never have occurred if teachers had only done a better job, but I do find it curious that the alleged failure of the classical curriculum is never analyzed within the context of the pedagogy of the day, a pedagogy which in fact *presumed* that curriculum is all, that texts teach themselves, and that the curriculum would *automatically* impose its benefits on students.

For centuries the pedagogy of the classical curriculum was a dry and sterile pedagogy of grammar instruction, not a pedagogy of ideas, values, critical thinking, historical perspective, moral deliberation, argumentation, or logical reasoning. What students *did* with the classical curriculum they were “learning” was in fact not to learn it at all but merely to translate it—a given number of lines a day—and what they were judged on was not their thoughts about it, or their criticism of it, or their ability to connect its content with their own social, political, or private lives, but merely the technical (grammatical) accuracy of their translation. End of pedagogical story. Writing near the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Henry Huxley (1938) gives a vivid portrait of the kind of pedagogy I am here describing. He asks, “What is to be said of classical teaching at its worst, or in other words, of the classics of our ordinary middle-class schools?” And he goes on to answer his own question, rather bitterly:

I will tell you. It means getting up endless forms and rules by heart. It means turning Latin and Greek into English, for the mere sake of being able to do it, and without the smallest regard to the worth, or worthlessness, of the author read. It means the learning of innumerable, not always decent, fables in such a shape that the meaning they once had is dried up into utter trash; and the only impression left upon a boy’s mind is, that the people who believed such things must have been the greatest idiots the world ever saw. (1325)

Clearly, the failure of the classical curriculum in England and Europe, a failure that has so exercised such people as Steiner, may perhaps be as well described, or perhaps better described, as a failure of pedagogy. In light of a pedagogy that stonewalled real student learning, that allowed students to avoid ever confronting what they were learning with what they believed about the world or how they conducted themselves in it, then of course it follows that such learning, which was learning in name only, would have no effect on the tremendous pressures in culture that pushed for social intolerance and, ultimately, ethnic genocide. The only possible response to such accusations as Steiner’s and others’ is that *of course* the classical curriculum failed to deflect such overriding influences on social life in Europe as nationalistic arrogance, centuries of anti-Semitism, territorial greed, racist bigotry, the injustice of World War I political settlements, and so on. Anyone who ever thought that translating a requisite number of lines of the *Aeneid* every day as a purely grammatical exercise would automatically produce citizens of superior sensitivity and morality was surely not *thinking* but merely repeating delusory bromides.

We can learn at least two things from the “failure” of the classical curriculum. First, we can learn that to expect any educational curriculum or system to make human beings morally virtuous in itself will always be an expectation absurdly and naively too high. Cardinal Newman (1852: 145), a realist in such matters, expresses the needed insight here with intellectual depth and poetic grace. “Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk,” he says, “then you may hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.” Even non-Christians can easily see that Newman’s location of the causes of moral failure in passion and pride is less naive, more searching, than the anguished anger of those who expected that, somehow, the classical liberal education of their youth in the first decades of the century should have “saved” Europe from war and genocide in the thirties and forties.

The second thing we can learn is that the effects of curriculum should never be considered in isolation from the kind of pedagogy that delivers that curriculum. This does not mean that a particular pedagogy will “save” civilization any more than a particular curriculum, but it does mean that if we want to know how or why a curriculum either works or doesn’t, we have to consider how we teach it, for none of its contents is transparently or automatically predictable. Surely the “failure” of the classical liberal arts curriculum in Europe was also and perhaps even primarily a failure of pedagogy. The potential advantages to heart and mind offered by the curriculum of the classics were effectively masked for most students by a pedagogy that deflected all genuine encounters with the classics in favor of a sterile pedagogy of right or wrong answers about verb irregularities, tenses, declensions, and inflections.

The fundamental reason *why* pedagogy deserves careful thought is that pedagogy is the primary force, the engine, that accomplishes the “leading out” (from Latin *educare*) that lies as the etymological source of *educate* and that also describes education’s most basic aim. Since at birth all human skills and forms of development are mere potentialities, it follows that we have to go someplace else in the world from where we are at any given time—we have to be led out, or educated—in order to turn those potentialities into realities. As Bartlett Giamatti (1976: 194) has said, “Teaching is an instinctual art, mindful of potential, craving of realization.” The content of any curriculum, whether a single course or a whole program of study, seldom exerts a sufficient pull on a person’s imagination to draw him or her out of the inertia of being a standing body and into the activity that takes mind and heart to new places and new levels of development. What *does* exert this pull is the sight of another human

being who has gone there before us and who brings back the good news: how exciting it is to read Shakespeare's plays! how transporting to learn about string theory or recursive functions! how uplifting to understand the relation between form and content in a Platonic dialogue or a piano sonata! and so on. In his famous essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," William James (1958: 149) hazards the observation that "our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the *feelings* the things arouse in us. Where we judge a thing to be precious in consequence of the *idea* we frame of it, this is only because the idea is itself associated already with a feeling. If we were radically feelingless, and if ideas were the only things our mind could entertain, we should lose all our likes and dislikes at a stroke, and be unable to point to any one situation or experience in life more valuable or significant than any other." The significance of this keen insight for teaching is this: if it is curriculum that contains and displays the idea, it is teaching that bonds the student's mind *to* the idea by creating the feelings that make the importance of the idea a vital force in the life of the student. Teachers are the good-news messengers—the exemplars—who create for curriculum what I call a "context of feeling" that turns curricular content into a burrowing force that gets under our skin, that irritates our natural self-satisfaction and by so doing turns it into the kind of dissatisfaction that only real learning can salve.

A curriculum in the catalog isn't worth a hill of beans to most students except as a list of requirements, and students are quite right to think that the only real meaning the curriculum possesses *for them* is its delivery or non-delivery by teachers in their everyday classrooms. In Aristotle's account of the imitative arts, he makes clear his view that no work of art finds its proper fulfillment, its "final cause," until it has elicited the appropriate response from an understanding auditor. The fulfillment of teaching follows a parallel course. Teaching finds *its* final cause when it is taken in by students who understand, who acknowledge its power, and who respond to it not just with intelligence but with pleasure. This fulfillment is accomplished in the classroom—not in the catalog or on any other piece of paper—or it is accomplished nowhere.

### **Teachers' Methods, Students' Criteria**

If the job of administrators and teachers is to create the terms and practice of good education, then what kind of teaching is most appropriate to this end? Many teachers try to answer this question in terms of method, but I am frequently unhappy with answers that rely heavily on method, for they almost

always assume that one method or another will solve all problems. Most analyses of methods assume that one method, simply because of its inherent powers, will automatically yield better teaching than the others. But if students vary in their responsiveness to different methods, which they do, and if the skills and forms of awareness that we wish to teach students are as varied as the situations and contexts of life itself, which they are, then it follows that no one teaching method can meet all the demands of learning. Sometimes lecture will work best, sometimes collegiality and fellow-learning, sometimes Socratic needling, and so on. Every good teacher should be able to vary pedagogical practice to meet the needs of student learning not according to some abstract definition (such as “collaborative learning is always best”) and not according to some ideological commitment to a single method (such as “the democratic ‘student-centered’ classroom”) but according to the demands of the material and the needs of students on any given day. Concern for method should always be a concern for methods.

The weakness of an excessive reliance on method can be exposed by a single, two-pronged question: what kinds of student development do we want, and what kinds of teaching promote those kinds? Whether we are talking about liberal education or professional education or technical education it is *development*, after all, that we want from our students, and it is by the *extent* of students’ development that teachers measure their own success or failure. Not even in the most technical or professional programs of education do we expect to turn out students who have a once-and-for-all doneness about them, like turned table legs or bronze castings. We want to put students on the path of developing powers that they will continue to use—and continue to develop—throughout their lives, and if none of us thinks that students should concentrate on only one form of development, then it follows that no one method will serve all needs.

Besides, there is at least one fundamental need that is obscured by a myopic focus on methods: the fundamental need for *practice*. Practice on the part of the student fosters development more than one method pushed by the teacher. Weight lifters lift heavier and heavier weights; dancers endure countless classes and rehearsals; students read, write, and organize their thoughts over and over. Practice, however, is not just a repetition of sameness. If I repeat a skill I am learning over and over in exactly the *same way*, it follows that I will repeat the skill at exactly the *same level* of proficiency. Practice has to be governed not merely by a repetition of sameness but by two mental activities: first, by *criticism*, the ability to see the imperfections in the performance so far, and, second, by *imagination*, the ability to visualize the perform-



ance or the skill not as it is actually being done now but as it might be done in the future, differently and better, after more practice.

The very concept of practice recognizes the inevitability of interim failure. If we did a thing right the first time we would not need to practice it. Real learning is always risky because the possibility of failure is always real. There is always the possibility for the student of being inadequate or simply getting something wrong: the date, the formula, the explanation, the interpretation, the cause, the analysis, or whatever. Some students want teachers to address risk simply by minimizing it, but this is surely unproductive and self-defeating. Progress *requires* risk. The most productive way of addressing risk, therefore, is not by minimizing it but by *supporting* it. Helping students to take risks required for progress is an absolutely necessary teaching strategy, and students' sense of being supported sufficiently to take risks depends more on teacher ethos than on any other single variable.

Whether we are lifting weights or dancing or learning Middle English, none of us gets it right the first time—and neither do our students—which points up a potential conflict between teacher desires and student needs. While teachers feel pressed to cover more and more material in their discipline, what students need is time to make mistakes, to correct them, to fail and try again—and they need teachers who can help them view each failure as merely interim, as merely a *halt* in forward progress, not as a terminal judgment on their abilities. Taking this kind of time in class, not to mention establishing the personal relations of trust that make it work, would force many teachers to revise their pedagogy considerably and even, perhaps, to elevate pedagogy above curriculum. Most teachers at present would find it difficult to consider fully the practical reforms that such ideas point to, for these ideas suggest, simply, that we must all, as Gerald Graff (1990) says, worry less about *coverage* and more about helping students find reasons to become engaged. And one way to foster engagement is to allow *practice*. Conceptually as well as practically, the notion of practice as a learning tool is not simple, for analogies between students and dancers and weight lifters begin to break down when we consider that learning to be a developed human being involves more skills and more forms of awareness than either dancing or weight lifting. The implications become not only boggling for what we might call “conventional pedagogy,” but highly suggestive for teacherly ethos. A teacherly ethos of seamless and impenetrable authority, for example—an ethos that suggests that the teacher never had to practice in order to learn because he or she first grasped knowledge the way Athena sprang from the head of Zeus, fully formed—presents an immensely different, and potentially forbidding, teacherly ethos to

students. On the other hand, a teacherly ethos that suggests that the teacher, like his or her students, not only did practice but *still* has to practice in order to improve—at writing, at argumentation, at close reading—both models what students need to see in order to learn themselves and shows them how to assume that model on their own.

One of the attractions for a concentration on method is that method, like curriculum, can be intellectualized and theorized more easily than teaching, which often has to be done on the wing. But rather than turn all considerations of teaching into considerations of method, teachers could better help their students *and themselves* if they learned to look at teaching from the student's point of view. Such a view suggests at once that students care little about what method their teachers use but do care immensely about what kinds of persons their teachers are. Without using the word *ethos*, ethos is nevertheless a primary concern for most students. It may strike many teachers as unpleasant and perhaps even unfair that the most important variable in the chemical mix that produces student learning or student stalling in the classroom is the students' sense of who their teachers are as persons. Some teachers may resist—"What difference does it make what kind of person I am as long as I really know what I claim to know within my discipline?"—but this question misses the point. What student learners see in front of them as they enter a classroom is not a disembodied skill or a dissociated idea but a *person* who has mastery over a skill or possession of an idea, and the first thing students respond to is whether the value of the skill or idea is recommended by the manner and the mind—in short, the ethos—of the teacher. Teacherly ethos—who the teacher seems to be *as a person*—only increases in influence (although that influence may be negative as well as positive) the longer and more deeply the student becomes acquainted with the teacher.<sup>1</sup>

If the teacher exhibits an ethos of passion, commitment, deep interest, involvement, honesty, curiosity, excitement, and so on, then what students are moved to imitate is not the skill or the idea directly, but the passion, commitment, excitement, and interest that clearly vivifies the life of the teacher. Everyone—we teachers included—loves imitating an ethos that says, "I *love* knowing this stuff about opera or calculus or chemistry." Such enthusiasm justifies our efforts as learners because *we, too*, want to know things that will make us love our lives more. *Then*, at that point, and only at that point—when we are moved as students to want what the teacher has and is as a person—do we as students begin to place high value on the skill or the idea that the teacher is trying to teach us. It's never just for the sake of the skill or idea alone that the learner learns it, but for the sake of the life that is heightened, vivified,

intensified, and enriched *by means of* the skill or idea. The possibility of such added value to learning can never be conveyed by the skill or idea alone, but only by the ethos of the teacher who has already integrated those skills and ideas into his or her life and thus offers us as students, via an appropriately vivid teacherly ethos, an existential invitation to, an existential reason for, learning.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers may not like being assessed by students in deeply personal ways—as likable or worthy of respect as human beings—but teachers don’t have the option of *not* being assessed this way, and they don’t have to like it in order to concede that such evaluations both always occur and always play a crucial role in student learning. Besides, likability as a student criterion is generally not as simpleminded—and therefore not as deserving of resentment or contempt—as some teachers may fear. In my experience, not even the least thoughtful student reduces a teacher’s likability to mere good looks or entertainment skills. To students, evaluations of likability and respect rest primarily on five criteria: their views of the teacher’s trustworthiness; their views of the teacher’s competence; their views of the teacher’s depth of commitment to the importance or value of the skills and ideas being taught; their views of the teacher’s dedication not just to teaching as a profession but to students as persons; and their views of the teacher’s commitment to fairness. These five criteria are applied to the teacher not as an exemplar of a particular pedagogical method or as the possessor of a particular level of professional expertise but as a human being, as a moral agent. Teachers who show up late, who never quite get the syllabus passed out, or who react defensively to student questions can be said to behave unprofessionally, but this language masks the fact that the problem in such cases is only marginally professional and primarily personal. The issues are trustworthiness and respect, and students begin making judgments not only about trustworthiness and respect but also about competence, commitment, dedication, and fairness from the moment the teacher walks into the classroom on the very first day, long before they are aware that he or she prefers any particular teaching method. Students don’t separate method from ethos, and they are quite right not to do so. To students, we are what we do.

### **Teacherly Ethos: A Friendship Model**

The model that I wish to recommend to teachers is a model not so much about what to do as about who to be. I wish to recommend an “ethotic” model of friendship—a very specific kind of friendship—but I must carefully define what I mean by it, for I mean something that is in some respects quite different

from and in other respects directly contrary to definitions of friendship that prevail in popular culture. One of the difficulties in recommending an ethotic model of friendship is that contemporary society has nearly abandoned any sustained discourse about friendship altogether. Ronald Sharp (1986: 4) asks,

Why is it that there has been so little serious writing about friendship in recent years? Love, sex, and marriage have been the central subjects of a great variety of serious twentieth-century literature, but with very few exceptions, friendship—which up through the nineteenth century remained a major issue for serious writers and philosophers—seems to have fallen mainly into the hands of pop psychologists and self-help enthusiasts. . . . As Wayne Booth [1980] has observed . . . “after millennia during which [friendship] was one of the major philosophical topics, the subject of thousands of books and tens of thousands of essays, it has now dwindled to the point that our encyclopedias do not even mention it.”

Whatever the *whys* of the disappearance of discourse about friendship, its paucity renders recommendations based on a model of friendship less clear than they would have been a hundred years ago. Yet this model must be rightly understood if it is to assist teachers in thinking about their teaching in deeper and more creative ways, and “rightly understood” means, first, separating the friendship model I am recommending from a friendship model of buddies or other kinds of companions who share a lot of social time and activities together.<sup>3</sup> Most of all, the model of friendship I recommend must be separated from contemporary images of friendship in movies and on television.

Friends as contemporary television and movies portray them share mutual interests in entertainment and something universally called a “lifestyle,” and they are supposed to like and support each other—to “be there” (as the buzz phrase goes) is the friend’s *job*—but friends do not offer serious criticism of each other in either intellectual or moral terms. Unlike teachers, friends on TV sitcoms do not *judge* each other. (This is true despite that fact that TV sitcoms contain a lot of *ridicule*, but flippant ridicule and deliberative judging are not the same thing.) Being described as a “nonjudgmental kind of person,” on the friendship front, is a big compliment on TV sitcoms. On occasions when serious judgments might be forthcoming, the evaluating friend who is violating the nonjudgmental dictum is typically warned, “Back off, I have a right to make my own decisions,” or “Back off, what gives you the right to *judge* me?” or “Back off, I have to do what I *feel* is right, not what you say is right,” and, according to current notions, the moralizing friend has to do

just that: back off. Without anyone's having to say so explicitly, this dynamic presumes that intellectual and moral integrity is decided upon solely by the individual agent and that intellectual and moral *principles* are pretty much what Alasdair MacIntyre (1981: 11) in *After Virtue* accuses them of being, that is, "*nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling."

If, on the sitcoms, a friend is definitely nonjudgmental, a friend is also definitely *cool*. In particular, I am referring to the attitude of ironic detachment that young people learn primarily from television. David Foster Wallace (1997: 63–64) describes this demeanor with vivid clarity:

To the extent that [television] can train viewers to laugh at characters' unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance: the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naiveté. . . .

In fact, *the numb blank bored demeanor . . . that has become my generation's version of cool is all about TV. . . .* Indifference is actually just the "90s" version of frugality for U.S. young people: wooed several gorgeous hours a day for nothing but our attention, we regard that attention as our chief commodity, our social capital, and we are loath to fritter it. In the same regard, we see that in 1990, flatness, numbness, and cynicism in one's demeanor are clear ways to transmit the televisual attitude of stand-out transcendence—flatness and numbness transcend sentimentality, and cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naive about something at maybe like age four. (my emphasis)

Clearly, insofar as Wallace's description of student ethos is accurate, teaching and learning will both be affected. Jane Tompkins's (1990) famous account of her graduate class at Duke in which personal emotions suddenly erupted illuminates the issue, for the greatest consternation among the participants was not the content of the emotion itself, or even the reasons behind it, but its sheer appearance, its disruption of the "everything's cool" surface of classroom relations. Deborah Chappel (1992: 21), a teacher who was a student in Tompkins's graduate class, provides an account of the students' perspective:

I was suddenly aware in that moment in Tompkins's class how relentlessly I'd been taught to keep overt displays of emotion and even conscious recognition of emotion out of the learning environment, to such an extreme that even to see a student really caring what went on in the classroom embarrassed and frightened me. . . . And I began to wonder why our expectation about school had been constructed in such a

way that the most socially acceptable emotion is denial that what goes on in the classroom really matters to the student on a personal, individual level.

Taken together, Wallace's and Chappel's comments suggest that teachers who are frustrated by their failure to strike sparks from students may simply not have noticed how generally pervasive the obligatory demeanor of *cool* has become.

In the contemporary context of cool detachment, cynical put-downs, and never letting on that one is naive about *anything*, friendship is being pressured to reconfigure itself as something that we might well call "the convocation of the cool." Sometimes teachers attempt to join the convocation of the cool themselves, a tendency especially noticeable in older teachers who persist in holding on to their own but increasingly distant *cool* from graduate school days. When this tendency takes over, however, responsible pedagogy suffers. As James Banner and Harold Cannon (1997: 113) say, "Teachers should try to become, as teachers, the people they are. . . . Teachers who impersonate themselves at earlier points in their careers invite ridicule."

In a much-discussed essay on liberal education in *Harper's* magazine, Mark Edmundson (1997) reflects on the views of himself as a teacher offered by his students on course evaluation forms. He is particularly struck by the way his students approve of his *cool* but also reveal to him a disquieting and flabby kind of *friendliness* devoid of rigor or sharp edges:

I have to admit that I do not much like the image of myself that emerges from these [student evaluation] forms, the image of knowledgeable, humorous detachment and bland tolerance. . . . I'm disturbed by the serene belief that my function—and, more important, Freud's, or Shakespeare's, or Blake's—is to divert, entertain, and interest. Observes one respondent, not at all unrepresentative: "Edmundson has done a fantastic job of presenting this difficult, important & controversial material in an enjoyable and approachable way."

Thanks but no thanks. I don't teach to amuse, to divert, or even, for that matter, to be merely interesting. . . . but the affability and the one-liners often seem to be all that land with the students. . . .

Why are my students describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? And why am I coming across as an urbane, mildly ironic, endlessly affable guide to this intellectual territory, operating without intensity, generous, funny, and loose? (39–40)

## The Ethos of Befriending versus Being Friendly

The model of friendship I would offer as an alternative to flabby friendliness is better expressed, perhaps, by the active verb *befriend* than by the passive verb *be friendly*. Being friendly indicates merely a state of being or, even more weakly, only a conventional pleasantness. But being friendly is not synonymous with befriending. Aristotle offered one of the earliest and most enduring definitions of friendship as befriending, and it is still a useful definition for countering the endlessly uncritical and coolly flip versions of friendship offered to us on television and in movies. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (1952: 626) defines friendship as the “feeling towards any one as wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things about.” On this view, friends don’t just support us or endlessly agree with us or weakly back off from us. If they see us doing something bad (and thus bad for us) or failing to reach for some good that would improve us, then *these* kinds of friends, Aristotle’s kind, sometimes get in our face; they help us improve ourselves, not for their own satisfaction but for our own good. In friendship-as-befriending, we find a model for the teacher who helps students achieve the kinds of development that are good for them simply because it *is* good for them. This view does not force teachers to impose a monolithic agenda of development on their students (“Listen up: *I* know what’s best for you!”), but it does require knowing the difference between being tolerant and being uncritical.<sup>4</sup>

The befriending model of teaching is not the same thing as merely wishing for others what they wish for themselves. None of us always *knows* what is best for us, and even when we do, we don’t always want it. All of us require, at times, help from our friends, not only to discover what really is good for us but to improve what we desire. Discussing things with friends helps us clear our own heads, but when our friends befriend us rather than give us flabby friendliness, we have to be prepared to receive instruction, criticism, or even reproof. Likewise, when teachers befriend students, we do not merely *feel* for them, and we certainly do not feel just as they feel. Friendship from a befriending teacher is likely to be challenging, not merely friendly. Befriending is not a touchy-feely, I’m-OK-you’re-OK activity, nor does befriending students entail being personally intimate with them, or sharing personal secrets with them, or sharing the same tastes in entertainment and “lifestyle,” or being the same age, and it certainly does not entail uncritical acceptance of their failures or mistakes. Primarily, the kind of teacherly befriending I am talking about entails creating an atmosphere of classroom



trust in which the teacher's willingness to call a bad job a bad job is seen by the student as helpful and productive rather than as mean and destructive.

Teachers who have earned this kind of trust help create students who are willing to take the risk of real engagement, the risk of failure, and the commitment to practice that constitute the grounds of learning. Once this trust is present, any teaching method can be productive. Teachers whose students know they are befriending them can lecture productively, discuss productively, imitate Socrates productively, or swing from the chandelier productively. Students can best learn the skills of criticism and imagination—especially when it is themselves they need to criticize and the course of their own lives they must imagine—when they have teachers whose critical and imaginative activity they can imitate.

No single model or single list will solve all problems of pedagogy, but the following list of ten ethical qualities may provide a useful guide for helping teachers see more clearly the complicated relations among curriculum, pedagogy, and teacherly ethos.

### **Honesty**

Teachers should be honest about what they know and don't know. We get annoyed when students cover their ignorance by "bulling" their way through exams and papers, but sometimes these student cover-ups seem merely a model of teacherly "bull," dished out by egoistic or insecure teachers on the mistaken assumption that presenting a seamless front of impregnable knowledge automatically bestows teacherly credibility. Teachers should also be honest with students about the nonquantifiable dimensions of grading. That nonquantifiable thing called "professional judgment" can and should be defended, not masked behind the pretense that everything a student does is transparently equivalent to a mathematically derived number.

### **Unpretentiousness**

Pretentiousness and pedantry are the bane of good pedagogy and they are rooted in old-fashioned vanity. The patinas of pedantry and pretentiousness are not only ugly and dishonest but manipulative, for they are not strategies employed to "lead out" students. Pedantry and pretentiousness are bullying strategies. I have read many of the contemporary arguments in favor of obscurantism in literary theory on the grounds that arcane and specialized jargon challenges the oppressive hegemony of middle-class values, but this self-serving rationalization is not only unconvincing with respect to literary theory, but absolutely deadly with respect to teaching. Without getting involved in the long controversies over the rightness or wrongness of all of the following statements, it is nevertheless clear that when we hear Socrates say that "the unexamined life is not worth living," or hear Jesus direct the rich young man to "sell all that you have and give it to the poor," or listen to Jefferson's claim that "all men are



created equal,” or react to Wollstonecraft’s indignant response to the patriarchy that “how grossly do they insult [women] who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!” or consider Engels’s dictum that “religion is the opiate of the people,” and, finally, when we listen to Marx assert that “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life,” what strikes us is that these utterances have not only shaped our world but are expressed in language that is accessible to everyone, not just an initiated coterie. Any discourse that aspires to influence must be expressed in a language that reaches its audience, and this is especially true of the language of good teaching.

### Curiosity

The love of learning is the most important ingredient in the love of teaching. *Teachers should make their teaching not just an important but an indispensable part of their own ongoing education.* Doing so is the only way to avoid eventual burnout and sterility. Curiosity should include inquisitiveness about how the course content connects with the lives that both teachers and students are leading as human beings. In the words of bell hooks (1994: 17–19), “Teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. . . . [Students] rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences.” Curiosity also implies the necessity of *playfulness*. We are not always curious merely about useful or necessary things, but about things that simply strike our fancy, and we don’t always want to know something merely because we can see how to turn it to profit or use. Sometimes we want to know just for the fun of it, and learning as a kind of play is an experience that teachers need to help their students discover. As Kenneth Eble (1983: 57) says, “If we cannot be playful at all in teaching, we are probably ill suited for that vocation.”

### Humor

Human beings are not merely the only creatures who use real language, who make works of art, and who judge their conduct by moral standards, but they are also the only creatures who laugh. Laughter is an immensely important social lubricant. In the classroom, laughter must be collegial and beneficent, not spiteful or contemptuous, but when it is the former rather than the latter it can create more classroom cohesion and goodwill in a shorter time than almost any other form of human expression. It pulls the teeth out of danger and liberates students to try for their best performance even as they risk failure. Laughter can help teachers help students bridge the gap between their desires and their performance.

### Tolerance

Teachers today are very concerned about tolerance for “the other” defined in racial, gender, class, or ethnic terms, but bad pedagogy rooted in these kinds of intolerance is not in my view either the main or the most pernicious version of intolerance in the

college classroom. I see very few teachers exhibiting class or race prejudices, but I do see and hear teachers expressing deep prejudice against students who are temperamentally and intellectually unlike themselves. Class, race, and gender aside, we tend to like students who, like us, are verbally fluent, who like books, and who already value the education we want so desperately to give them. Those who are like us in these ways get our approval regardless of their race, class, or gender. But those who are unlike us, who question the value of our education, who don't read our books, who play football rather than Scrabble, and who find movies and television more interesting than novels and science we too readily dismiss as impossible or uninteresting. We long ago ceased making hurtful ethnic jokes; now we need to cease stereotyping those we call "jocks, boneheads, sorority bubbleheads, and frat boys." It's not that these stereotypes never have validity, but such validity is never a good defense for stereotyping whole groups. Liking those students best who mirror us most is just another form of teacherly vanity.

### **Courage**

Teachers today need a lot of courage in order to stand up against many different pressures: pressure from the administration to keep retention figures up by keeping students happy, pressure from students not to push the envelope of their intellectual comfort too fast or too far, pressure from a society that wants greater "accountability" measured only by hours in the classroom, and, most discouraging of all, perhaps, pressure from students, administrators, some colleagues, and society at large to measure everything in education by a bottom-line ideology that is invoked as a mantra, never defended as an argument.

### **Indignation**

Every teacher worth his or her salt needs the capacity to be indignant over time that is wasted, talents that lie fallow, red tape that gets in the way, students who refuse to put out their best effort, and so on. Throwing great gobs of gritty indignation into the hub of the status quo is one way to create that squeaky wheel that gets the grease.

### **Passion**

A teacher who lacks passion for the twin activities of internal and social learning is not a real teacher. Please note that I am not assuming a uniform or monolithic *expression* of passion. I'm not assuming, for example, that all excitable teachers have the kind of passion that I'm talking about, or that all quiet and undemonstrative teachers lack it. The manifestation of passion may be loud, boisterous, and intense, or it may be quiet, introspective, and unassuming. But if it's there in any manifestation at all—or if it isn't—most students will know. However it gets manifested, passion is the engine that drives the pedagogical sense of urgency to obey E. M. Forster's ethic of "only connect."

## Charity

None of us lives up to our potential all the time. None of us is nice all the time. None of us is without blame or guilt somewhere in our lives. None of us maintains clear judgment all the time. None of us is smart every single day. None of us makes the right decision at every important turning point in our lives. When these same lapses of judgment and character show up in our students, teachers need to dispense charity, not just censure. Of course we have to know when censure is the better corrective, but whether charity or censure is most required always deserves serious thought.

## Love

It has always seemed to me that Shelley offers one of the most perspicuous definitions of love available anywhere, and in words that are particularly useful in pedagogical discussions. “The great secret of morals,” Shelley (1961: 495) says, “is Love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.” To adapt, “A teacher, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he and she must put themselves in the place of the student and of many students; the pains and pleasures of students must become the teachers’ own.” If we cannot as teachers learn to see things from the students’ point of view, if we have no intuitions about where their resistance or confusions are located, if we cannot be midwife to the joys and pains of their developmental progress, if we cannot remember what it was like to be buffaloeed or riveted by new material, then we lack the love of identification, that love that is “a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own.” To achieve that “going out” as teachers is the most effective strategy for helping students achieve their own “leading out” as citizens and moral agents.

Notice that these features of teacherly ethos completely background those features of teacherly life that usually get foregrounded: professional standing, disciplinary expertise, intellectual ability, and so on. It’s not that these are unimportant to good teaching, but they are not sufficient to guarantee it in the absence of the ethical features I have just discussed. *Since who we are is an integral part of what we know and what we do*, we need to think about what goes into “who we are” as carefully as we think about what we know and do.

## Good Teaching—A Definition

Our lives are a constant attempt to move things from the domain of things as we think they are into the domain of things as we would like them to be. Into

the gulf between these two domains we invest most of our life's energies, where they pile up as the rich humus that nourishes the growth of human creativity. Teaching is that activity that helps students, at first with the teacher's assistance but eventually on their own, not only to criticize the world as it is and to imagine an improved version of the world as it might be, but to imagine more vividly and productively their own possible contributions to that improvement (Gregory 1982).

A good teacher, one who is not merely friendly but befriends, can help students engage in criticism that avoids cynicism and can also help them engage in imaginings that avoid solipsism. The teacher who knows how to befriend students teaches them how to befriend the world: how to work for the humanization of the social order, how to be critical of self without falling into self-loathing, how to be critical of others without being thoughtlessly callous, and how to be compassionate of others without being unduly sentimental.

Socrates was a teacher who was neither a banker nor a barnstormer and who was sometimes not even very friendly either to his interlocutors in particular or to Athens in general. Nevertheless, Socrates' vision of what his fellow citizens might become made them uncomfortable with what they were, and in that discomfort—theirs then, ours now—lie the seeds of growth and improvement. Socrates did not say to his interlocutors, "I'm OK, you're OK." He did not say, "Learning is hard. Let us proceed in risk-free increments." He said, instead, "I'm ignorant. I know practically nothing. But in knowing my own ignorance I know more than most of you. Let's talk. Let's see how, in sharing good talk, we can together learn more and turn ourselves into better people." His is perhaps our best, most enduring, and most inspirational model of befriending as good teaching. If students need teachers, and they do, to become the best versions of themselves, teachers need students to become the best versions of themselves as well, and in this reciprocity of mutual assistance all of us, students and teachers alike, may learn, if we are careful, how to tend better through education the fragile relations of personal development, human community, and civilized conduct.

## Notes

1. See Brinton 1986 for an incisive analysis of the relation between ethos and argument that is highly relevant for teachers.
2. In an essay that is both brief and insightful, novelist Jay Parini (1997: 92) develops an analogy between the teacher's ethos and the writer's voice.
3. Both Robert Audi (1994) and Peter Markie (1990) offer convincing arguments against

teacher/student friendships of the buddy, mutually affectionate, and social companion kinds.

4. For more on students' ethos see my "Many-Headed Hydra" (1997b) and "Introductory Courses" (1997a).

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