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ADVICE

It's a Simple Game

By John D. Arras

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Attempting to halt a hapless losing streak, the manager of the Durham Bulls exhorts his young players: “This is a very simple game: You throw the ball, you hit the ball, you catch the ball. You got it?!”

My hunch is that most good teachers would say something similar about their own work.

When I read about professors winning major teaching awards, I'm always struck by the disparity between their manifest greatness in the classroom and the sheer humdrum ordinariness of their own accounts of what they do. For most outstanding teachers, it's not a matter of high-tech wizardry or some nifty new philosophy of education; rather, I suspect, they are great in the classroom because they have a great passion for ideas, they care deeply about their students, and they are compelling storytellers and explainers.

Just as good artists cannot capture the spirit of what they do in a prosaic list of dos and don'ts, so good teachers often fumble in attempting to articulate what makes them

tick. Without any expectation of doing better, I offer my own humdrum list of simple rules that I try to follow in my own teaching:

Teach Thinking

My prime directives as a teacher are to foster critical-reasoning skills and philosophical creativity in my students. I lecture as little as possible in order to focus on intense classroom discussion. I definitely have a goal in mind for each class, but I try to reach it circuitously -- through probing, mutually respectful debate, thus giving each student a stake in the proceedings. Sometimes, however, the side alleys turn out to be more interesting than the initial destination.

I also try to teach good, rigorous writing skills, focusing simultaneously on writing technique, critical reasoning, and mastery of important factual detail. Victims of poor high schooling, of whom we have plenty at my university, often come to my classes asking, "Is this an 'opinion paper' or a 'research paper'?" I tell them that that is a spectacularly bad question based upon a false dichotomy; that I'm interested neither in mere feckless opinion nor in the random accumulation of facts, but rather in reasoned argument based upon a secure empirical and philosophical foundation.

I offer a writing workshop for each class, work intensely with students throughout the semester on their evolving papers, and spill a lot of ink on their finished products. It's hard but rewarding work, both for me and, I would hope, for my students.

Love What You Do

I believe that passion animates all good teaching -- passion both for ideas and for communicating them to students, colleagues, and the general public.

I teach philosophy, a subject I have loved ever since I encountered Socrates in a bad intro class more than 40 years ago. I am passionate not only about philosophical

theorizing but also about engaging philosophical modes of thinking with moral and political problems at the intersection of medicine, law, and public health. Each new issue that arises in that problematic space represents a chance to participate in the public life of our time and, simultaneously, yields an exercise that allows my students to develop the requisite intellectual and moral skills to shape the future they will inherit from us.

Teaching without passion for your subject matter is a crime (or at least a serious tort) against the young. As one of my favorite philosophy teachers at the Sorbonne once warned on hearing that I, too, wanted to be a professor some day: “Never be bored, never be boring!”

Practice Tough Love

First, you have to set very high standards; you have to explode that sense of entitlement to good grades so prevalent on campuses today. Students need to know that they're going to have to work very hard to do well, let alone excel, in your class. But that sternness, that sense of expectation, that display of shock and awe, need to be tempered by genuine love and respect for your students as independent sources of value and thought.

This might sound corny, but Plato had it right: the love of wisdom is predicated upon the love between teacher and student. If you don't care deeply about your students both as thinkers and as persons, you're in the wrong profession.

Keep it Real

As a professor of practical ethics, I have one foot in the nether world of philosophical abstractions and the other in the clinic, the courtroom, the research lab, and the frontiers of global health. In my teaching I try to bring about a fruitful blending of theory and practice, mostly through the discussion of dense, complex, messy, and

difficult case studies viewed through the lens of contemporary ethical and political thought.

The intended effect isn't the mere mechanical application of pre-established theory to practice, but rather the intermingling of the concrete and the abstract.

Theory can guide practice, especially when “problems of first impression” arise, as they constantly do in the areas of genetics and human enhancement. On the other hand, deep immersion in practical debates can often highlight the shortcomings or blind spots in our ethical or political theories (e.g., in the areas of justice, disability, and health-care rationing).

My previous experience as a professor in a medical school and research hospital, and my current consulting work with government agencies, lend credibility and authenticity to my teaching. My prior work on a reproductive ethics committee informs my current teaching in reproductive ethics; and my continuing consultations at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control on international research and avian flu enrich my teaching of research ethics and public health policy.

Pay It Backward and Forward

Ten years ago I heard from a former student whom I had taught many years earlier. He wrote to thank me for teaching him to think and see the world in a different way -- in effect, for changing his life. Best of all, he didn't even want a letter of recommendation! I immediately called my (now dear departed) graduate-school mentor, Henry Veatch, to thank him for showing me what it means to be a great teacher and a writer of rigorous but sprightly and widely accessible prose.

I'm now “paying forward” my enormous debt to Henry by grooming my own graduate students to care not just about writing technically proficient papers, but also about

the values of good teaching and critical, humane discernment. As a professor of ethics, I try to model for my graduate and undergraduate students alike a concern not just for ideas, theories, and professional advancement, but also for the sufferings of others not as fortunate as we are.

It's OK to Be a Luddite

Although I'm sure there's an important place for new technologies in the classroom -- especially in the presentation of visual materials -- and although I'm currently toying with the idea of using some of them in my introductory lectures, I generally believe that PowerPoint is the spawn of Satan. It breeds passivity in the students and it disconnects the speaker from the audience. (It also encourages professors to reduce their deepest, most private thoughts on teaching to a few bullet points.) So I prefer to engage my students in a lively conversation about ideas, whether it's in a class of 20 or 200.

Oddly, this method seems to work, perhaps because students are so shocked to encounter someone who is actually trying to make eye contact with them. As one student recently wrote on her course evaluation: "I really love Prof. Arras's old-fashioned style of teaching!"

Is that the crack of a bat I hear?

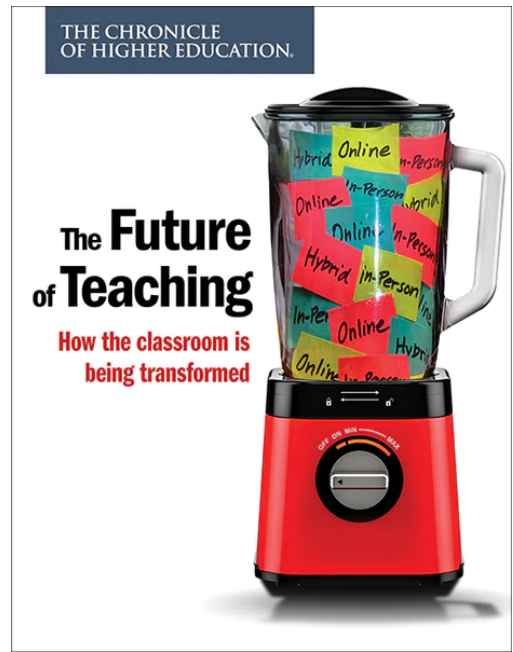
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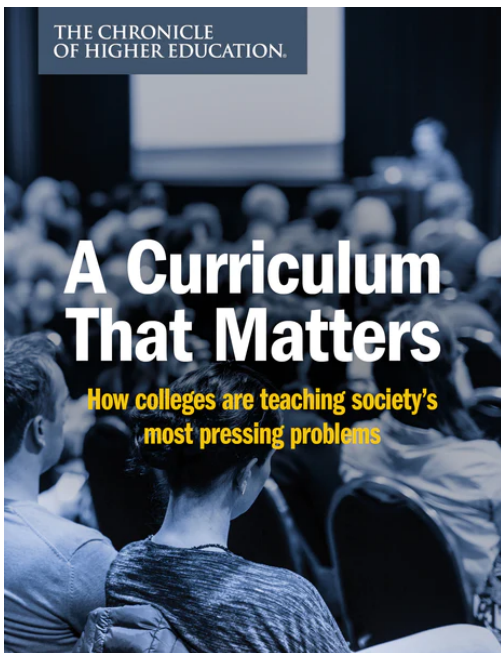
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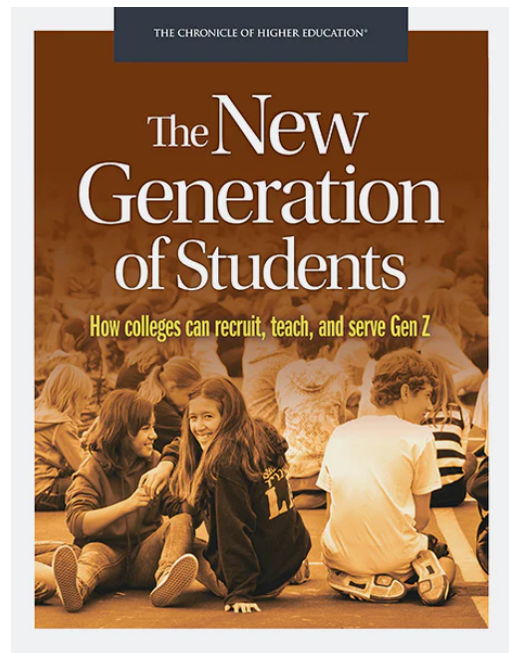
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