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“TEACHING MUSIC HISTORY WITH YOUR MOUTH SHUT”

One of my yearly assignments is to participate in a team-taught “Teaching Proseminar” offered every spring to first-year doctoral students who will be teaching undergraduate music classes at the City University of New York the following fall. The Proseminar is intended to introduce these students to three things: the peculiarities of teaching at our university; the particulars of teaching the various sub-disciplines of music (history, theory, ethnomusicology); and more generally the craft of teaching itself. I am responsible for organizing the portion of the seminar that introduces the teaching of music history and music appreciation. After I have led two meetings of the seminar, each student prepares and delivers a sample course lecture in front of me and the other students, who act the roles of undergraduate students listening. In this short paper I will narrate the story of how I radically changed the way I led this Teaching Proseminar by “teaching with my mouth shut”, and what the (mixed) result was.

The prospect of introducing college teaching to first-year doctoral students brought me face to face with my own longstanding qualms about the enterprise. Nobody during my own graduate training ever suggested that pedagogy was something that could be taught – it appeared to be something you were supposed to figure out on your own. As I did develop my own teaching strategies over the years, the courses I found particularly problematic were the so-called “survey” courses, Music History and Music Appreciation, both designed to introduce undergraduate students to the totality of western music in one or two semesters. There appeared to me to be a set of unstated assumptions about the “survey course” that went something like this: the class’s goal was to *survey* the history of European art music from one point to another (chant to Cage, Bach to Schoenberg); the professor lectured to the students about fundamentals of music, about what to listen for in music, about the biographies of composers, musical forms, music-stylistic changes, etc., and the *textbook* was present as a kind of Alpha and Omega, the totality of all knowledge and wisdom to be *covered* in the course. A successful course was one in which the professor had traversed the historical terrain promised and the students had listened, read the textbook, and then *demonstrated their knowledge of the material* on tests.

Three inter-related aspects of this model disturbed me, I realized, indicated with the words in italics in the paragraph above. The first is the centrality of the textbook, and the way it is taken as representative of comprehensive knowledge of the subject. Textbooks package knowledge tidily,

presenting information as if it were the whole story, the definitive version of how things were in the past. We all know this and we are prepared to be on guard against it, but we also know that preparing our own materials is phenomenally time-consuming, and we are overworked as it is. Students take for granted that the textbook is the final authority, the ultimate arbiter of knowledge. If it's not in the textbook then it isn't "required" knowledge.

The power that the textbook wields over students and professor alike leads to my second dissatisfaction, what I will call the "tyranny of coverage": the feeling of obligation the professor might have to present all the material contained in the textbook and make sure the students know it. This means that if the teacher wants to go on a tangent, explore something more fully, or answer student questions, this will come into conflict with schedule and content dictated by the textbook. A skilled professor knows how to handle this, but inexperienced teachers are more likely to submit to the will of the textbook.

The "tyranny of coverage" works in tandem with the third problem: the unequal power dynamic inherent in the lecturer-audience relationship. If the textbook can potentially determine the content of the course, the professor is its mouthpiece, and the students' role is passive: to learn the material and then prove their knowledge by taking a test. There are troubling political and ethical implications in this model anywhere, but they are particularly acute at a university such as mine in the Music Appreciation courses that most of our students teach. At the four-year colleges of the City University of New York, students of European background make up just 32% of the population; at the two-year colleges where many of our graduate students do their teaching, European students comprise just 16% of the population. The music history and appreciation textbooks used by these campuses are virtually all written by European men, largely about European music. The content of these books has changed over the years that I've been in the field to include more and more musical repertoires outside the European canon (world music, jazz, popular music, and so forth) but the shape of the courses remains the same: the European canon is the center, augmented with supplementary forays into "other" repertoires. I have always found teaching this content to this population problematic. I dislike the power implications of a professor standing in front of the class, telling students whose life experiences were so different to hers, about the minutiae of European music history. Why should they care about the revolution that was the *Ars nova*?

How, then, to instruct my doctoral students who are preparing to do this job that I find so problematic? I thought I found my answer last year in a little book with a provocative title: *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (henceforth *TnyMS*)

by the American educator Donald Finkel.¹ Finkel was trained as a developmental psychologist, but taught mostly literature courses in a small public college in Washington State, Evergreen State College. Finkel starts *TnyMS* by identifying and critiquing precisely what has always made me uncomfortable about undergraduate lecturing, and he has a name for it: “*Teaching as Telling*”.² In this model’s ideal execution, a brilliant and charismatic professor lectures, infusing her students with enthusiasm about her subject, and the students listen and become inspired. As Finkel reminds us, research on education has shown that Teaching as Telling is an ineffective way to get students to learn things; generally they retain the knowledge just long enough to take a test about it, and then forget it. This is because this method focuses on the figure of the teacher (charismatic, articulate, passionate) and not on the students’ learning. Finkel proposes an alternate definition of good teaching: it is the “*creating of circumstances that lead to significant learning in others*”.³ This definition leads to the sound bite that is the title of his book: “teaching with your mouth shut” means facilitating learning in your students, not telling them the information you want them to have.

TnyMS includes provocative and informative blueprints for how to achieve the goal of keeping your mouth shut, in a series of chapters with titles like “Let the Books Do the Talking” (chapter 2) and “Let the Students Do the Talking” (chapter 3). In the course of describing different models for avoiding teacher-centered pedagogy, Finkel makes powerful arguments about the relationship of teaching methodology to fundamental intellectual, political and ethical concerns. Three of these particularly resonated with me. The first is a lesson that Finkel teases out of an analysis of Plato’s dialogue *Meno* and its “debater’s paradox” that Socrates presents to his interlocutor Meno:⁴ if I am ignorant of something, how am I to attain knowledge other than by appealing to an authority? But by appealing to an authority I merely displace the question of knowledge and authority onto the figure of authority to whom I have turned. How did this authority gain his or her knowledge? This begins an infinite regression, in which we chase the location of authority back from figure to figure (professor, textbook, article) to some imagined first link of the chain. Either this first link is omniscient, grounding authority in a Godlike figure that cannot be questioned, or it is a figure of authority who obtained her knowledge in some other way than having been told by yet another authority. But if this “first link” can gain knowledge without resorting to an authority, then any one of us can do the same: we can proceed on a search for knowledge “without

¹ D. FINKEL, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*, Portsmouth, NH, Boynton - Cook Publishers, 2000.

² *Ivi*, p. 2.

³ *Ivi*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 34-37.

relying on one who already knows”.⁵ A student who internalizes this truth is empowered to take control of his own learning, to make himself the authority rather than seeking knowledge in the professor or the textbook. And a professor who internalizes it is given permission to relinquish control of the learning environment, to overthrow the tyranny of coverage, and to let students learn what they are interested in learning. This analysis led directly to an explanation of one alternative teaching structure, the “Open-Ended Seminar”, a course organized around an open-ended question or problem that is approached by professor and students with an attitude of mutual inquiry.

The second significant revelation for me in *TnyMS* was the assertion that students are motivated to learn by “present interest” (the term is Rousseau’s, from his classic treatise/novel *Émile, ou De l’éducation*) that stems from his or her need for the information, a concept derived from the writings of the American educator John Dewey.⁶ A student will not be interested in learning algebra because of some abstract notion that it’s good for him, but because it will help him with a problem he wants to solve. Thus, creating the conditions for learning to take place, according to Finkel, involves engaging them with problems that students want to solve, rather than presenting them with already-digested information. The best way to do this, he suggests, is to design inquiry-based classes rather than “subject” classes, such as the ubiquitous music history survey. But even if the professor does not have the liberty to design the class from the ground up, as our students do not, she can seek to organize the class meetings around project-based inquiries rather than lectures.

The third and most profound lesson the book provided me was in its discussion of the relationship between the power dynamic inside the classroom and that in the world at large: the way the professor structures the relationship of power and authority in the classroom is a microcosm of power structures in the world outside the classroom, and can shape the character of the students. “Learning” becomes much more than the material the course is ostensibly covering. A professor who uses the “Teaching by Telling” model is reinforcing a hierarchical idea of authority. A teacher who abnegates the role of Teller and turns over some of the activity of the class to the students – even if they flounder or do not “cover” the same material that the teacher would have – is offering a democratic model of learning, empowering the students to take responsibility for their own knowledge.

Seasoned professors who have years of classroom teaching behind them might put forward objections to this rather utopian vision of teaching and learning based on their own experience. I imagine three kinds of objections.

1) The students don’t know enough to do the talking, lead the discussion, or pursue a joint inquiry with me. I need to teach (*tell*) them a lot of material

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 37.

⁶ See, in particular, *Democracy and Education*, New York, The Free Press, 1916.

before they are prepared to participate in a conversation about my subject area (which after all, I’ve been studying for years). I’d answer this as follows: all teaching and learning involves a verbal interaction between professor and students, and the professor perforce must modulate his discourse to be appropriate to students. I am an expert in the musical notation of the late middle ages, and would never start to teach by immediately discussing *mutatio qualitatis* or imperfection by the remotest part. But rather than start a course by lecturing about the four prolations, I start with a question – how would you design a system of rhythmic notation from thin air? What does it need to contain? Once students have grappled with this problem themselves, they are in a position to want to know how our own system developed – and with my assistance they can ask the questions that lead them to seek historical answers.

2) The second objection might be that the modes of teaching described in the book do not allow me to cover all the material needed to complete the course I’ve designed. My answer to this is that the “tyranny of coverage” must be overthrown. What course is actually “complete”, and how do you know it to be so? There are traditional parsings of knowledge into course-sized units that have been handed down from generation to generation, such as the “music appreciation” and “music history” examples, but these of course have no real status as transcendent bearers of knowledge. It is much more valuable for students to take full possession of a smaller amount of knowledge than to be presented with “full coverage” of a subject whose contours have been determined by someone else. In addition, when students take charge of the material, the “totality of the course” will be partially determined by their inquiry and interest, and the content of the “course” itself will change.

3) The third objection might be that students these days are extremely unmotivated to learn; they are only looking for a good grade, and are not in pursuit of real knowledge. They are accustomed to passively receiving information and will never consent to do this much active work. This to me is the most devastating potential objection of all, because it points to a global failure on the part of our education system. The American educator John Holt famously articulated the position that children are born curious, and it is only bad schooling that leaves them unmotivated to learn.⁷ Thus one of the most important jobs of the professor might well be to re-create the desire to learn in his or her students, a desire they had as small children but has been suppressed by years of being subject to the “teaching as telling” model of pedagogy.

As the reader may observe, after reading *TnyMS* I was utterly converted to its principles, and I approached my teaching of the Teaching Proseminar under its spell. I not only urged my doctoral students to read and implement it in their own teaching, but I also tried myself to employ some of its precepts as I

⁷ Among John Holt’s many books I would single out *How Children Learn*, New York, Pitman Pub. Corp., 1967, with several later editions.

prepared to lead the Proseminar. In previous years I had lectured for the entire two-hour first meeting of the seminar, giving the students tips from my experience, showing them syllabi from a few older graduate students, and sometimes bringing in an experienced graduate student to talk about his or her experience in the classroom. This year, in the first meeting I came with one question, taken directly from *TnyMS*: I asked the students to think for five minutes about what the two or three most significant learning experiences of their lives were, to write them down, and then to share them with the group.⁸ This generated a very rich discussion; the responses were extremely varied and allowed us to mull together what it was that made learning happen, and how the classroom could facilitate learning.

In the second hour of that seminar meeting, I gave a short introduction to the idea of ‘music appreciation’ and how it is implemented at the CUNY campuses, but then played a video clip of about 15 minutes showing Professor Craig Wright of Yale University, a writer of a popular music appreciation textbook, giving an introductory lecture to his music appreciation class at Yale (videos of the entire course are available online through the Open Yale platform),⁹ in which he was attempting to define the parameters of the music they would study during the semester. I asked the students for their reactions, and was stunned and gratified by the range of opinions, and their insight; the discussion was considerably richer than it would have been had I merely “Told” them about what to do in the first lecture of a music appreciation class. I then asked them to divide into groups and brainstorm about ways to introduce the topic of “art music” to non-musicians. Once again, an excellent discussion ensued.

Further meetings of the seminar were devoted to the students each teaching 30-minute sample classes, with the other seminar participants acting as their students. After encouraging them to read *TnyMS*, and myself attempting to put its precepts into practice, I expected all the students would experiment in their sample classes with “teaching with their mouths shut” by creating some form of student-centered activity, thereby “creating conditions for learning”. However, I was wrong; they all without exception conducted their sample classes using the Teaching as Telling model, supplementing their carefully-planned lectures with beautiful Powerpoint backup and well-integrated listening clips. This caused me consternation at first. I was convinced that they’d all jump on the Finkel bandwagon as I did, and feel liberated from the Teaching as Telling model. Had I failed to communicate the brilliance of the book’s insights?

A few days’ reflection allowed me to realize that I myself was succumbing to the very fallacy that Finkel had patiently pointed out in the book. By assuming my students would think as I did, and respond in the same way to

⁸ FINKEL, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* cit., p. 6 f.

⁹ <http://oyc.yale.edu/music/musi-112#sessions>.

the teaching methods outlined in the book, I was replicating the very same assumptions about teaching that I'd been disparaging: I had put *TnyMS* in the position of the omnipotent textbook, expecting the students to learn the material in it and then reproduce it in their own lectures. I reminded myself of the central lesson of the book: I cannot Tell students what to learn and how to think, but can only create the circumstances so that learning can occur. I can confidently say that I learned an enormous amount from this experience, and my task going forward is to think about how always to create the circumstances for learning so that students of this Proseminar will be motivated by the problem of interrogating and adapting their own teaching practices just as I tried to do.

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