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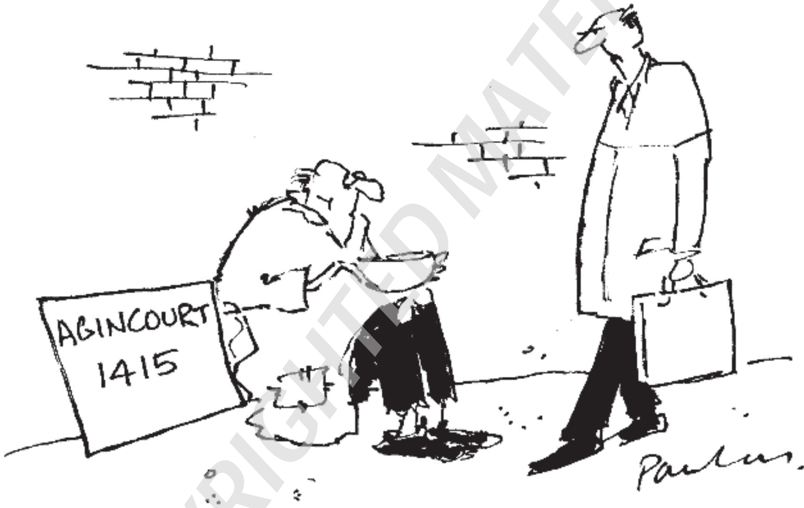
# The Art and Craft of Teaching, or Toward a Philosophy of Teaching

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> Other people can talk about how to expand the destiny of mankind. I just want to talk about how to fix a motorcycle. I think that what I have to say has more lasting value. (Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*[1])

Pirsig's famous statement favors praxis over theory. It is of course a theory of its own, and a profound one. It applies well to classroom teaching, especially at the beginning of one's career.

1 Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York: Bantom, 1988), p. 267.

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We want to fix the motorcycle! We stand before the masses (our students) not in search of a philosophy in the first instance, but in search of a practical way forward. There is little time to contemplate the destiny of mankind or the meaning of the universe. Teaching is instinctive, human, and, I would submit, its own obstacle to theoretical inquiry insofar as once the skill is learned, it seems more of a technical or interpersonal one than an intellectual one. Teaching is, as Parker Palmer famously asserted, a triumph of the will and soul.[2] But it is *our* motorcycle. We fix it (teach) behind closed doors. In this way, teaching is also, as Palmer asserts, "the most privatized of public professions."[3] Many instructors spend their lives "bound in chains of silence."[4]

There are nevertheless transcendent issues at play, no matter how much we may wish to ignore them. Indeed, few endeavors have engendered more ardent philosophical discussions than teaching. Allan Bloom in *Closing of the American Mind* believed that the fate of western democracy lay in balance in American classrooms. He spoke, as his title suggests, pessimistically, blaming the abandonment of the study of western classics on "cultural relativists" and "fans of rock music" whom he cast as enemies of the state.[5] Gary Nash and his colleagues struggled in their attempt to establish national standards for the study of American history in the 1990s owing to the deeply political nature of the subject matter.[6]

The confluence of these factors perhaps explains why the literature on university teaching often begins with discussions of "anxiety." Elaine Showalter describes anxiety in her *Teaching Literature* as the inevitable handmaiden of teaching, even for the most experienced veterans. She tells of vivid dreams before the first day of classes, including one in which she inexplicably skipped class for weeks, only to arrive breathless and illegally parked.[7] Jane Thompson expressed her fears in a series of fictive postcards to herself and to colleagues that expose self-doubt and personal insecurity.[8] Douglas A. Bernstein admits that the "severe" suffering he experienced at the beginning of his career has never left him.[9]

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2 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossy-Bass, 2007, 10th edition), pp. 1–3.

3 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, p. 2.

4 Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective* Teacher (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 247.

5 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

6 Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross E. Dunn, *History of Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, first published 1994).

7 Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), p. 5.

8 Jane Thompson, *What a Teacher Learned* (Reading,: Perseus Books, 1996).

9 Douglas A. Bernstein, Dealing with teaching anxiety. *NACTA Journal* December (1983), p. 4.

It is easy to relate. We all worry about how we are perceived by others and, more generally, how to deal with the "performative" aspects of the profession. For me, it is not about tortured dreams but lack of them. I do not sleep well before the first day of class. This has been true for 30 years. A high school teacher colleague of mine told me it was a good sign. It showed that I cared. "May you never sleep well before teaching!" At this point in my life I would rather sleep, since there are few things I enjoy more. And many of my colleagues, who care at least as much as I do about teaching, sleep very well before the start of class. They are both effective and *well rested* on the first day!

The point is, however, that there are many paths to success – a theme that will be stressed throughout this book. It is, as Patricia Nelson Limerick says, "our First Amendment right" to be nervous. And telling professors to relax "just makes us more weird."[10] And with all due respect to the very fine professors who highlight their anxieties, I for one believe that too much has been written about the subject. The discussions border on self-indulgence. It is true that we worry, but so too do workers in hospitals, fire stations, legal offices, and many other jobs. Moreover, contemplation of worry does not necessarily help the beginning teacher move forward in the classroom. "Sure I am anxious, but how do I practically succeed?" Anxiety is for them a bourgeois emotion. To the extent that acknowledging our fears helps us manage them, the discussions are useful. But the working person needs more.

The challenge for the teacher in the first instance is to find a means of communicating with the students, who are dealing with their own set of anxieties. We do well to contemplate the worries of students, however arcane and strange their worlds may on the surface seem to us. The approach turns the psychology around. It encourages us to imagine the class from their perspective, which is a relief from our own anxieties.

The notion was made plain to me on my very first day as a teacher in high school. An older colleague watched me (age 22) fidgeting in the faculty room, completely focused on myself, hoping to do well in my first appearance "on stage." She came over and said "You are aware it is *their* first day, right Caferro?" I had not given "them" any thought at all, except in terms of how they would view me. The advice really helped. It was in fact the best advice I have ever had. She turned the psychology to where it belonged.

The message is now a mantra. The best way to get the most out of the students is to construct an environment and structures in which they can

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10 Patricia Nelson Limerick, Aloof professors and shy students. In: *On Teaching*, edited by Mary Ann Shea, vol. 1 (Boulder: University of Colorado, 1987), p. 3.

succeed, in which they want to succeed, and, more generally, are able see clearly the requirements for success. The approach does not assure that you will be perceived as a "great" teacher but it is a first step toward basic competence. It provides an "out" from long self-involved contemplations of one's teaching persona. It allows us to get beyond the cult of personality, which is more suited to some people than to others. And it is an important first step toward establishing "student-centered," active learning.[11]

We do indeed bare our souls in front of the class, but it is more effective if we do not do so consciously. The students see our personalities whether we want them to or not. Given that, it seems more efficacious to focus on the motorcycle, as it were – on practical issues such as presentation of the course material and organization of the class engagement of students in critical thought (see Chapter 3). These reveal our relationship with our subject matter and with the immediate task before us. This is teachable. The image of an engaged, organized teacher is a compelling one, and can be as different from one person to another as our personalities. If our personalities inevitably and subconsciously come through, so too does our attitude toward our subject matter. As a student, I admired all my teachers who loved learning, cared deeply about their subject matter and had a clear organizational structure that they adhered to, provoked new ideas and questions, and had basic empathy, expressed in their own unique ways.

## A Teaching Philosophy

With all this in mind, the first assignment we give our graduate students in our seminar on pedagogy at Vanderbilt ("Art and Craft of Teaching History") is to write a philosophy of teaching. The assignment is unpopular. The graduates see it as putting the cart before the horse or, worse, the sort of "touchy feely" task that augurs a long boring semester. But fixing a motorcycle is, as Pirsig makes clear, its own philosophy. We sell the assignment to the students by stressing its practicality. It will be useful when they apply for jobs and later when they go up for promotion. Indeed, one of the positive recent developments in the academy is that job committees often ask candidates to send teaching statements, along with syllabi of prospective courses, for their "job talk." The job talk used to consist primarily of a lecture on research. It is now divided into a

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11 Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 17–19.

research-related lecture and a demonstration of teaching, the latter sometimes an informal discussion of teaching in seminar fashion, which amounts to a discussion of teaching philosophy. The teaching demonstration is in many ways more difficult for the candidate than the research lecture. Aspiring professors come into direct contact for the first time with competing ideologies and methodologies. The host history faculty may know nothing of the candidates' research subfield, but they usually have opinions – and strong ones – about teaching.

In addition to its professional practicality, the exercise is also useful because it encourages self-reflection. The graduates are forced to think more directly about their objectives and, in some cases, confront the reality that they will indeed stand before a class. The American historian Peter Filene recommends this sort of reflection for all starting professors. He suggests that we answer five fill-in-the-blank questions ("prompts"), including "In class I see myself as (blank)" and "I seek to foster in my students (blank)."[12]

To aid the students in our seminar, we give them the teaching statements of their own professors in the History department – those who graciously allow them to be read. There is, to be sure, irony. The statement of teaching philosophy was in my generation something we did only when we came up for promotion, seven years into our careers (if lucky). My high school colleagues scoff at the very idea of a teaching philosophy written by a college professor. Secondary school teachers have often read extensively the literature on pedagogy. They have discussed it with colleagues and committees specifically tasked with evaluating their performance, and applied it in real time and space before students. We often fly by the seat of our pants, waxing philosophical only when we need to impress a tenure committee. And as terrible as it is to admit, my colleagues and I in fact exchanged our statements with each other, essentially passing them down to the next person in the tenure line, nuancing the statements along the way. I used Helmut Smith's statement, who followed Michael Bess, who presumably followed someone else. The aim was more to pass muster with the administration than to gain any real insight into teaching. At least it was for me.

But as a teaching tool, discussion of the statements of endeavor is useful. It becomes obvious when reading them that they do indeed reveal the souls of their authors. They project stored up experiences and strategies employed and, most immediately, they form the basis of a discussion on teaching – the very thing that Parker Palmer, Ken Bain, and others have

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12 Peter Filene, *The Joy of Teaching: A Practical Guide for New College Instructors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 11–12.

pointed out as most lacking in the profession. Michael Bess, who teaches a popular course at Vanderbilt on World War II, stresses the importance of raising “moral” issues with students. He sees his role as getting students to question their beliefs. Marshall Eakin, a professor of modern Latin American history, stresses the importance of the “big picture” in history. He believes in a classroom structure that emphasizes writing and attendance. He expresses the hope that his students will use their education to become more involved in the public sphere.

The statements elicit a strong response from the students. Much of it, perhaps surprisingly, is disagreement. Should a teacher involve herself/himself in moral or political issues in class? Is my own subject matter suitable for involvement in the public sphere? Will I be a stern professor or a more accommodating one? Will any of this stuff work for someone my age, race, ethnicity, and background (see Chapter 5)?

Some graduate students already have a strong sense of what they will do. They are in tune with a Hegelian world spirit that makes them sure they will be successful. Others have no idea what they will do. The teaching statements initiate a conversation that rarely takes place verbally, indeed rarely takes place at all among colleagues or with professors and their students.

## The Good Teacher

Philosophy is, however, no substitute for experience. In the best parts of her discussion of anxiety, Elaine Showalter highlights lack of adequate training for young teachers. Peter Filene in his *The Joy of Teaching* asserts that it takes “three run-throughs” for even an experienced professor to fashion a course to their liking.[13] Robert Boice’s study of first-year university faculty shows that they equated good teaching with “good content.”[14] The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching at Brown University suggests that new professors allow themselves enough time to go through several iterations of their syllabi.[15] Here, the difference between college and secondary school is great. In my home state of Tennessee, initiatives such as the Memphis Teacher Residency advocate “hands-on” experience

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13 Peter Filene, *The Joy of Teaching*, p. 1.

14 Robert Boice, Quick starters: new faculty who succeed. In: *Effective Practices for Improving Teaching: New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, edited by Michael Theall and Jennifer Franklin (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), pp. 111–112.

15 Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching at Brown University. www.brown.edu/sheridan/programs-services

for novice secondary school teachers and mentor them via direct experience in the classroom for a full year with a full-time teacher.[16]

This does little to help the beginning professor. And it is unhelpful, nay disingenuous, to tell beginners, as I was told as a young PhD, to cut corners when faced with limited time. It is difficult to cut corners when you do not have mastery of the subject material or full understanding of the medium. The better advice, however unwanted, is to work hard, but wisely, when preparing (see Chapter 3).

I posed the question to colleagues, asking what practical basic steps they used to get ready for class. "I try to keep it simple," the medievalist Steven Epstein at the University of Kansas says. "I lay out a distinct trajectory for the course on the first day, with clearly stated themes, usually only a few. We then work off these and I try to be open to whatever deviation occurs in class discussion."[17] He noted also that he tried not to talk too much as he thought this put off his students and encouraged passivity. Professor Mary Harvey Doyno of the Humanities and Religious Studies Department at Sacramento State University begins class by speaking a little too loudly, trying "to pull the students out of their technology" and asks "general questions like how people are doing," and sets immediately to work learning names.[18] Paul Rahe of Hillsdale College invokes the "stern Paideia"in his Roman history classes. He likes to start with forbidding statements about student obligations and the difficulty of assignments. "Many are called, few are chosen." The intention is to chase away nonserious students and make clear to those who stay that the summer vacation is truly over. My Africanist colleague at Vanderbilt, Moses Ochonu, begins his survey course with a short video highlighting the popular stereotypes of Africa and Africans. He follows with a discussion exploring the stereotypes, seeking to replace them with an awareness of the "multiple constructed and reconstructed meanings" of Africa.[19]

Providing a clear outline of course goals is the constant here. Whether sternly stated or not, it is the surest way to set a course on the right path. Our biorhythms wax and wane, we are cogent, perhaps brilliant one day and disorganized and obscure the next. The well-conceived outline allows for the inevitable bad days we all have – the ones that make us want to quit.

16 Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), pp. 248–250.

17 Interview with Steven Epstein.

18 Mary Harvey Doyno, Where in the text? *Common Knowledge* 23:1 (2017), p. 3.

19 Interview with Moses Ochonu.

It is not a road map to sure success but it avoids a basic obstacle to effective teaching: lack of understanding by the students of what is expected of them by the professor. The flaw is fatal. Students first and foremost, as Wilbert McKeachie emphasizes in *Teaching Tips*, project themselves into the course via the syllabus, which should make clear the responsibilities and, at its best, engage students' imagination We shall speak in greater detail about this in Chapter 3.

A consistent question is how prepared is prepared? How detailed must I be? A colleague of mine cites the "Heisenberg principle" of teaching. When she tries too hard to organize every detail in advance, she invariably squeezes the life out of the class. When she is too loose, she has trouble connecting the parts and feels the course is not sufficiently coherent. Another colleague arranges his whole class around a very small, carefully chosen set of questions, based solely on the reading. He begins calling on the students the first day, to make the point that they must always be prepared. The practice allows him also to learn their names early, which helps invest the students in the course. The National Council for History Education suggests crafting "instructional activities" that present various points of view on historical issues and interrogates sources.[20]

Different professors have different guiding principles. Samantha Kelly, who teaches medieval and early modern Italy at Rutgers University, stresses the importance of assigning numerous brief writing assignments tied directly to the readings. They keep students engaged, facilitate daily discussion and provide numerous grades so that no single one will determine their final mark.[21] I employ a similar strategy but combine small and longer assignments and stress at each turn how the readings relate to the basic themes of the course. A book as seemingly distant from their ordinary lives as Augustine's *Confessions* can deeply resonate with students. The basic themes – "Who am I, and why is there evil in the world?" – are timeless. Anthony Molho, a historian of medieval and early modern Europe at Brown University and the European University Institute in Florence, keeps his weekly reading load light. He believes that "big and complex books" need to be read slowly and carefully and with close supervision by the instructor. Richard Davis, a historian of India at Bard College, is keenly aware that his students come to his class with little background in the subject, so he relies on a small set of carefully chosen primary texts, like the Bhagavad Gita, which have strong human appeal.[22]

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20 National Council of History Education. NCHE Expectations for Teacher Preparation Programs. Best Practices of Teachers. www.nche.net/bestpracticeshisttchng

21 Interview with Samantha Kelly.

22 Interviews with Anthony Molho and Richard Davis.

The common element is, as scholars of pedagogy argue, to formulate clear learning objectives that can be assessed throughout the semester and involve close examination of sources.[23] For me, this involves an ongoing process of self-reflection: what are the things we want to accomplish, are we accomplishing them, and how can I better insure that we do? All practices flow from the course objectives and a mutual sense of discovery and critical engagement with texts. I make no effort to impress, but rather judge all activities in terms of pedagogical efficacy. Indeed, I offer an extra class to review for exams and papers, which students see as an act of generosity but is actually a self-serving deed, intended to lure students into devoting extra time to collective study; given the stakes, it focuses their attention and allows an intense discussion of critical assessment of sources and historical thinking. The goal is to use the "oppression" of tests and papers as a teaching tool.

Most professors view the first day of class as crucial. It is then that they lay down basic rules of the course, at a time when student attention is best. Some professors dismiss the students early, once the course objectives have been stated and the introductions are made. Others keep students for the whole time. Ernest Hartwell, writing in the pedagogical Dark Ages (1913), made sure that the first day of class was a particularly "heavy workday," to eliminate what he called the "inertia" of the summer. Caroline Walker Bynum seeks to deliver "a jolt" to students in the first meeting of her class on devotional objects, to force them to think about how political and social structures condition who makes objects and who controls and consecrates them.[24] She points out that using the first class effectively is challenging at Princeton, where she taught the course, because of the so-called "shopping" period, which allows student to come and go while the professor presses forward trying to ignore the ebb and flow (was it something I said?).

I am an advocate of the jolt to eliminate summer inertia. I purposefully use every minute of the first class, and even go a minute or so over. My aim, apart from making clear the course themes and getting to know the students, is to take full advantage of their undivided attention. The intention is also to make the subliminal point that every minute counts. I carefully explain my syllabus, which is thematically circular, beginning where I ultimately intend to end. Amy Remensnyder at Brown University starts the first day of her survey class on medieval Europe with a year in which nothing happened. Her purpose is to reinforce the reality that in

23 Laurie Richlin, *Blueprint for Learning: Constructing College Courses to Facilitate, Assess, and Document Learning* (Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2006), pp. 6–8.

24 Caroline Walker Bynum, Where in the Text Symposium: In the Humanities Classroom. *Common Knowledge* 23:1 (2017), p. 68.

the Middle Ages, as in history more generally, most years were in fact of little obvious importance. I have stolen this for my own medieval courses.

For the first meeting of my Western Civilization class, I play a historiographical game. I critique “old-school” pedagogy. I place on the board (if I have one, otherwise I use a computer) at the beginning of class, without comment, a list of dates – 399 BCE, 330 CE, 476, 800, 1066, 1215, 1348, 1517, etc. I leave them up as I then talk about the readings and broader themes that we will examine. I turn then to the dates and ask the students if they can identify them. They usually guess several, particularly those relating to English history. I tell the students that this is how I learned Western Civilization in the old days, according to dates (I actually did not take Western Civ as an undergraduate), and how they will *not* learn it. We then talk about what the dates represent, what historical patterns they convey. Is it the lives of great men? Is it important political, religious, and economic events?

I do this to underline the fact that, then as now, historians make conscious choices about how they slice up history. And even something so seemingly empirical as a date reveals subjective judgments embedded in our craft; 1348 highlights the role of disease (the Black Death) as a historical force; 399 BCE (death of Socrates) privileges the role of philosophy and the great man.[25] History is constructed by historians, as are classes in the subject. I then ask the students to identify the events they would stress if asked to write a history of the world they live in. What issues define their age? The discussions have worked well, and are particularly useful for Western Civ, which has, more than any other course I teach, the stodgy air of old school “facts first *auctoritas*” (see Chapter 3). My students come expecting to learn the canonical facts, ones already settled upon, that they can draw upon later, often for no greater motive than to appear to be not entirely ignorant of the past. I want them to know that those facts and how they are arranged are subject to debate.

## Doctors and Morticians

Who then is the good teacher? The answer is variable. Ernest Hartwell imagined the successful history teacher as someone who was “pedagogical and practical,” “scholarly without being musty,” “imbued with the love of his subject” and “familiar with human experience.”[26]

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25 William Caferro, Teaching Western Civilization. *Common Knowledge* 24:3 (2018), pp. 366–374.

26 Ernest Hartwell, *The Teaching of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 1.

The judgment is strikingly similar to that of Peter Filene, writing nearly a century later in 2005 (without reference to Hartwell), who likewise stressed the basic importance of the human element.

But understanding "human experience" would appear the most problematic requisite. The meaning and importance are intuitively clear. It helps to know humanity in order to teach human beings. Precisely what human experience, however, do we need to know and how do we hope to apprehend it from the vantage of our lofty ivory towers? The principal I worked for in secondary school approached the question by dividing teachers into two categories: "morticians" and "doctors." He asked a rhetorical question of all new faculty: "Are you a mortician or a doctor?" I was nonplussed when he asked me, having no idea what he was talking about. But luckily he supplied his own answer. Good teachers are doctors. They think of ways to make their patients (students) better. Bad teachers are morticians. They condemn student flaws and study habits, sometimes even cite an existential "downfall of humanity" in recent years. They pronounce the patient/student "dead on arrival."

This morbid metaphor has the benefit of reducing pedagogical experience to its simplest elements. Even if we do not understand the patient as a person, we may still devise ways to treat her/him. My own experience has in fact been that my students, despite their entirely different cultural reference points and increasing distance from my own world, do not seem so different from me, my friends and fellow students at their age. And I say this having taught in several places, including New York City, Connecticut, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Where there is a basic desire to learn and to think, there is the possibility of a connection. The desire "to know" is the human element that ties us all together and does not end when formal classroom education stops, but follows us throughout our lives.

Nevertheless, history as a teaching field presents its own unique challenges in tapping into human experience. We do not teach science, whose importance is well understood by undergraduates even if they sometimes find it dry and difficult. The study of history does not lead directly to a postgraduation job, which has increasingly become a basic expectation at universities nowadays. History needs to be sold, and not only to the students and (by extension) their parents but also to universities as well (see Chapter 2). Anthony Grafton, a historian at Princeton University and recent president of the American Historical Association, argued in his essay "History under attack" (2011) that the "austere principled quest for knowledge" intrinsic to the study of history mattered all the more in the "current media world." But he admitted it is a "quest without a Grail."[27]

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27 Anthony Grafton, History under attack. *Perspectives on History* (2011). www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2011/history-under-attack

Teachers of history courses look for a hook to tie their students to the material. Peter Allitt in his courses on recent American history wants his students to feel the "contingency of history" and how they are themselves connected to the changes in American since the nineteenth century.[28] Several of my colleagues in modern European history give assignments that require students to interview their grandparents or other members of the family or friends who have experienced an "historical event" of interest or can speak of a bygone era.

Not all of us are able, however, to find such contingency and immediacy, especially those of us who teach more distant eras and places. America had, for example, no medieval past, which means at base that the way medievalists teach the subject in this country is different from how they teach it in Europe, where the physical monuments of the era remain visible and medieval precedent is still drawn upon by public officials. Therefore, although it is excellent pedagogy to stress the currency of the past in the present world we live in, it is not necessarily always an option or, to be more precise, a desirable option.

Many professors seek deeper human connections (see Chapter 2). Richard Davis in his class on "Devotion and Poetry in India" at Bard College takes as his basic pedagogic goal to get his students, who are unfamiliar with the sources he assigns, to "enter into a subjectivity that is different from their own and challenges their values," but is at the same time "human and sympathetic."[29] Hoyt Tillman, a historian at Arizona State University, finds relevance for his survey of premodern Chinese history in the terrorist strike of 9/11 on America. The event serves as an entrée into a discussion of the relationship between executive power and individual rights/civil liberties, which he sees as central to understanding premodern China. Tillman evokes "historical empathy" from students to create a bridge for a more open dialogue about the challenges faced in the past. Wendy Doninger, a historian at the University of Chicago, finds that the Sanskrit texts she studies and teaches resonate also with students because "authors cared then about things that humans care about today: love, sex, death and fear."[30]

What is perhaps most difficult for historians of distant times and places to convey to students is their love of the unknown and unfamiliar, which often includes interest in foreign languages and paleography that drew them to the fields in first instance. Remoteness has its own intrinsic

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28 Peter Allitt, *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 2–3.
29 Richard Davis, Bhakti in the classroom: what do students hear? *Common Knowledge* 2 (2017), pp. 1–2.
30 Interviews with Hoyt Tillman and Wendy Doninger.

appeal, and may indeed be said to represent another aspect of the human condition. Human beings have always traveled far and wide to see things that are new and different, and to try to connect with people from other cultures. That which is strange or unusual can be used to strike a resonant chord with students who, like their professors, are attracted to the transformative dimension to education, which allows them to enter worlds previously unknown. The visual and tactile aspects of documents and old books can now, via the internet, be brought before the students in ways previously unavailable (see Chapter 4).

The medievalist Marc Bloch, a founder of the famous Annales school of historical study, addressed the issue of history's appeal in the middle of the twentieth century. He argued that the chief value of history is its ability to capture the imagination and "to entertain." He asserted that from a "simple liking" evolves a more general "yearning for knowledge."[31] The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume argued similarly, adding, however, a more explicit moral component: "The advantages found in history seem to be of three kinds: as it amuses the fancy, as it improves the understanding and as it strengthens virtue." He added that history opens the door to other "parts" of knowledge, "extends our experience to all past ages," to distant nations, which ultimately improves "our wisdom."[32]

We shall speak more about these issues, in historical perspective, in the next chapter but the notion of "amusing the fancy" should not be casually dismissed. The church father Augustine of Hippo made essentially the same point in his *Confessions*, admitting that he "hated Greek literature" because he feared punishment from his teachers, but he loved Latin because he was "encouraged by jokes and laughter." "I learned Latin not under pressure, but by my own heart." For Augustine, this was proof that "unbridled curiosity" was the most effective pedagogical tool.[33] Indeed, the methods underlined by Augustine follow closely modern pedagogical notions of "student-based" learning. And once it becomes fun, it becomes part of who we are.

Augustine's dislike of Greek would have important consequences for western Christendom. It denied him – and the West – access to the Greek Christian heritage and the original language of the Gospels. But to our present point, the line between pleasure and pain is blurred. Education is most effective when it is fun but teachers must also be demanding and exacting in their daily requirements. In a treatise on education written

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31 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 7.

32 David Hume, Of the Study of History (1741). In: *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984).

33 Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Everyman, 1907), pp. 20–21.

back in fifteenth-century Italy, Pier Paolo Vergerio asserted that "good results" could only be achieved if the student was willing to be "criticized and chastised." "It is seemly to endure abuse," Vergerio wrote, "as long as there is not too much severity." [34] The advice was intended for the male children of the aristocratic elite and addressed specifically to the son of Francesco Carrara, lord of Padua. In the early twentieth century, Abraham Flexner, founder of the Institute of Advanced Study and author of a comparative history of universities, stated that college education should create "a crisis" among students that "is ultimately for the greater good." [35] The American college students about whom Flexner spoke were not dissimilar to those of Vergerio – male and from the elite.

In more recent years, Mark Bauerlein of Emory University, author of *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, has advocated for a very different approach. He asserts that he used to be a "hard line, great books" advocate but came to believe that in the "age of Game Boy and Facebook," students deserve more discretion in choosing their own assignments. He found it acceptable for students to read "entertaining" books like Harry Potter, as long as faculty "preserve book reading habits."[36] I choose books that I think are enjoyable, with the awareness that what I think is fun may not be what the students think is fun. I believe, like Professors Bynum and Flexner, that a basic challenge for college teachers is to get students to appreciate what they may otherwise not read themselves. It may be that I have more faith than Bauerlein in the ability of students to read and develop intellectually on their own, to read their own favorite books in conjunction with those I am trained to teach. But as a colleague who teaches antiquity often reminds me, students still connect viscerally with Plato's dialogues and, indeed, he gets nervous assigning parts of Ovid's *Art of Love* because he does not feel sufficiently mature to handle the probing questions that will inevitably follow. I insist, as may be evident from the foregoing discussion, on teaching Augustine's *Confession*s wherever I am able because it is, at base, a book about a person trying to figure out who he is, contemplating the world around him and why there is evil in it. He is also a seminal figure of the period I teach, the Middle Ages, which may otherwise be appealing only for its "strangeness" – which, as noted above,

34 Pier Paolo Vergerio, The character and studies befitting a free-born youth. In: *Humanist Educational Treatises*, edited by Craig W. Kallendorf (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 21.

35 Abraham Flexner, *Universities, American, English, German* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 28.

36 Motoko Richaug, A new assignment: pick books you like. *New York Times* (August 29, 2009).

is nevertheless also an effective teaching tool. If I cannot sell Augustine to a group of young people, I think I should find a different line of work.

There is nevertheless sound pedagogy in all the above approaches. The choice of assignment must ultimately reflect the person who assigns it or, as Ken Bain asserts in his *What the Best College Teachers Do*, instructors must adjust their teaching to who they are. [37] If you enjoy teaching a topic, it is likely that the student will enjoy reading and learning about it. This may perhaps appear to be too reductive and roseate a view but even if the student dislikes the reading, the image of an engaged professor valiantly making his/her case is worth something in itself. Anthony Molho recalls how during lunch-time discussions among history faculty at a "grubby" cafeteria at Brown University known as the Gate, he and his colleagues, representing diverse subfields, found more similarities than differences in their approaches to teaching. They agreed that the discipline of history was sufficiently "capacious" to allow professors to "expand the conceptual terrain they considered appropriate to historical inquiry." They all shared the "element of time" as a fundamental component of their study.[38]

The point is worth stressing here because an unnecessary and largely generational divide has posited a fundamental unbridgeable opposition between student-centered and teacher-centered learning. Some recent authors have argued that teachers should abandon their own "peculiar enthusiasms" in favor of the perspective of a "bored student." The point is worthy, but teachers in my experience possess a basic empathy that inclines them to try to align their "peculiar enthusiasms" with the supposed boredoms of students. Indeed, to assume the perspective of a bored student is *prima facie* problematic, as it reduces students to a monolith and subverts a central purpose of learning: to force students out of their comfort zones and encourage true critical thinking. The "best teachers," Ken Bain found in his study, are those who treat pedagogical issues with the same intellectual rigor that they treat their research and who unapologetically expect more from students than they believe that they can handle.[39]

## Imitatio as Innovatio

The challenges of the beginning teacher nevertheless remain the central issue here. Several colleagues stress the value of imitation in the early phases of their teaching careers. Hilmar Pabel, a professor of Reformation

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37 Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 100.

38 Interview with Anthony Molho.

39 Ken Bain. *What the Best College Teachers Do*, pp, 15–17, 21.

Europe at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, tells how during the first years of his career he instinctively imitated his advisor, Jaroslav Pelikan of Yale University. He abstracted his early courses from Pelikan's syllabi, used similar readings and even found, when lecturing, that he sometimes spoke like his advisor, using a few noteworthy expressions – "hemi-semi-demi;" "whether he nailed them or mailed them, Luther nevertheless *posted* the 95 theses." Pelikan still occasionally reappears in his lectures. Indeed, I find Professor Pelikan in my own classes. Hilmar and I arrived at graduate school together and were both transfixed by Pelikan's wonderful lectures on the medieval Christian tradition East-West. We served several times as his teaching assistants. After a few years, it got so that we were able to imitate his inflection and tone. Hilmar did it better than I. "We may not be great historians," we used to joke, "but we can sound like one!"

The professor I most imitated when I first left graduate school was John Boswell, who had been my *de facto* advisor for most of my graduate career. I admired his meticulous organization, his choice of readings and his enthusiastic, learned, humorous, and empathetic presentation of material. He entered the classroom in a friendly, easy-going way – no pretense, comfortable with himself. The moment he started to speak, however, it was clear that he was an undisputed master, whose knowledge was forged at a high temperature. The subject matter seemed to speak through him, emboldening him, pushing him further on, challenging him as much as his listeners. This struck me to the core, and corresponded so well with my own attitude, both toward myself and toward the subject matter (and perhaps my otherwise complete lack of personal confidence). When I ultimately got my first full-time university teaching job, I offered a class called "Judaism, Christianity and Islam," the same one that I had taken and TAed for as a graduate student. I altered the readings but the main lines were very much the same.

Such blatant copying would get us all charged with plagiarism if it involved our written scholarly work. But imitation as a basic learning tool stands on firm pedagogical ground, and goes way back into the distant past. Giovanni Boccaccio transcribed the works of Dante and Petrarch in order to capture the spirit and style of their work. Petrarch in turn copied Cicero, and patterned his *Letters on Familiar Matters* on the personal correspondence he found by the Roman writer in a library in Verona in 1345. A basic feature of the never-ending debate about "the Renaissance" has been whether "imitation" of the ancients by humanist writers led to "innovation" and new ways of thinking or merely slavish devotion to precedent. As recent literature has argued, even if the intention is to faithfully follow our predecessors, it is unlikely that, mediated through our own persons, the message will remain unchanged.

With this in mind, one of our assignments for the graduate students in our teaching class at Vanderbilt is to have them observe professors and write a critique of their teaching styles. Students implicitly critique all their teachers but the explicit evaluation has the benefit of making them truly think about the craft. Students point out what they like and what they do not like. It is an awkward exercise both for them and the professor. Students feel uncomfortable with their openly evaluative comments, and the teacher of the course will hear things that she/he does not want to know about colleagues – members of the same guild for whom there is an inherent sense of solidarity. I confess that I wanted to eliminate the exercise from our syllabus, but colleagues convinced me otherwise and the practice is indeed fruitful.

The critique helps students see ways that they would put their own stamp on classes. They ponder closely what they believe would work for them, and implicitly how their goals differ from those of their professors. Interestingly, one of the main points of discussion in our seminar focused on "toughness." Some students found the professors they observed lacking in this regard, believing that they catered too much to student opinion. They also pointed out imprecise and clumsy use of technology (see Chapter 3), and saw organization, class management, intellectual engagement, and enthusiasm as keys to good pedagogy.

The exercise made equally clear that the images conveyed by one effective professor were not the same as those conveyed by another effective professor. The students saw distinctions along gender and racial lines, in terms of age, general bearing, and habits. The assignment reinforced the importance of reading faculty teaching statements that we asked them to do in our first meeting. It also made clear the gap between theory and practice, and with it the importance of Pirsig's motorcycle.

## Casting Images

What emerged at base from the discussion is that whether or not we imitate our forebears, our reception in the classroom depends on variables that are not easily quantified. The goal is to transcend these things but the variables need to be explicitly acknowledged because they often are not.

It is also important to acknowledge that teaching also depends on the nature of one's students. And this depends also on the type and size of the course and the institution (see Chapters 2 and 3). Very large classes make intimate, lively exchange of ideas difficult. Very small classes can also inhibit discussion. Augustine of Hippo, a professor of rhetoric in the first instance, left his post at Carthage to go to Rome because he hoped that

the students would be "quieter" and less inclined to "invade the lecture room" and "indulge in wild antics."[40]

Modern-day professors can relate. Teaching is inherently unstable because the object of our labor – even at the same school – does not remain the same. Thus, however much we prepare, it is not entirely clear how things will actually go. The skill level of students varies not only from school to school, but from class to class and even, in my experience, according to the time of day a class is taught.[41] Colleagues report that Friday classes are often "curiously" empty, especially as the semester proceeds. I have had less problem with those than with late afternoon classes, especially on a nice day.

The differences are nevertheless not always what one would expect. Jennifer Spock, a historian of medieval Russia, points out that while the students she teaches at Eastern Kentucky University are nontraditional and lack the skills of those she taught as a TA at Yale University, they "internalize information more strongly" and often discuss materials more enthusiastically and personally.[42] My students at the University of Tulsa, a commuter school, were often older, had gone to junior college first and worked for a time in the outside world to make the money to go to university. They were as a result often highly motivated and very appreciative. As a medievalist, I found that they knew the Bible – important to the study of my field – better than their counterparts up north, where I was a TA and adjunct (at Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution!). This owed in large part to the fact that many were from Protestant denominations where Bible study was common. At the same time, however, the course I stole from John Boswell on Judaism, Christianity and Islam took an unexpected turn in that same setting. In a fit of youthful exuberance, I grew a beard when I took the job at Tulsa. In combination with my dark completion (and teaching Surahs of the Koran), the students believed I was myself Muslim, specifically an Egyptian, as "Caferro" sounded to some of them like "pharaoh." I was informed of this by several colleagues and as a pedestrian Italian-America from New York City I was surprised, amused and pleased. I thought that the misidentification could be used to pedagogical advantage. It would make the class all the more meaningful if they accepted being taught from the "other" side.

The class did not, however, work, and it had nothing to do with misidentification. I am not John Boswell and did not have mastery of the material, and just did a poor job teaching it. But the experience was illustrative of the unexpected challenges that teachers face and the images we

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40 Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 96–97.
41 Laurie Richlin, *Blueprint for Learning*, pp. 13–17.
42 Interview with Jennifer Spock.

project. I taught that class back in 1994, and it coincided with the bombing of the Murrah building in Oklahoma City. I was in fact in class when the tragedy occurred and when I returned to my office, unaware of what had happened, I was confronted by an angry secretary, who blamed "my people" for the deed, which was in fact initially attributed to Islamic terrorists. Several faculty members quickly escorted me away before I could fully understand what she was talking about or indeed what had happened. I assumed that the reference to "my people" was to New Yorkers, whom no one loves anyway.

## Signature Pedagogies and Historical Thinking

Whatever images we cast and however we go about our craft, the growing literature on pedagogy suggests that teaching history, like other subjects, has a strong disciplinary aspect to it and that the instruction students receive in high school is often fundamentally different from what is expected of them in college. The point is critical. Lee Shulman, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, encouraged college teachers to use "signature pedagogies" for their fields, by which he meant approaches geared to their disciplines. The Carnegie Foundation sponsored a series of comparative studies that examined how the members of different professions (e.g., clergy, 2005; lawyers, 2007; engineers, 2008; nurses, 2009; and physicians, 2010) receive their training.[43] The studies revealed distinct disciplinary ways of thinking and instructing students. Sciences, for example, were more fact and textbook based, while the humanities were more ambiguous. The historian Lendol Calder interpreted "signature pedagogy" as avoiding the "facts first" approach of high schools in favor, in his American history survey, of "self-reflection." Self-reflection for Calder necessarily begins with the question "what is history?" and includes understanding that historical knowledge is "fraught" with difficulties.[44] The expert on pedagogy, Peter Seixas, advocates inculcating "historical consciousness," looking at cognitive and cultural factors that shape our understanding of the past and its relation to the present day.[45]

The approaches highlight a fundamental challenge facing college history teachers that beginners and seasoned veterans do well to acknowledge. Students enter our courses without proper understanding

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43 Lee S. Schulman, Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus*, 134:3 (2005), pp. 52–59.

44 Lendol Calder, Toward a signature pedagogy. *Historical Survey*, pp. 1361–1363.

45 Peter Seixas, Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. www.cshc.ubc.ca/about/

of the kinds of reasoning required to think historically. The cognitive behavioralist Sam Wineburg has argued that the basic nature of the primary and secondary school curriculum makes it difficult for students to adapt to the discipline-specific forms of reasoning they encounter in college history courses. They are presented in the first instance with generic tests of reading comprehension and textbooks that present history like biology, language, arts, and other subjects. The footnotes and structure of historical evidence and argument are stripped away, erasing the "epistemological distinctions" that lie at the heart of the discipline. History is conveyed with "a single tongue."[46]

The attention to these issues demonstrates the progress made by professional historians in developing teaching philosophies and "critical reflection" of their craft. The notion of a "scholarship of teaching" has gained currency since 1990, when Ernest Boyer first popularized the term.[47] In addition to the Carnegie Foundation, important foundations such as the Pew Charitable Trust, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the American Association for Higher Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Council of Graduate Schools and other professional organizations have launched initiatives designed to help professors advance scholarship about teaching their disciplines. These have been accompanied by journals – *Perspectives*, *Inside Higher Education*, *Innovative Higher Education*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Journal of Excellence in College History*, *History Teacher*, among others – that relay pedagogical approaches and experiences of historians. There are in addition web pages including for teaching centers such as the Goldberg Center at The Ohio State University (http://goldbergcenter.osu.edu) and the Teaching Center at Vanderbilt, which post an array of the latest pedagogical approaches; the Roy Rosenzweig Center for Teaching and New Media, which has partnered with CUNY and the Smithsonian Museum to provide digital sources, the Historical Thinking Project (http://historicalthinking.ca) directed by Professor Peter Seixas of the University of British Columbia and the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) (https://sheg.stanford.edu), led by Sam Wineberg, partnered with the Library of Congress, that has recently launched Beyond the Bubble (https://sheg.

46 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p.5.
47 Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); Mary Deane Sorcinelli, Advancing the culture of teaching on campus: how a teaching center can make a difference. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 90 (2002), pp. 41–48; Alan Booth, Rethinking the scholarly: developing the scholarship of teaching in history. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 3:3 (2004), pp. 247–266.

stanford.edu/history-assessments) which provides a wide range of sources in addition to strategies to better elicit historical thinking, assess historical learning and critical reading of sources.

It is this scholarship and awareness of the "distinctive" nature of historical thinking that Julia Brookins (May 2013) argues is now becoming an indispensable component of instruction of graduate students. The constraints of limited time and the burdens of publishing render such instruction difficult and require a basic creativity that is worth the effort.[48]

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48 Julia Brookins, History learning and teaching in the graduate curriculum. *Perspectives on Histor*y (May 2013), p. 1.