Introduction to University: Lecture Eight

The Classroom

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I tell my students early in the course that I'm not here among them to teach and that they are not gathered together to learn. We are all here in our classroom simply to think hard about difficult matters, and to think about them in the company of others who are also thinking hard about them. The point of the gathering is to participate in the academic endeavour, and to participate in that endeavour just for the sake of participating in it.

I mention that although they are not here to learn, some learning might in fact occur. Indeed, it's entirely reasonable for them to expect to learn something and it's perfectly fine for them to welcome learning something. We're not to avoid learning things. But learning is merely a side effect of doing what we're here to do, anticipated and welcomed though it might be.

I also mention that some of their learning might occur as a result of teaching. Much of their learning will be of their own doing, I expect, but I accept that they might very well learn something or other because I've taught it to them. I do try to avoid gratuitous teaching, but when teaching seems necessary or useful, I'll right away engage in some teaching.

It often happens, though, that I end up doing a fair amount of teaching during a class. A student might propose, for instance, that one cannot act freely if everything one does is determined by prior events, and in response I'll teach the class the theory known as soft determinism, which says that even an action fully determined by prior events to be the action it is might be done freely. Or a student might propose that only if talk of psychological states can be reduced to talk of neurological states is the mind the same as the brain, and in response I'll present the idea that a neurological state might possess psychological properties that aren't physical properties. For much of a class now and then, I'll take the floor to teach my students ideas and arguments useful in thinking about the issue at hand.

I don't mind that I do some teaching sometimes. Even though I'm present in the room simply to participate along with everyone else in our discussion and our other academic endeavours, occasionally the best way for me to participate involves teaching people things. To be sure, I, the professor, am not the only member of the class who engages in teaching. Students teach each other and sometimes they teach me. But I, as the professor in the classroom, take the role of teacher more often than I take any other role.

Yet our focus, even when there's some teaching going on, must be the matter at hand. The matter at hand is an intellectual problem or a controversy, and our task is not only to try to understand it,

but to take some steps toward solving it. Understanding the problem or controversy is, of course, crucial, and that's where most of the teaching comes in. The action, though, is in attempting to resolve the problem. Only if students are seeking a solution are they actively engaged in liberal study.

In the classroom, working on the problem, our main activity is discussion. We talk with each other. We present hypotheses regarding the problem at hand, we explain our hypotheses, and we explain how we suppose our hypotheses manage to go some distance toward resolving the problem. We work on constructing arguments, beginning with a few ideas and then attempting to fill in the gaps. We subject our ideas and arguments to criticism. The ones that seem promising we keep, the ones that we judge poor we set aside (of course, we might be mistaken; the ideas we've judged poor might actually be excellent).

Discussion, though, will not go well if it's not accompanied by thought. We might suppose discussion needs to be preceded by thought, but that's not always how it can be. A poorly thought-out idea might get things started—or liven things up if we get bogged down. Unexamined ideas won't remain unexamined long, though. Criticism will help us to articulate them more clearly and to see their strengths and weaknesses.

In an academic classroom, students and professor are always thinking. We might be thinking just in our heads, or we might be thinking with a pen, a sheet of paper and a couple hi-liters, or with a keyboard and screen. Most students realize very early in their university career that note-taking is almost always pointless and distracting. Whenever in the classroom we're writing something down, we're not taking notes but collecting points to draw on for our thoughts or we're working to find sentences that express our thoughts clearly and concisely.

We are chasing insight, insights that solve our problem. To attain insight, we need creativity. We might have to think new thoughts—thoughts that are new to us, that is, that we ourselves haven't come up with before. Creativity and insight, though, come to us wily nilly; we have no way of going to them ourselves. (Leonard Cohen said that if he knew where the good songs lived, he'd go there more often.) All we can do is to try to prepare the ground so that creativity and insight might find us. The best way for us to prepare the ground is to be clear, rigorous and circumspect. Clarity, rigour and circumspection, unlike creativity, are up to us and under our control. We can intend to be clear, rigorous and circumspect and then act on that intention. (We cannot *intend* to be creative or insightful.)

To be clear is, first of all, to understand the most literal meanings of the words that express our thoughts. Thinking in short sentences helps clarity, for it's easy to get lost in sentences that pile clause on clause. To be rigorous in developing ideas and arguments is to be aware of what implies what and what follows from what. It is also to leave no gaps in one's arguments—no unspoken premises and no unacknowledged leaps. Rigour also requires a sense of when an argument employs irrelevant premises, circles back on itself or begs the question at issue. Circumspection is being aware of the possibilities and alternatives within the logical space of one's ideas and arguments. A circumspect thinker will look at both sides of the matter and seek all the evidence. When thinking about practical matters, she will consider both the pros and cons of each of the different options that occur to her.

By attaining clarity, rigour and comprehensiveness in our thinking, we meet the standards of excellence of liberal study. It is by meeting standards of excellence internal to hard thought that one experiences the joys of hard thinking. And meeting those standards of excellence might conjure up creativity and insight, if anything will.

Students should feel it in the pit of their stomachs that the classroom is a dangerous place to be, whatever the topic under discussion is. One reason it's a dangerous place is that, whether one is a student or a professor, one is always risking embarrassment. It's easy to look ignorant or stupid when one is participating in a critical discussion. The observations, ideas and criticisms one offers may in fact be irrelevant, naïve or false. One might be mortified as one's professor or classmates savagely criticize or pointedly ignore one's idiotic remark. Some professors will try to find a good idea in what you say and pretend that that was what you meant, but everyone sees through this ruse. Feeling coddled by the professor who does this will just increase your embarrassment, if his condescension doesn't also anger you. Moreover, by faking it, the professor introduces an element of insincerity into the classroom, which can reduce people's sense of how seriously to take whatever's going on.

It is difficult, but absolutely necessary, that students risk the embarrassment of, and risk being patronized for, saying something foolish. Otherwise, the discussion will be left up to the professor, which then means a lot of teaching, along with just one or two students—one or another of whom might shamelessly ramble on just to hear his own voice (this does happen, but only very, very rarely). To be a member of a class is to participate in that class. And so members of the class must not stay out of the discussion when they believe they have something to contribute.

There is another, more profound, way in which the classroom is a dangerous place to be. At any moment, whatever the topic, a student might hear someone say something disturbing or upsetting. A student might hear the professor or another student criticizing, even belittling, something important to that student, some facet of his or her identity. Classmates or the professor might say or behave in objectionable ways in a classroom—"objectionable," simply in the sense that one objects to them. In thinking hard about a topic and discussing that topic critically, people will say things that are shocking, appalling and hurtful. Or they might violate, even knowingly violate, a social or cultural taboo.

Part of the student's task of becoming an academic is acquiring the ability to hold aspects of her identity, the things she cares about deeply, things that matter emotionally, at arm's length, away from herself. In engaging academically with the things of the world, a person, whether a student or a professor, has to alienate some of herself from herself, so that she might, along with others in the classroom, examine that part critically, and appraise it. One might be called upon to alienate oneself from one's values, one's cares and concerns, one's affiliations, or one's emotions. The discussion might concern transgenderism and auto-gynephilia, child sexuality, ethnicity, race and intelligence, the residential schools and unmarked graves, exploiting the Holocaust, the virtues of authoritarianism, the ignobility of worship, Islam and terror, the idiocy of talking euphemistically about slurs, or the unfortunate ways in which your parents raised you, and someone might say, and endorse, a view one finds cruel or abhorrent. Students, if they are to participate in the academic

endeavour, must be willing to hear and consider ideas and proposals that disturb them in the depths of their being.

In an academic classroom, topics and ideas, even disturbing topics and controversial ideas, will be treated in academic ways. Theses will be written down on the whiteboard. The questions will be: are these theses true? Are they well supported by argument and evidence or not? What are solid objections to the arguments? What are cogent responses to those objections? What are replies to the responses?

The academic way of discussing disturbing topics and controversial views adds another layer of danger. For academics discuss things calmly and dispassionately. The thought that we are dispassionately discussing whether ours is a rape culture or whether ethnic diversity lowers social trust and harms communities can be upsetting, independently of what gets said. We should, you might think, be doing something about the serious social problem and not just gabbing on. Our discussion, you think, should be passionate or at least reverent, and it should be aimed at doing something to confront the horror. But the discussion goes on, until the professor signals that it's time to move to the next topic or the class ends. And no conclusion has been reached, or, at least, no consensus on a conclusion has emerged.

A university classroom cannot be a safe space and yet be a university classroom.

Perhaps paradoxically, while academic discussion is organized around the aim of getting the matter right, no one is under any pressure to get it right, or even to come to a conclusion. We have done enough academically, even if we continue to be ignorant of the truth, so long as we come to see the matter more clearly and fully. Indeed, we've done enough simply if we've given the inquiry our best.

Now, one might suppose that listening to abhorrent views is just something that one gets socialized into and that responding to them calmly is to exercise civility, a value independent of liberal study. That is, one might suppose that one will get used to hearing things that would have upset one and that one keeps one's cool out of regard for the feelings or comfort of others. That isn't quite right. Getting used to offensive views and valuing civility are no part of the academic character. On the contrary, academics, whether professors or students, are *happy* to hold their values and emotions at arm's length away from them. Alienation is their pleasure, not something distasteful they have to endure for the sake of something else. They are happy to hold aspects of their identity at arm's length simply because doing so is a constitutive ingredient of critical inquiry and critical discussion, and they want to engage, and to engage merely for the sake of the engagement, in critical inquiry and discussion. Even, then, if they are upset by what they hear, they wish to hear it, because they are more concerned to participate in the academic endeavour than they are to retain their ease of mind. They respond in what appears to be a civil manner not because they value civility, but because they see in calm, measured questioning and discussion the best route to understanding the matter at hand.

What is necessary in a classroom if students and the professor are to think hard about and strive to gain insight into some matter at hand? A great and terrible source of distortion in academic work is self-censorship. Too often, professors and students who have in mind something they think

would contribute to the discussion and move it ahead refrain from saying it. They refrain from saying it out of fear. They are afraid that if they say it, someone might report them to a university authority or that if they say it, they will be disparaged by their peers and excluded from their company. One thing that is necessary, then, is for all members of the class to be committed to the academic mission and to the values that sustain that mission. Unfortunately, no one can be sure that everyone in the class values dispassionate inquiry and critical discussion. We would also hope that the deans and academic vice presidents who receive complaints are themselves committed to the academic mission, and to explain to the complainers that they should restrict themselves to trying to change people's behaviour through arguments, and not through the threat of sanctions or punishment.

The academic classroom is a wonderful place, a place unlike any other. In a classroom, professors and students can engage in deep, open and free inquiry into the things of the world. But because of the way in which it is a wonderful place, it is also a fragile place. Part of a professor's job is to help his students to appreciate the classroom as an academic environment above all else, and part of a student's responsibility is to accept, though only for the sake of trying it on, the professor's invitation to participate in liberal study within the classroom.

Students might want to think of their time at a university as an opportunity to live in light of the values and commitments of an academic or intellectual. Chief among these is respect for one's own intellectual and moral autonomy and the intellectual and moral autonomy of others.

After three or four years (with summers off, maybe) of experiencing the world as an academic or intellectual does, a student might determine that he or she has had enough of it, that the pleasures of respecting intellectual and moral autonomy aren't worth the rigours or sacrifices. She might decide to return to a less free, open and intense way of life. But at least such a student would have experienced life in a community of minds first. Without having adopted the ways of a culture of disputation and critical inquiry, though, a student will not know what the life she is refusing is like.

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