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Personal Reflection: Teaching's Way

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Abstract

Excerpt: Appalachian State University engaged in a vibrant and exciting Darwin Bicentennial Celebration throughout the 2008 – 2009 academic year. Prominent speakers and writers joined with a film series, theatre productions, art exhibits to focus on Darwin and his scientific discoveries. Most of the university departments contributed and or participated in a variety of ways to this year long event. The Darwin Bicentennial provided the members of our university community with the unique opportunity to come together to discuss, argue, debate and challenge issues concerning theories of human origin, contemporary scientific knowledge based on theories of evolution and natural selection and, of course, issues of faith and reason. For a year, the university itself becomes a wide open classroom with a “commons” defined by Darwin and his legacy.

Keywords

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Teaching's Way

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Appalachian State University engaged in a vibrant and exciting Darwin Bicentennial Celebration throughout the 2008 – 2009 academic year. Prominent speakers and writers joined with a film series, theatre productions, art exhibits to focus on Darwin and his scientific discoveries. Most of the university departments contributed and or participated in a variety of ways to this year long event. The Darwin Bicentennial provided the members of our university community with the unique opportunity to come together to discuss, argue, debate and challenge issues concerning theories of human origin, contemporary scientific knowledge based on theories of evolution and natural selection and, of course, issues of faith and reason. For a year, the university itself becomes a wide open classroom with a “commons” defined by Darwin and his legacy.

At the same time that this wide umbrella of activities was going on, a small group of ASU faculty met to discuss Miriam Rosalyn Diamond's *Encountering Faith in the Classroom: Turning Difficulty Discussions into Constructive Engagement*. This group was composed of faculty from the sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities. As the title of Diamond's book suggests, each of us had had experiences with students regarding issues of faith related to topics in our disciplines. Some of us encountered a range of responses from our students in our classrooms. Some would challenge the subject of the day taking either a liberal left or a conservative right position. Debate was expected and encouraged. For many others, of course, there was that all too common question: “is it going to be on the test?”

What brought us together, however, was not how do we engage the apathetic or extend the debate beyond that of the vocally committed student but rather how do we address a kind of “deeper learning” that questions of faith in the classroom often invite. For many of our colleagues, there is a sense that questions of faith simply do not belong in the classroom. For others, they shy away from the potentially politically sensitive nature of where the classroom conversation might go if this area of human inquiry were to be acknowledged. Before we can reach out on these issues with our students, it became clear to us that it might be helpful to examine how we understand “deep learning” and its role in our own lives as teachers.

There have been several writer/teachers over the last several years that have opened a dialogue on this subject for us. Two whose work resonates for me and many others are Parker Palmer and bell hooks. I would now however add a third – Maria Lichtmann.

In her book, *The Teacher's Way: Teaching and the Contemplative Life*, Lichtmann reexamines the Christian Contemplative tradition known as *Lectio Divina* and applies that to the learning experience of the Millennial student who defines the contemporary classroom of today. She recognizes the pull that the students and

their families have in regarding undergraduate education from the point of view of holding consumerist expectations informed by a "bottom line" value system. She quotes *A Nation at Risk* but reminds us that the risk may be more fundamental than even what that report suggests. Most of this book is not a critique of how liberal arts education has evolved over the past generation (she leaves that to others) rather she concerns herself with transformative teaching that is informed by contemplative practice. As a warning to the reader, Mary Rose O'Reilly in her preface warns that this book is "delicate and dangerous." I would agree. It is not for the timid.

As Maryellen Weimer reminds us, the personal narrative approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning can break open for those who are "ready" a kind of wisdom that informs, colors and deepens their teaching and learning experiences. Lichtmann brings a philosophy professor's insistent curiosity about "the self" of *each* of her students in her classroom with a confident yet "open to risk" availability on her part in the role of teacher. There is a kind of "a- ha" recognition as you read through her book that you are being invited to "re-vision" one's self and one's students in light of contemplative traditions that come from Christian, Muslim, Taoist and other ancient "ways of knowing." In her hands, the classroom moves from being a place in which one applies techniques to achieve measurable outcomes to the classroom-as-verb, as a sacred place in which relationships between students, teachers, questions, modes of inquiry, traditions and contemporary forms of knowledge collide in ways that reveal the unexpected.

In the introduction, Lichtmann informs the reader of the *lectio divina* tradition and identifies the four aspects of this practice as they correspond to contemporary educational practice; consequently, *lectio* becomes attention, *meditatio* becomes reflection, *oratio* becomes receptivity and *contemplation* becomes transformative vision. She argues that contemplative teaching recognizes the sacred space in the classroom and acknowledges that the *ethic of presence* "may be our greatest gift to our students" resulting in what Thomas Merton calls "compassionate time." What Lichtmann is seeking for her students, I believe, is not just a sense of "knowing about" the world but also a strong and articulate sense of "being in" the world. The former requires a kind of social intelligence and confidence while the later requires a kind of self-knowledge that is authentic yet open to change.

In chapters two through five, she devotes one chapter to each of the four aspects of contemplative teaching. She breaks open the traditions on which each of these aspects are founded, places each in bas-relief to contemporary educational theory or practice and concludes with specific suggestions or recommendation of how each can be adapted to the classroom. In addition to Palmer and hooks, Lichtmann incorporates the work of other educational theorists and practioners like Robert Coles, Paulo Freire, Maria Harris, Ivan Illich, David Kolb and others.

As with the work of Parker Palmer, Lichtmann is not presenting us with a methodological approach to our teaching and learning. Also, like Palmer, she pulls us into the "heart of the matter." She is actually "re-informing" us of the rich traditions inherit in contemplative practice and suggesting how they might inform our teaching and learning experience. She invites us to engage with her, with each other and most importantly with our students in a journey that is as much about stillness and silence as it is about movement and verbal engagement. If you accept the premise that Thomas Friedman argues in his bestseller, *The World is Flat*, that the shifting

global dynamics creates a decrease in concentrated wealth and power and an evolving democratization of communication, opportunity and distribution, then Lichtmann's book helps us to redefine with our students the ways in which education can and does happen "in the real world." A flat world requires a depth of experience and a confidence born of genuine self-knowledge if it is to counter the powerful commercial and political interests that sacrifice immediate reward for long term sustainability.

As the poet Rilke reminds us, it is often not so much that we learn new lessons as we relearn old ones in new ways. Lichtmann brings that point home to those of us who care deeply about education and its potential to create a more compassionate world.