

PUTTING THE HEART BEFORE THE COURSE: PASSION VS. PLANNING

by Diane Andrews Henningfeld

As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied: the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be.

Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

My students, I could see, wanted nothing more than for me to stop talking. Some students had their heads down on the table, others had their backpacks in their laps, ready for flight, still others gazed with longing out the window. I sighed, dismissed the class, and began to gather my gear. Why, I thought, is this class going so poorly? Why are the students so disengaged?

English 250: Remembering the Vietnam War, an interdisciplinary mix of history, literature, ethics, and composition, was not a new course. In fact, I had taught some variation of the class eight times before, to students at all levels, and it had always been a wildly successful course. Students ranked the class highly in their evaluations, and their written work nearly always exceeded my expectations. Discussion was generally lively and sometimes heated as students grappled with issues of episte-

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mology, literary criticism, and ethical decision-making. I regularly had former students tell me that it was the best course they had taken during their college years.

So what happened? In the two years since I had last taught a Vietnam War class, I had studied a variety of teaching techniques, I had reconsidered assignments and objectives, and I had tinkered with the course design trying to improve my teaching and student learning. As a member of the college-wide assessment team, I had made sure that my class would produce assessable and quantifiable results. The fruit of my labor was a classroom full of bored students, trying to fulfill a college-wide requirement, and completely uninterested in the Vietnam War.

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Some of my colleagues, sympathetic to the angst I expressed over this class, suggested that perhaps times had changed and that the younger students no longer had much interest in the War. Others attributed my lack of success with this class to the particular mix of

students. When my friends heard that I was teaching the class at 1 p.m., they thought that was the answer—students in need of the after-lunch siesta. I appreciated my colleagues' help in trying to think through the matter, but I knew that none of these reasons accounted for my perceived failure.

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No, it wasn't the students or the subject, or the time of day. It was what I had done to my much-beloved course. I had tinkered the heart right out of it. In my attempt to integrate critical thinking, add more research writing, conduct in-class assessments, utilize small group activities, assign more tightly controlled writing assignments, and provide more of the historical and cultural background of the War, I had forgotten what fueled my passion for the subject in the first place. The reason that I began teaching the course was because I was mystified and passionate about the unknown, about what we didn't know, and perhaps could never know about the Vietnam War. For me, the heart of the course was the ambiguity inherent in any study of this murky time.

In previous years, my students encountered this ambiguity for themselves each time they imaginatively traveled up river with Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now*, or journeyed to the Vietnam War Veteran's memorial with Samantha Hughes, the young protagonist of *In Country*, or found themselves with Bao Ninh and the missing-in-action remains gathering team

in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in *The Sorrow of War*.

While students were often initially uncomfortable being thrown into this maelstrom of uncertainty, little by little they found their footing, constructing a knowledge base as they read, piecing together the puzzle until they had built a tentative picture of the Vietnam War, knowing, however, that this picture was contingent on the information they had; new information could force them back to reconstruct yet another image of the War. But, this year, students seemed content to do just what I asked them to do, no more, no less. In my fourteenth year of successful teaching, I felt like a failure.

As Parker Palmer writes in *The Active Life*, "Learning from failure is not a cool and calculated act. It tears at the heart and opens us against our will."¹ Just so. When I began my course postmortem over Christmas break and into the spring, I found myself alternately defensive and heartbroken over the class. Nevertheless, I was determined to find out what had gone wrong.

As I looked back over my research on learning outcomes, critical thinking, small group work, and assessment, I thought again, "This class *should* have worked!" And, in fairness, as I toted up final grades and evaluations, I found that the students as a group had written strong research papers. In addition, most of the students had met all of the learning objectives I set for them at the beginning of the semester. Students finished the class with a solid knowledge of the Vietnam War and its historical and cultural contexts. In addition, most students had improved their writing skills.

Because I had intentionally used a series of classroom assessment techniques designed to give me this information, I had the proof in hand that these successes were real. In addition, all students passed the class this time around, something that rarely happened in the past. If grades were not as high as the previous time I taught the class, they were also not as low; somehow I had eliminated the extremes at either end. The institutional student evaluations were good, although slightly lower than those for the same course two years earlier.

The planning I had done paid off in some very tangible ways. As I examined the evidence, it became clear that the class was scarcely a failure. So what was I griping about? What was it that I wanted from my students, wanted from myself? I wanted students who had some insight,

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some engagement. I wanted students who demonstrated creativity, who were willing to take risks, students who saw themselves as part of a community of learners. I wanted those lively class moments or serendipitous discussions that made the class seem alive, those moments when teaching feels for all the world like a state of grace.

I had weighted this class heavily toward knowledge based on rational cognition. The course, over the years, had grown increasingly “mind” centered; that is, I was moving in the direction of reasoned arguments and away from personal responses. The writing assignments I gave, and the tenor of class discussion reflected my changing bias. As I thought about this, it became clear that I had thrown the class out of balance. In my attempts to encourage and teach critical thinking, I had generally eliminated more heartfelt responses to the literature. In addition, because I added so much content to the class, I had eliminated most moments of pause, those moments when we integrate and assimilate difficult or ambiguous material, those moments when we consider how this material relates to each of us.

I thought I might find some answers in the research exploring holistic teaching, exploratory pedagogy, or spirit-centered teaching, approaches that overlap and diverge, but which all emphasize the importance of balance and integration in teaching. For example, Liz Grauerholz, in an article in *College Teaching* defines holistic teaching as “pedagogical approaches that consciously attempt to (a) promote student learning and growth on levels beyond the cognitive, (b) incorporate diverse meth-



ods that engage students in personal exploration and help them connect course material to their own lives, and (c) help students clarify their own values and sense of responsibility to others and to society."² Likewise, Kristie Fleckenstein argues that exploratory pedagogy "acknowledge[s] the importance of affect in cognition, affirm[s] the worth of personal experience, transform[s] our concept of the self, and build[s] meaning dialectically."³

All of the writers I read return again and again to the notion of whole teaching, of the balance of mind, body, and spirit in teaching. They also emphasize the need for connections among the student, the teacher, the content, the community, and the world at large. For the students to be truly engaged, the class needs to offer the students a chance to incorporate their experiences into what they are learning. The class needs to offer the students the opportunity to grow, not only in the knowledge of the content of the course, but also in their ability to make meaning out of complex and complicated issues.

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I had a small epiphany. What Grauerholz, Fleckenstein, Palmer,⁴ Mary Rose O'Reilly,⁵ and others were describing were the ways I had always intuitively taught my classes. Indeed, the same semester I had my failure with the Vietnam War class, I had a wonderful Senior Seminar in Poetry that attended to affect, to personal experience, to narration, to relationships, and to community. We learned poetry through intuition as well as rational argument, and we connected the poems we read to ourselves as well as to the greater critical context. Aha.

My research led me to think about moments of grace, those moments when everything falls into place and the atmosphere in the classroom is charged with energy. I have experienced such moments a number of times since I began teaching. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls this phenomenon "flow," a moment when a person is so deeply engaged in the process of learning or creating that it is as if no time at all is passing.⁶ We all know this experience: A discussion takes on a life of its own; a group project takes flight; or a student suddenly understands something she has not understood before. Although moments of grace are not predictable, Richard Graves identifies the qualities of a classroom where grace is likely to occur. Such a class room must be "authentic," it must be "communal or dialogic," and it must be "intuitive."⁷

Does this mean that I intend to throw out all of the planning that I do for my classes? Of course not. Here is the most important lesson I have learned in my years as a teacher: The essential tension in teaching is the push and pull between passion and planning, between preparation and spontaneity. If we go into the classroom without adequate planning, we are not giving our students the benefit of our learning, our knowledge, and our training. It is our planning that allows us to identify what our students need to accomplish in our classes, and it is our planning that allows us to determine if our students achieved these goals. Our work in critical thinking, group processes, Socratic questioning, reasoned argument, and classroom assessment clearly lead to better learning.

But when we go into a class without passion, without heart, we are denying our students something even more important than our list of learning objectives. We are denying our students ourselves. Our passion for learning, our enthusiasm for our subject, our conviction that it is this task, and no other, that calls us to stand with our students: it is this passion, our heart-full passion, that brings our classrooms alive, and lets us live in the flow. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
- ² Liz Grauerholz, "Teaching Holistically to Achieve Deep Learning," *College Teaching* 49 (Spring 2001): 44.
- ³ Kristie S. Fleckenstein, "Creating a Center that Holds: Spirituality Through Exploratory Pedagogy," in *The Spiritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner's Whole Potential* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook, 1997), 27.
- ⁴ See Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscapes of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); "Good Talk About Good Teaching: Improving Teaching Through Conversation and Community," *Change Magazine* 25 (June 1993): 8-13; and "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching," *Change Magazine* 29 (June 1997): 14-21.
- ⁵ Mary Rose O'Reilly, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook, 1997).
- ⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).
- ⁷ Richard L. Graves, "Grace, in Pedagogy," in *The Spiritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner's Whole Potential* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook, 1997), 20.

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