

Reflections On Teaching

A few weeks ago, I received a very gloomy e-mail from one of my best students raising concerns about our last class. The student was disheartened because he felt that his classmates were not making the effort to understand differing points of views, and that ultimately there was no point in raising questions for discussion, when a student's voice was either disregarded, or openly mocked. The author dismally concluded that he would never again participate in class discussion.

Having finished reading his message, I was as much surprised as troubled by its content. I was pleasantly surprised by the unusual openness of the letter, yet troubled both by his discouragement and more personally, by my failure to address how we, as students and scholars, should converse, listen and exchange opinions with one another, and what is, ultimately, the objective of classroom discussion. On one hand, I had let my student down, on the other this circumstance had tested my teaching skills, hopefully improved them, and more generally, but not less importantly, brought to bear the issue of what exactly a philosophy of higher education means.

Classroom Discussion: Act of Convincing or Acts of Explanation and Understanding?

The following day, I chose to speak about the objectives of classroom discussion. The message I tried to convey was simple. First, as students of social sciences, we should always strive to present our views and opinions using all available means of communication. Silence, in this particular case, is not golden at all. Second, we should present our points of view in a clear and coherent manner so that those who do listen will understand how we think about specific issues. Finally, and probably most crucially, classroom discussion should not be aimed at convincing others to share particular views, since not only is this quite often impossible, but it is not even necessarily desirable.

Academic discussions, similar to scholarly publications, should not aim at persuasion, but rather explanation and understanding. Students often become frustrated when others do not accept their arguments. They then proceed to blame each other for failing to listen or being closed to others' views. Once we shift the objectives of classroom discussion from the issue of acceptance or rejection of ones' arguments to the issue of understanding others' arguments, we may more easily avoid frustration. Convincing someone of his or her particular points of view only leads to the end of disagreement hence, discussion. Such situation is more than needed in politics, but not in social science. Social science research is about endless, which does not however suggest meaningless, presentations of new hypotheses and evidence to explain issues or events, even those (or particularly those) which seem to have been already explained.

Similarly, discussions in class should aim less at convincing or persuading others and more at providing stronger evidence to produce more plausible explanations and clearer understanding of specific

issues. Once this is acknowledged and implemented, discussions become less emotional and more scientific.

Philosophy of What We Are Doing

This whole episode ended exactly where it had started – with an exchange of e-mails between the student and me in which in this case, the acts of explaining and convincing served their purpose. The student agreed to remain engaged in class discussion. However, during our e-mail conversations, I became more and more aware of one thing, namely that teaching is not a word which properly describes the work in which I am involved. University teachers working in the Eurasian region encounter students often as young as sixteen, seventeen and eighteen years old, whose social and political consciences are still being formed. In this context, a philosophy of higher education is less about pure teaching or researching (although many would disagree) and more about mentoring and educating, where both pedagogical (mentoring) and educating (tutoring) skills complement each other and become essential components of 'professorship'.

A pedagogical dimension to 'teaching' demands a certain amount of training in psychology, which should focus on gaining students' trust, while still maintaining a professional distance. An academic with whom students identify has a better chance at resolving student conflicts, in addition to success in shaping the intellectual 'bones' of young people. An educating dimension to 'teaching' requires that academics acquire in-depth knowledge concerning social science theorizing and research, as well as the ability to transfer this knowledge. Overloaded with empirical data and factual knowledge, students are often poorly equipped to analyze, draw causal inferences and construct generalizable hypotheses. Academics thus have the responsibility to provide students with the analytical and theoretical tools to comprehend and explain processes and events in today's world. In addition to introducing key social science research terms connected with various ontological, epistemological and methodological issues, academics should be obliged to become more knowledgeable about these subject matters. Thus, special training programs on social science research and theorizing should become available for teachers of the Eurasian region.

Maciej Bartkowski

*Visiting Faculty Fellow,
Department of International Relations,
Odessa National University, Odessa.*

*PhD Candidate,
International Relations and European Studies,
Central European University, Budapest.*