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TEACHING THE EPIPHANY



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Teaching the Epiphany

Synopsis:

Are we overfeeding knowledge to our students? As a professor of theatrical design, I have come to an impasse in my teaching that has led me to question my own process of educating the next generation of theatre artists. This talk and paper outlines my discoveries.

TEACHING THE EPIPHANY

Just so we are clear, this is not a paper about how to teach. After 20 years in the profession, I know less and less. This is a paper about learning how not to teach. This is merely about listening, and knowing the moment to back down from a supposition, and the moment to move forward. How can epiphany be taught?

Last year, I was tasked to devise a curriculum based on craft rather than one based on an inquisitive approach for a course in theatrical design. Within this new curriculum was the supposition that our students were more inclined to succeed if given very specific knowledge that could then be turned into something equally tangible. For example, in a costume class, it was suggested that all the students make the exact same prop purse rather than come up with their own vision for the prop purse. The assumption here would be that it would be “clearer” for the students if they all had the exact same instructions. My initial reticence regarding this concept was that students in my courses were part of a creative major that required them to actually grapple with having their own ideas, and teaching the students particulars was not going to aid in this quest. Instead of completely writing off the requirements laid out, I, instead, treated it as an experiment. I, myself, was curious about what the outcome of such teaching would be.

The experiment was predicated on the notion that one side of the equation was based on giving our students a “safe” experience. An experience that was easy to teach, it merely required me handing out step-by-step rules, and the students just needed to follow them. If the students were tasked with learning how to make a chair out of paper for a design model, I gave them the supplies and the exact steps to follow and then I would send them off. This side of the experiment felt like a relief to me. The other half of the experiment was much less forthright. Within that side, there were many uncomfortable lessons that were harder to quantify. Simply the notion of how one would grade students based on their idea rather than based on their concrete answers was complicated. However, I was more used to the second approach, and had always believed that creativity had to be taught with the knowledge that not having a clear path was really the most justified approach. Could I have been wrong all of these years?

I usually begin my semester by giving my students a map. On the map it simply says, “you are lost.” I am a conscious mix of these two things. I am at the front of the classroom under the pretense that I will supply some sort of answer, but the class itself is titled “Stagecraft.” This title suggests that I, in turn, should be teaching the students the craft of the stage. But what is that? And who am I to define that for this new generation of theatre makers? In previous semesters, I would be open with the students about my inability to define the art of the stage, and in turn would open it up to their own notions, but this semester, I treaded a fine line of trying to quantify what it was I was teaching. I was teaching theatre, which is an evolving art form, but I was going to attempt to teach it with an authority about what that the future should look like. This course would include rules and laws and, most importantly, rubrics.

With each class, I watched as they eagerly took notes. I was imparting particulars that they understood needed to be recorded in some tangible diagram. The students were content. So

content, in fact, that when I asked any questions of them, they were flustered and mute. *Don't I (the very authoritative teacher) have the answer?* Every time this happened I made my own note, the note was essentially, don't ask anything of them, tell them. *What a silly teacher was I?* I am teaching a craft, and within this craft there are specific rules. I posted handouts, a vast amount of handouts that dictated what they needed to do. The handouts had directions, but the students would still come to class flummoxed. They wanted me to illustrate in even more detail how they were supposed to do the homework. Oftentimes I noticed that they did not even have the wherewithal to search out the handouts, and instead, wanted me to show them step-by-step how to find the handouts on the server. I obliged. It was an experiment, and now I was the mouse caught in the maze of it all. I thought that this would be the easy half of the experiment. It only required that I dictate steps, and they would follow them. *Here is a scale ruler. Here is how you read it. Watch how I do it. Here is a ground plan. Here is how you draw it. Watch me.* The tedium felt endless. But I persisted. The new curriculum was intended to produce more efficient students that would have a product to show for it. What is this product that I was trying to sell?

Safety, right? In the end, wasn't this course objective about safety? I was sent into the classroom to promise that my students would be hire-able after they graduated, and if I gave them all of these handouts that dictated all of these rules, wouldn't the students be better off? I was still tinkering with the experiment, but I was also floundering. I was unhappy with the students. Why, if I was doing everything in my power to give them skills that would make them job-ready, were my students unable to show even a spark of interest? Was the comfort of my authority making for a less effective learning environment? What had I been doing in the past that made the department question its results? At least in the past, the students were engaged in the process of learning, but now I felt as if they had become detached from the whole experience.

What was my instinctual approach? The other side of the experiment looked something like a hoarder's house. It did include a suitcase, a literal suitcase, filled with crumpled papers and funny statues, it also included a teacher who made a lot of missteps and asked for the students to come to their own conclusions. The instinctual classroom, the one that had felt awkwardly effective, had real moments of interaction. Instead of a handout on the scale ruler, the class began with me asking the students to teach me something they knew how to do very well. I was taught how to paint my toenails, how to do a cartwheel, and even how to make macaroni and cheese (this was a favorite of many semesters). After the students handed me their mac and cheese on a knowledgeable platter, I would then begin the lesson on how to read a scale ruler, which was something I knew how to do really well. All the barriers were dropped and we were communicating on equal footing. We were both modeling how to pursue knowledge, and this was more important to me than actually teaching them the scale ruler. My original supposition had always been that if they were open to the pursuit of knowledge, they would figure out how to read the scale ruler. But the new direction of the department did not come from nowhere, so why and how was my instinctual teaching failing?

It is valid to assert that in the past few years, I had noticed a change in the anxiety level of my student body. They were less enthused by the uncomfortable notion of "not knowing." I was equally concerned with their inability to come up with an idea. In the creative field, not being

able to have an idea felt disconcerting. What was holding the students back? Was it me? How was I failing them? In a sense, the experiment was more about trying to get to the bottom of this dilemma. I wanted the students engaged without high levels of anxiety regarding outcomes. Turning this notion around was more difficult than I expected. It was in the mix of all these insecurities that I came to an epiphany. It was not the rubrics that were wrong, and neither was it the over-stuffed suitcase of teaching props, but it was the over-teaching.

I have come to a solid assurance that over-teaching is not going to help the matter. I cannot lay out rules and hope that those rules will delineate each student's individual path to an epiphany. Instead, I actually came to wonder if I had always been over-teaching. It is possible that my pronouncement that students ought to feel lost is not accurate, but rather the students need to know how to speak and be heard by a critical mind. I am currently working on how to become that listener. The one that can lay out information that can provide a better springboard for independent thoughts. A listener that provides parameters that allow for the anxiety to not get in the way of searching out solid moments of seeing the world. Possibly, being able to see the world from their own view, is more important than anything for theatre students. A student that is invested in real moments that happen in real time with a more foreseeable goal, a goal that would be less about handouts and more about crafting their own tangible visions.

The classroom for me is a mixing pot... An open-ended stew. I can step into the idea of craft and hand out the very exciting assignments. I can also spin in circles to explore the circumference of a circle. But most of all, I can listen better and produce less. This classroom is for students on the cusp of discovering a world that has more variables than I had. And if this is so, the promise we need to shower on these students is a promise that the map has no directions. It is blank and open for them to fill in, mistakes and all. If they are unable to make a mistake, they are unable to come to an epiphany. Just like I was able to see that teaching for craft was not serving me. I found that it was full of holes and mistakes and wrong posturing. I was able to come to that epiphany, and pack my bags, and head out into uncharted water.