

# Why Do I Teach?

As I wind up another semester of teaching at Notre Dame, I've been thinking about what I'm actually accomplishing in the classroom. The standard view is that teaching imparts knowledge, either knowing how (skills) or knowing that (information). Tests seem important because they measure the knowledge students have gained from a course. But how well would most of us do on the tests we aced even just a few years ago? Discuss the causes of the Thirty Years War. Mary is 20 years old, which is twice the age Ann was when Mary was the age Ann is now: how old is Ann? How do Shakespeare's early comedies differ from his late romances? Give a quick summary of Mendel's Laws.

Overall, college education seems a matter of mastering a complex body of knowledge for a very short time only to rather soon forget everything except a few disjointed elements. (To return to the test questions above: it was about religion; you would need to set up an equation; the comedies were supposed to be funny, the romances not so much; something about the genetics of peas). Of course, almost everyone eventually learns how to read, write, and do basic arithmetic—along with the rudiments of other subjects such as history and geography. But that's because such knowledge is constantly reviewed as we deal with e-mail, pay bills and read newspapers— not because we learned it once and for all in, say, third grade.

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The same is true of the much more sophisticated knowledge of our adulthood. I know a lot about certain philosophers that I studied in college and graduate school, but only the ones that I've repeatedly returned to in my teaching and research. In general, people retain the knowledge that they repeatedly use in their professions. But what we studied once and haven't taken up again and again is mostly lost. At best the traces of one-shot learning serve as a sign of being an "educated person" (say Swann and I'll say Proust).

I've concluded that the goal of most college courses should not be knowledge but engaging in certain intellectual exercises. For the last few years I've had the privilege of teaching a seminar to first-year Honors students in which we read a wide range of wonderful texts, from Plato and Thucydides to Calvino and Nabokov. We have lively discussions that require a thorough knowledge of the text, and the students write excellent papers that give close readings of particular passages. But the half-life of their detailed knowledge is probably far less than a year. The goal of the course is simply that they have had close encounters with some great writing.

What's the value of such encounters? They make students vividly aware of new possibilities for intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment—pleasure, to give its proper name. They may not enjoy every book we read, but they enjoy some of them and learn that—and how—this sort of thing (Greek philosophy, modernist literature) can be enjoyable. They may never again exploit the possibility, but it remains part of their lives, something that may start to bud again when they see a review of a new translation of Homer or a biography of T. S. Eliot, or when “Tartuffe” or “The Seagull” is playing at a local theater.

College education is a proliferation of such possibilities: the beauty of mathematical discovery, the thrill of scientific understanding, the fascination of historical narrative, the mystery of theological speculation. We should judge teaching not by the amount of knowledge it passes on, but by the enduring excitement it generates. Knowledge, when it comes, is a later arrival, flaring up, when the time is right, from the sparks good teachers have implanted in their students' souls.

The fruits of college teaching should be measured not by tests but by the popularity of museums, classical concerts, art film houses, book discussion groups, and publications like *Scientific American*, the *New York Review of Books*, *The Economist*, and *The Atlantic*, to cite just a few. These are the places where our students reap the benefits of their education.

Many will see all this as fuzzy idealism, ignorant of the essentially vocational needs that must drive even college teaching. Students need jobs and employers need well-trained workers. What do the alleged joys of the mind have to do with these brute facts? It's hard enough to just teach what people need to do their jobs.

But what do they need to do their jobs? In professions like medicine and engineering there's a body of technical knowledge learned in school and maintained through subsequent use. Beyond that—at least it is often said—we need critical thinking and creativity: the ability to detect tacit but questionable assumption and to develop new ways of understanding issues—in short, to think beyond what “everyone knows.”

But it's our intellectual culture—physicists and poets, psychologists and musicians, philosophers and visual artists—that above all generates criticism and creativity. Those not tuned in to this culture lack the primary source for new ways of seeing and thinking. Ezra Pound said, “Literature is news that stays news,” and the same is true for all great humanistic and scientific achievements.

It may be, of course, that many employers do not really want critical and creative employees. Even so, engagement with intellectual culture is a source of immense satisfaction for many people in their personal lives. A democratic distaste of elitism leads many people to regard such engagement as merely the peculiar preference of some individuals. But everyone who has a capacity for enjoying intellectual culture should at least have the opportunity to do so. (This is the lesson of the play and film, “Educating Rita.”) I've come to see college teaching as providing not knowledge but activities that open the door to this enjoyment.

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