

# Good Teaching

*A Matter of Living the Mystery*

by Parker J. Palmer

Good teaching is an act of generosity, a whim of the wanton muse, a craft that may grow with practice, and always risky business. It is, to speak plainly, a maddening mystery. How can I explain the wild variety of teachers who have incited me to learn—from one whose lectures were tropical downpours that drowned out most other comments, to one who created as arid silence by walking into class and asking, “Any questions?”

Good teaching cannot be equated with technique. It comes from the integrity of the teacher, from his or her relation to subject and students, from the capricious chemistry of it all. A method that lights one class afire extinguishes another. An approach that bores one student changes another’s life.

Faculty and administrators who encourage talk about teaching despite its vagaries are treasures among us. Too many educators respond to the mystery either by privatizing teaching or promoting a technical “fix.” The first group uses the variability of good teaching as an excuse to avoid discussing it in public—thus evading criticism of challenge. The second group tries to flatten the variations by insisting on the superiority of this or that method of subtlety. In both quarters, the far-ranging conversation that could illumine the mystery when we think of it as a “black box,” something opaque and impenetrable that we must either avoid or manipulate by main force. Mystery is a primal and powerful human experience that can neither be ignored nor reduced to formula. To learn from mystery, we must enter with all our faculties alert, ready to laugh as well as grow, able to “live the question” rather than demand a final answer. When we enter into mystery this way, we will find the mystery entering us, and our lives are challenged and changed.

Good teachers dwell in the mystery of good teaching until it dwells in them. As they explore it alone and with others, the insight and energy of mystery begins to inform and animate their work. They discover and develop methods of teaching that emerge from their own integrity—but they never reduce their teaching to technique.

I want to share a few reflections on the mystery of good classroom teaching, whether in large lecture halls or small seminars. I want to name some of its challenges, and suggest some responses, without treating it as a “problem to be solved.” Only by doing so, it seems to me, can we enlarge the community of discourse that might encourage more and more of us to teach well.

## The Transaction Called Knowing

The knowledge we deal with in the classroom has not only a content but also a characteristic way of imaging the transaction between the knower and the known. In the present “canonical” Debate over what knowledge we should teach, more debate over *how* we gain knowledge would help if good teaching is our aim. (In fact, a hidden conflict among diverse modes of knowing continually confounds the debate over which texts merit full canonical status.)

The academy has been dominated by an objectivist image of knowing that holds the knower at arm’s length from the known so that “subjective” biases will not distort our knowledge. This image of knowing both reflected in and conveyed by our dominant mode of teaching, which, as Dewey said, turns education into a spectator sport. Students are kept in the grandstand so they can watch the pros play the knowledge game but not interfere with its “objectivity.”

Reformers have railed against this pedagogy. It makes learning passive and joyless, and it turns too many educated people into spectators of life itself. But many efforts at pedagogical reform have failed because the problem cannot be solved on the level of technique alone. The performer-spectator classroom is simply a faithful rendering of the objectivist epistemology. If the last word in knowing is to keep subjectivity at bay, then the last word in teaching will be to keep students off the field.

More engaging way of teaching will take root only as we explore more engaged images of knowing—especially of “objective” knowing. Few of us want to throw out the Enlightenment baby with the objectivist bathwater. But we can no longer teach as if there were a reality “out there” that can be mirrored by logical-empirical propositions. This image of objectivity ignores the way reality is shaped by an interplay of knower and known, and it leads to teaching with no higher aim than making sure that students get the propositions straight.

The only objective knowledge we have is the provisional outcome of a complex transaction in which many subjectivities check and balance each other. It is a fluid process of observation and interpretation, of consensus and dissent, conducted within a far-flung community of seekers who agree upon certain assumptions, rules, procedures—many of which are themselves up for debate. This, I think, is an image of objectivity that is faithful to the way we know. It is also an image that clarifies the goal of good teaching: to draw students into the process, the community, of knowing.

“To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.” That image of teaching has given me guidance in recent years, as has a related image of truth: “Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.” Good teaching, whatever its form, will help more and more people learn to speak and listen in the community of truth, to understand that truth

is not in the conclusions so much as in the process of conversation itself, that if you want to be “in truth” you must be in the conversation.

I do not mean that every classroom must be turned into a discussion section. The “conversation” of truth can and must be internal as well as external—internally, it is called “critical thinking.” That teacher of mine who walked in and asked, “Any questions?.” created a space for external conversation. But the teacher who rained words had a way of arguing with himself that opened the subject up rather than shutting it down. His lectures created a space for debate within me, a debate that goes on to this day. Both of those good teachers knew that the relation of knower to known is not distanced and static but interactive and evolving. They know that objectivity at its best is a commitment to critical discourse.

### **On Content and “Covering the Field”**

When conversation, internal or external, is named as one quality of good teaching, some teachers get nervous about the need to “cover the field.” They feel obliged to deliver large numbers of facts that students simply must master, facts that neither require nor abide “conversation” of any sort—they are what they are. Of course, some of this reaction comes from confusing education with memorization, and some of it comes from forgetting that an educated person should know where “facts” come from. But some of it is well placed. There *are* subjects that require students to master much factual material. How does good teaching deal with that demand?

Not best, I think, by non-stop lecturing, where our efforts to “cover the field” often do exactly that—they bury topics in a blizzard of information, obscuring them from the students’ view. The fact-laden lecture is probably the least desirable way to get the facts across. Not only are students easily overwhelmed by all that data, but are likely to get the facts wrong to boot. Far too many lecture courses resemble the “telephone game” where messages get mauled on their brief but perilous journey from speaker’s mouth to listener’s ear.

Surely the best way to deliver the facts is not with lectures but on the printed page or computer screen where they can be read, and read again, studied and reviewed. Perhaps it is not a sense of responsibility that leads to lectures burdened with facts. Perhaps it is lethargy that keeps us from finding or creating the texts that could give our students the factual grounding they need.

When we deliver the facts on paper, we free the classroom for various exercises in generating facts, understanding facts, using facts, seeing through the facts—exercises that might draw our students into the community of truth. One such approach I call “teaching from the microcosm.”

Every discipline is holographic. One can find small pieces of it that represent the whole. A critical episode in a novel, a particular historical event, a classic puzzle in science—any of these, properly approached, can be the grain of sand in which a world is revealed. In my own discipline, sociology, I once taught methods of social research, and I would spend up to two weeks taking students inside a single statistical table, a microcosm that discloses the basics I wanted them to learn.

Imagine a simple four-cell table that correlates race (black, white) with income (high, low). The table stays on the board for six sessions while I lecture a little and ask a lot of questions, encouraging my students to respond not only to me but to each other's answers. Can people really be divided into "black" and "white"? How—by observation or self-assignment? How reliable are the various ways of determining race? If race is really a continuum of traits, what is our warrant for using discrete categories? What are the consequences of doing so—for science, for persons, for society?

The questions go on and on as we turn to the concept of income, the general idea of concepts and indicators, modes of data collection and their validity, the logic of correlation, the social implications of such findings, the ethics of social research. Unlike the objectivist strategy of keeping students outside the subject as observers and manipulators, the microcosm approach brings them inside the subject as participants and co-creators of knowledge. After two weeks of dwelling critically in this simple table, many of my students were able to negotiate parts of the larger world of social inquiry and its findings.

## **The Autobiographical Connection**

If it is important to get students inside a subject, it is equally important to get the subject inside the students. Objectivism, with its commitment to holding subjectivity at bay, employs a pedagogy that purposely bypasses the learner's life-story. Objectivism regards autobiography as biased and parochial and hopes to replace it with "universal truth," as told through a particular discipline.

The challenge of racial and cultural minorities to higher education comes in part from their refusal to accept the validity of a "universal" tale that does not honor the particularities of their own stories. Feminist and black scholars, for example, compel those of us who promulgate universal truth to consider the possibility that our super-story has persisted less because of its persuasiveness than because of our political power. If there is a valid super-story it will emerge only as the academy becomes what it is meant to be, but is not yet: a place of true pluralism where many stories can be told and heard in concert.

Of course, everyone's story is, in part, parochial and biased. But when we deal with that fact by ignoring autobiography, we create educated monsters who know

much about the world's external workings but little about their inner selves. The authentically educated person is one who can both embrace and transcend the particularity of his or her story because it has been triangulated many times from the stand points of other stories, other disciplines—a process that enriches the disciplines as well. When autobiography and an academic discipline are brought into “mutual irradiation” the result is a self illuminated in the shadows where ignorance hides and a discipline warmed and made fit for human habitation.

By intersecting knowledge and autobiography we not only encourage intellectual humility and offer students self-understanding, we also make it more likely that the subject will be learned. When students do not see the connection between subject and self, the inducement to learn is very low. I know a geology professor whose students keep journals on the personal implications of each session to help them remember that the rocks they study are the rocks on which they live. I know a college where students are asked to explore the childhood roots of their vocational decisions (or confusions). In these ways, curiosity about the self can empower curiosity about the world.

When class size prohibits methods such as these, a teacher can help connect self and subject by giving away one of the academy's best-kept secrets: the major ideas at the heart of every discipline arose from the real life of a real person—not from the mind alone, but from the thinker's psyche, body, relationships, passions, political and social context. Objectivism tries to protect its fantasy of detached truth by presenting ideas as cut flowers, uprooted from their earthy origins. But good teachers help students see the persons behind the ideas, persons whose ideas often arose in response to some great suffering or hope that is with us still today.

We teachers can also show students how the ideas we care about are related to our own life stories. Many students will be surprised to learn that their teachers—separated from them by pages of age and authority and vocation—even *have* lives. They will be even more surprised to learn that our intellectual interest arise from the larger lives we lead, that the two enrich each other. That, after all, is why many of us became scholars and teachers—and our teaching will become more vivid as we let the secret out.

## **Hearing Students Into Speech**

If good teaching depends on drawing students and their stories into the conversation called truth, then good teachers must deal with the fact that many students prefer to sit silently on the sidelines. Students have blocked interactive teaching at least as often as have faculty. Many of them do not want to suffer the conflict and ambiguity of external conversation, and some try to avoid inward debate for the same reason.

If we are to treat their condition, we need an accurate diagnosis. It is inaccurate, though common, to attribute most student speechlessness to laziness or stupidity—and that diagnosis usually leads to teaching that is more punitive than provocative. Instead, I suggest, the silence of many students is the result of disempowerment that leads to privatization. Students are often marginal to the society by virtue of their youth, their lack of a productive role, their dependency on the academy for legitimization. Deprived of any sense of public place or power, they withdraw into the private realm where they keep their thoughts to themselves and sometimes, from themselves.

“Hearing people into speech” is a phrase I first learned from the women’s movement, and similar imagery can be found among blacks and liberation theologians. In those quarters, the diagnosis of speechlessness is not accusatory but compassionate; the silent one is understood as the victim of a system that denies his or her story, that ignores or punishes people who tell tales that threaten the standard version of truth.

The remedy is clear: establish settings where silenced voices can be heard into speech by people committed to serious listening. The classroom can be such a setting—if the teacher will work hard to gain credibility with students who have learned that silence is the safer way. Credibility comes as the teacher empathizes with the voiceless and with their struggle to speak and be heard.

There are many practical ways of “hearing people into speech.” Teachers who must lecture much of the time can honor minority viewpoints on their subjects, giving minority students a sense that alternative voices can be spoken and heard. Even in the largest classes, it is not necessary to lecture all the time; some materials can be presented by questioning (as in the “microcosm” approach), and, if the questions are neither rhetorical nor catechetical, students will want to respond. When those responses come, teachers can hear people into speech by respecting their responses—which does not require assenting to false claims. The familiar problem of a few students speaking a lot while the majority remain mute can be controlled in many ways: I sometimes allow each student only three chances to speak, thus allowing the quieter ones to find an opening.

With smaller classes, when a divisive issue is up for debate and my students retreat into privatism, I sometimes give each of them a 3" x 5" card and ask that he or she write a few lines expressing a personal opinion on the issues. I collect the cards and redistribute them so that no one knows whose card he or she is holding. Then I ask each student to read that card aloud and take sixty seconds to agree or disagree with what it says. By the time we have gone around the group, the issue has been aired, diversity has been exposed, the unspeakable may have been spoken, and a foundation for real conversation has been laid.

“Hearing people into speech” is as pertinent to science as it is to social science and the humanities. Think, for example, of the gender stereotyping that has often discouraged women from pursuing scientific careers. If the work of such scientists as Barbara McClintock and her biographer, Evelyn Fox Keller, were more widely read in science courses, more women might be heard into scientific discourse. Or think of the implications of eugenics for some disfranchised groups. Students who represent those groups must be helped to find their scientific voices lest they be speechless in the face of the next silent holocaust.

### **Conflict, Competition, and Consensus**

Contrary to its reputation and self-image, the academy is a place where conflict is often privatized, not openly aired. If we practice the community of truth in our teaching, if we intersect our subjects with autobiography and hear more people into speech, we will experience more public conflict than the academy is accustomed to, or even appreciates. Our fear of public conflict is a major barrier to creating spaces where the community of truth can be practiced. If we want to remove that barrier, we must remind ourselves—and help our student to learn—that conflict can be a paradoxical path to health and harmony for persons and groups.

Many people regard conflict as terminal rather than creative because they have experienced it in setting that are competitive rather than consensual. In competition, the purpose of conflict is to determine which few will win at the expense of the many. In consensus, everyone can win through conflict as the clash of apparent opposites gives rise to fresh, fuller truth.

A consensual classroom assumes that truth requires many view and voices, much speaking and listening, a high tolerance for ambiguity in the midst of a tenacious community. Consensual truth is not the outcome of majority vote. It is a continuing revelation that comes as we air our differences in public, pay special heed to those who dissent, and seek deeper insight—whether the subject is a statistical table, a laboratory experiment, episode in history, or an epic poem. Since consensual truth is the only truth we have, it is vital that students be brought into the process and into the conflict it contains.

Paradoxically, the most important thing a teacher can do to encourage classroom conflict is to make the classroom a hospitable space. Only under these conditions are students likely to do the hard things on which consensus-making depends—exposing one’s ignorance, challenging another’s facts or interpretations, claiming one’s own truth publicly and making it vulnerable to the scrutiny of others. When the classroom is a hostile place, students either withdraw into privatisim for safety or engage in public posturing to score points.

To give my students experience of conflict in a consensual setting, I sometimes use a simulation game. The game poses a problem that individuals first solve privately. Then small groups are turned loose on the problem after being given a simple set of conflict-consensus rules—e.g., “Present your views clearly, but listen to reactions before pressing your point.” “Don’t change your mind just to achieve harmony.” “Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, coin-flips, bargaining.” “When stalemate comes, don’t assume that some must win while others lose; seek a solution acceptable to all members.” “Remember that consensus does not require that everyone love the solution, but only that no one be strongly opposed to it.” The rules authorize and guide the very conflict that students want to avoid.

When the game is over, individual and group solutions are scored for accuracy. If a group has followed the rules, the group score is almost always better than the average of individual scores—and it is often better than the *best* individual score in the group. When these results are not achieved it is often because the group failed to follow the rules. By playing the game, students learn that all of us together can be transferred from the simulated problem to the real problems we are studying.

In classes too large to permit corporate inquiry through conflict, lecturers can at least remind students where “the facts” come from. They come not from immutable authorities but from very human communities that have sustained creative (and some non-creative) conflict for centuries, a conflict that continues even as we teach and learn the facts. A teacher whose class is too large to allow the outward conflict of a learning community can evoke the inward conflict called critical thinking.

## **The Nemesis of Evaluation**

Any case for consensual teaching and learning can founder quickly on the shoals of grading. How can a teacher draw students into non-competitive inquiry when the academy’s system of evaluation seems to require competition?

The first step is firmly to reject the notion that grading on the curve, with its forced competition, has any educational merit, and to insist, instead, that if everyone receives an “A” it might be the result of superb teaching and learning rather than sloppy standards. Another possibility is to allow each student to determine, within stated limits, what proportion of his or her grade will hinge on exams, papers, discussions, lab work, outside projects, etc. By allowing students to lead with their strengths rather than weaknesses, some of the anti-educational effects of competition are migrated.

Teachers can give students a chance to have their work evaluated several times before it must be finished. Grading then becomes more a tool of learning and growth than a final judgment on the final product. But the largest leap a teacher can take



beyond competition and toward consensus is to stop attaching grades exclusively to individuals and start assigning group tasks for which every member receives the same grade. When the academic reward system is used to make student rely on each other, the skills of consensus are more likely to be learned.

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If teaching and learning is to become a corporate enterprise, students need a chance to evaluate teachers, too. I do not mean the kinds of evaluations that are collected on questionnaires and published as consumer guides. I mean the kind that can be conducted publicly at the end of every second or third class, a time of open reflection of how things are going (based on criteria that students help identify early in the course) so that mid-course corrections can be made. When a class knows that it will progress, everyone—the teacher included—comes to class with more intention and wit, more sense of being in this together.

## **The COURAGE TO TEACH®**

The word “courage” comes from a root that means “heart,” and I like to transpose the words. How can we develop and sustain, in ourselves and each other, the heart for good teaching (assuming that the mind is already available)? Good teaching requires courage—the courage to explore one’s ignorance as well as insight, to yield some control in order to empower the group, to evoke other people’s lives as well as reveal one’s own. Furthermore, good teaching sometimes goes unvalued by academic institutions, by the students for whom it is done, and even by those teachers who do it. Many of us “lose heart” in teaching. How shall we recover the courage that good teaching requires?

We need institutional support in response to that question—workshops and institutes on teaching, promotion and tenure policies that reward good teaching as handsomely as good research. But we need even more to do the inner work that good teaching demands. “Taking heart” to teach well is a profoundly inward process, and there is no technique or reward that will make it happen.

Taking heart means overcoming the fears that block good teaching and learning. Fear is a driving force behind objectivism, that mode of knowing that tries to distance us from life’s awesome energies and put us in control. Fear is a driving force behind the kind of teaching that makes students into spectators, that pedagogy that tries to protect both teacher and subject from the give-and-take of community, from its rough-and-tumble. When our fears as teachers mingle and multiply with the fears inside our students, teaching and learning become mechanical, manipulative, lifeless.

Fear, not ignorance, is the great enemy of education. Fear is what gives ignorance its power.

In its original meaning, a “professor” was not someone with esoteric knowledge and technique. Instead, the word referred to a person able to make a profession of faith in the midst of a dangerous world. All good teachers, I believe, have access to this confidence. It comes not from the ego but from a soul-deep sense of being at home in the world despite its dangers. This is the authority by which good teachers teach. This is the gift they pass on to their students. Only when we take heart as professors can we “give heart” to our students—and that, finally, is what good teaching is all about.

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**About the Author:** Parker J. Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books, including the bestselling *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Parker holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with eleven honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”)