Done correctly, college education enacts the paradox of serious fun
(image from La Tomatina, Buñol, Valencia, España)

Teaching college students is what I have been doing for essentially all of my “adult life” since graduating college. In 1989, I first ventured into the classroom with the title “Graduate Teaching Assistant” at the University of Illinois—Urbana, tasked with leading an experimental psychology lab under virtually no supervision. Eager as I was to impart knowledge and be a memorable educator, these early efforts to teach yielded uneven results. My first attempt at a lecture-discussion that I was convinced would elicit fist-pumping enthusiasm from students—the topic was neuroanatomy—was answered by one student’s head sinking to the table as if it was a pillow. I
realized that I was not the “natural” at teaching that I had assumed and that the craft
demanded practice and work.
After the first semester, the student evaluation comments that I took most heart in
were that I was “candid” and did “not insult the intelligence” of students. Almost a
quarter century later, while teaching tactics and topics have changed dramatically,
these are still two principle beachheads from which I seek to reach the students:
Personal/intellectual honesty and rigor. At the same time, during the course of one’s
trajectory in the classroom, one must be constantly re-tooling, responding to a new
milieu and auditing one’s profile of strengths and weaknesses. The following have
emerged as the pillars of my teaching philosophy:

*Teachers should teach.* We have a vast array of methods and instruments at
our disposal in the effort to instruct. Beyond promoting discussion, teaching
aids include readings, chalkboards, handouts, audiovisual clips, as well as new
media outside the classroom. However, all of the available techniques and
props are for naught unless a teacher has something important to impart and
does so in a manner that recruits interest. Without material that has high stakes
embedded within thoughtful effort to reach students, teaching pivots on one’s
“props” and quickly collapses into contrivance and gimmickry. Moreover, the
instructor should take command of the course’s direction, applying one’s
expertise to the extent needed—and not pretend that the instructor’s remit is to
effectively sub-contract instruction onto undergraduates.

*Teaching is grounded in preparation.*) What is preparation? Reviewing, refining
and re-working material, devising new material to support claims and provoke
discussion, stitching new readings and topics into the course’s framework (and
thusly re-framing it), reflecting on previous class sessions, fashioning questions
beforehand to assess the students’ temperature (among other things). Few
people alive can summon a semester’s 35 hours of college-level material
without detailed preparation beforehand. The paradox is that preparation
enables serendipity and spontaneity. Memorable class sessions feature some
rambunctious outbursts from students in the face of the material. In these
instances, preparation—being able to cut and re-cut a script while surfing the
students’ stated interests and concerns—meets the moment.

*Students should learn.* In the teaching-learning dialectic, learning is probably
the more difficult to explain, accomplish or even to ascertain that it has
occurred. While a day’s instruction may end after 75 minutes due to a
university’s bureaucratic demands, what one learns is partial (incomplete and
steeped in perspectivism) and subject to revision (even across years). Learning
may be said to be engagement with (long-term, if sporadic review and repair of) what one provisionally knows. In the brief bursts of time an instructor has to do so, teaching can assay to cultivate another person’s informal library of knowledge and refine the repertoire of habits of thinking that govern that knowledge. Moreover, while learning may occur within an individual head, it does not stay there inertly; an educated person is also an educational agent, part of the “global brain” tasked with making our often troubled world better.

The liberal arts are the basis of teaching and learning in Communication. The phrase “liberal arts” refers to a broad and cross-disciplinary education, not a specific position on the political continuum; and the phrase certainly does not refer to a narrow and specialized education on technical procedures. All knowledge should be our province, although depth need not be sacrificed for, nor taken as antagonistic toward breadth.

Respect should prevail. Everyone and every claim cannot be equally correct as a matter of course. There is, in other words, ample space for substantive conflict in education. Although good manners can be a sign of it, respect does not collapse into ritual utterances of “Yes sir”, “No ma’am” and other outwardly observable gestures. Respect can follow from vigorous intellectual conflict. However, even battles have rules of engagement to abide if one is to participate in them honorably. Tough intellectual clashes can—should—caringly recognize one’s foe via respect and concede when one’s arguments have been demonstrated to need repair, tuning, or a thorough re-think. Importantly, respect is also channeled into the quotidian acts of holding one’s self and others to high but reachable standards, and in recognizing the good, honest effort even if it was not as successful or as elegant as hoped.

Research and teaching can co-exist harmoniously. At least, in the field of Communication: Class notes can become academic papers and academic papers can become class notes, with the aid of alert and discerning students’ natural curiosity and skepticism.

Being a student is not a form of Darwinian struggle in which only some can succeed at the exclusion of others; indeed, assuming such a struggle reproduces the most repulsive neoliberal (“free market”) assumptions about human behavior. At the same time, education is not a sentimentalized Disney movie. While everyone can demonstrably learn, formal education is also not for everyone; one needs to be honest with him- or herself if one’s heart is elsewhere, either transiently or enduringly. To be a student can be as discomforting as it is captivating with periodic
stares into the abyss. However, if one is not enjoying the experience—teaching and learning—then one is doing something drastically wrong and the reset button needs to be worked.

Revised September 2013