
*Teaching With Your Mouth Shut***A Review**

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Throughout my teaching years, I have come to marvel at how much I am still learning. I think to myself, “At last I am becoming like the teachers I admired.” Yet, Donald Finkel has made me ask *why* I admired my teachers, and he has caused me to reflect about what they actually taught me about teaching. In *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*, he emphasizes teaching as reflection, not performance, by disabusing our time-honored notion about what we generally believe constitutes a “great teacher”:

She was enthusiastic about her subject. She seemed to know everything there was to know about it, and then some. She had an awe-inspiring command over her material, and in response to any question, could hold forth brilliantly for as long as she wished. . . . When her lectures were over, her students left the classroom touched by what she had said. They wished that they, too, could master this subject, or some subject. Their minds felt alive and their souls felt virtuous. They wanted to be like their teacher (5).

However, as Finkel explains, this is “our culture’s shared image of the Great Teacher . . . our cultural ideals of good teaching” (5). What we think is good teaching may not really be good teaching at all. Performance, to be sure, is memorable, but it is not learning about something we will remember. I am sure we can all confess to the many times have we walked

into the classroom and “performed,” and thought, “Wow! That was great. I really got their attention!” Finkel poses a question from another perspective: “How much do you remember from all that you were told in high school and college?” (3). “Education,” Finkel answers, “should aim at long-lasting learning that forever alters our grasp of the world, deepening it, widening it, sharpening it” (4). Did your “great teacher” do that for you? Did you admire her because of her scintillating performance in the classroom, or because she deepened your understanding about the subject? That is the sort of question that slices a neat line between the teacher who “tells” and the one who “shuts her mouth” to inspire thinking.

I had such an inspiring teacher, but at the time I was annoyed with what I thought was his non-response to my rather anxious question: “How will I know good literature?” I asked in all sincerity because I was deathly afraid of only learning to parrot the canon and never learning to think for myself. I wanted a ruler by which to measure (so I was still asking him to *tell* me). Instead, he pointed me to Percy Bysshe Shelley, patiently explaining that good literature causes one to “imagine deeply.” I thought, “How do I do that?” and “How do I know if I am thinking ‘deeply’”? Shelley gave me more cause for reflection in *A Defence of Poetry*. He argued that “Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be ‘the expression of the imagination’: and poetry is connate with the origin of man” (505). He compared the poet to the lyre over which the wind blows to create music, but he drew a sharp distinction between the capricious lyre and the thinking person, stating that the “principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre [. . .] produces not melody alone, but harmony” (505). As with all poets and philosophers, Shelley

combined reason (thinking) with harmony to produce something better, something that resonates and causes us think deeply. Thus, for Shelley, “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (514), those men and women with special powers of the pen that move beyond the mundane and into the realm of genius, “the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory” (512).

I do not remember a thing about this professor other than this encounter. He was right to refuse to “tell” me because he made me ponder Shelley’s ruler of measurement for years on end. What does it mean to imagine deeply, and what does it mean to produce harmony and to possess wisdom? I do not believe there is a fixed answer, which was my professor’s point.

Finkel asks his readers to stop reading and write this down: “Thinking back over your whole life, what were the two or three most significant learning experiences you ever had? That is, list the moments (or events) in which you discovered something of lasting significance in your life” (6). This is what caused my “Shelley moment.” There are two more interrelated events I would like to share. They both concern my favorite English professors. One always came to class in a dark suit, what I thought was the epitome of a professional English professor. He was superior in intelligence, almost everyone was afraid of him except me, and I secretly called him my “English Dad.” The course he taught was English I, and the book was the 1,500-page Oxford English Lit I text. My professor tried valiantly to get us through the entire text in one semester, but half way through the course the project fell apart; realistically, we could not manage it. The next semester in the sequence course, my other professor used the

companion 1,500-page Oxford English Lit II text. She carefully selected authors and came to class armed with supplemental readings for depth. We spent a lot of time on each author, and she was never in a hurry to follow the syllabus (I considered that brave). From my first professor, I learned to love the early English authors (who can forget “the Dream of the Rood” or “Beowulf”). From my second professor I learned to love the later English authors and to never be bound by the reading schedule. My second professor modeled how to practice close reading, and to read beyond the text—quality over quantity.

Interestingly, Finkel says that most of us remember that our best learning comes from outside the classroom, from someone “doing something different from enthusiastic Telling” (7). This type of out-of-classroom teacher “got out of your way, gave you the opportunity to make your own mistakes, or failed to rebuke you when you expected a rebuke” (7).

Finkel says, too, that to be good teachers we need to learn how to be good listeners. He gives an example of a teacher he knows who meets with his students outside the classroom (but this can also be done inside the classroom), and listens to his students discuss a novel, saying very little. He avoids “telling” but lets them speak without judgment or correction. Teaching with your mouth shut therefore means that “there are more ways to teach well than are included in our cultural image of the Great Teacher” (9).

One such way to become a “mouth shut” teacher is to follow the examples of the parable, the Zen Koan, the puzzle, or the paradox. These brainteasers do not have fixed answers; instead, they invite more questions, some confusion, more thinking, more dialogue, and perhaps even a multiplicity of solutions (there is no *right* answer). Finkel argues that “a teacher who teaches ‘in the spirit of the puzzle’ will not give the answer, lecture on the reasons for it, or rob students of an opportunity to solve it on their own. He will keep himself in the background and let the puzzle do the talking” (16). He says that the place best to learn is from the Great Books, although other disciplines work well because they offer a multiplicity of interpretation like a puzzle wherein students learn to deconstruct, interpret, contextualize, and explore new perspectives. The best venue for such learning is an open-ended seminar in which Finkel cautions that “the outcome of the seminar must not be predetermined” (33) whereby teachers must learn to let go and trust the organic process.

Finkel gives us five reasons why the open-ended seminar works so well: The first is that “the teacher’s function is to act as a spotlight” (42) by refocusing attention, asking a student to repeat something, or asking, “Why would you think that?” (43). The second is for the teacher to ask “usefully posed questions to contribute” (43). Note that Finkel does not say to “tell”; rather, he says to “ask” so that students will struggle to come up with their own possibilities. The third is that the teacher can help the class remain focused. “She can help the group decide when sufficient time has been spent on one question. . . . She can muster evidence from the book to support a hypothesis generated by a student . . . she can even suggest her own answers to student questions or enunciate her own dawning

discoveries” (43). The fourth is that “the teacher can help make the conversation civil and orderly” (43). Put succinctly, the teacher is the guide, the facilitator, but not the performer. Finally, the teacher can “summarize key results of the day’s discussion so the group can hold onto what it produced” (44). Perhaps these are methods we already use to some extent but, again, the emphasis is on student learning, not teacher performance. An interesting aspect of Finkel’s teaching with his “mouth shut” is how he makes room for the development of good teacher/student relations with the support of his school. Evergreen College, where Finkel taught until his death, boasts that it “emphasizes collaborative, interdisciplinary learning across significant differences. Our academic community engages students in defining and thinking critically about their learning. Evergreen supports and benefits from local and global commitment to social justice, diversity, environmental stewardship and service in the public interest.”

These are lofty ideals but certainly not unattainable, no matter where we teach. How many times have we developed a warm rapport with our students, only to have the honeymoon be over once we return a graded paper? After that, it seems, all bets are off, and the hard-won trust relationship cools. At Finkel’s college, students are graded through an evaluation letter that is placed into the student’s file instead of the traditional grade. Even though we might be teaching at a “grade-centric” school, Finkel suggests that we circumvent that by writing letters to our students along with the grade. Letter writing draws the teacher into the writing process by modeling good writing, and it cements the student/teacher relationship. Finkel has even received response letters from his students, thereby creating a writing community in which everyone

practices the art of writing. The letter writing practice would work well across the disciplines. Imagine getting a letter from your math professor! “Students can learn from reading what their teacher has written to them. They can also learn by writing to each other” (78). The happy consequence for the teacher is that “By keeping her mouth shut, she makes room for two more teaching activities that will help her students learn: she can arrange for them to write to each other, and she can write to them herself. By doing the former, she invites *them* to speak with their mouths shut. By doing the latter, she shows them how to do it” (85). Finkel therefore creates “democracy in education” because “a teacher who wishes to train independent thinkers, then, will be committed to fostering democratic aims in his classroom. In promoting collective inquiry, he is already promoting democracy” (116).

What makes this book work so well is that Finkel cautions his readers not to think of it as a “how to” book; rather, he wants the reader to *reflect* about his or her teaching. He says that he hopes “my phrase ‘teaching with your mouth shut’ will have been explored, exemplified, varied, and deepened sufficiently that it will no longer be puzzling. ‘Teaching with your mouth shut’ should then specify a comprehensible approach to teaching—along with a host of concrete teaching possibilities. In the end, the title phrase will, I hope, turn your head sufficiently so that not only will your notion of good teaching be transformed, but so, too, will your sense of what may be signified by the word *teaching* itself” (10).

Teaching With Your Mouth Shut has done that for me, and perhaps I have already begun teaching this way. That brings me to my last teaching reflection that comes straight from one of my student’s evaluation

comments: “The books were weird and I’m not really sure what I was supposed to actually learn from them.” Did I tell her what she was supposed to learn? I hope not. Did she really expect me to tell her? I think she did and that was her disappointment. Were my book selections really weird? Maybe to her but not to me. I hope that her search for meaning will stick with her, as my search did, and that she will think about it for years on end. If I could talk to her, I would tell her that I want her to divorce herself from “supposed to learn” to “imagining deeply.” I would tell her that eventually she, too, will stop asking her teachers to “tell” her and that she, too, will become brave enough to strike out on her own, just as I did when I was a young pup.

Reverences

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