

Leaving affinities open: practicing hope in the classroom

INTRODUCTION – HAVE I LOST HOPE?

I began teaching the classics in the In Dialogue with Humanity syllabus in a different sequence three semesters ago. In the immediate past semester, I also began collecting students' comments during most of the tutorials on "what they have learnt or what they have discovered during the class". This poster reports on the questions that motivated me to make change and my failure to determine as yet any direct consequences this change might have had on the way students have been learning. Despite this failure, the process of experimentation affirms my existing concerns and reveals to me new exigencies that I would like to respond to in my future teaching. At I write, I can manage to give only a vague sense of what is at hand: making possible for freedom, hope and imagination to exert a tenacious hold in the classroom. The experimentation goes on.

QUESTIONS – SOME CONDITIONS FOR IMAGINING CHANGE?

- Given that the syllabus presents a patriarchal line of authorship, how could "competing universalities" (Butler 2000) be taught?
- How could reproducing established canons at the same time be a gesture to invite learners to appear before the canons?
- How could values upheld in ancient worlds be shown to hold a serious grip on contemporary life rather than be kept safe as belonging to a pristine or primitive past?
- How could cross-cultural dialogues be forged without reinforcing such dichotomies as the "East/West", "the traditional/ the modern" etc.?
- Would the pairing of some texts like the *Wealth of Nations* and "Estranged Labor" be over-determined by existing modern disciplines to limit the potential of their ideas in relation to the core value of the syllabus as a whole?
- How could the redemptive power presented in particular religious texts not be generalized into the understanding of what the experience of faith might be in general?
- How could non-believers learn of religiosity with religious texts?
- While positing the suffering subject teaches empathy, when might it also produce narratives of self-victimization?

Official Syllabus		
Section headings	Themes	Texts
I. Self & Human Capacity	Choices and Transformation	<i>Odyssey</i>
	Love & Search for Beauty & Goodness	<i>Symposium</i>
	Friendship & Happiness	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
	<i>Humaneness & Moral Awakening</i>	<i>The Analects</i>
	Freedom Through Detachment	<i>Zhuangzi</i>
II. Faith & Human Limitation	No-Self, Emptiness & Inter-being	Heart Sutra & <i>The Heart of Understanding</i>
	Creation, Separation, Suffering	Bible (Gospel of Mark & Book of Genesis)
	The Right Path & Right Responsibilities	Qur'an
III. Self in Social Institutions	The Way of Sage King & the Ideal School	<i>Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince</i>
	Sovereign Power of the People	<i>The Social Contract</i>
	Self-interest for Common Good?	<i>The Wealth of Nations</i>
	Labor: Becoming Human Again	"Estranged Labor"

Re-arranged syllabus I am teaching now

Section headings	Themes	Texts	Varying affinities (for prolonged attention throughout the course)
I. Self and Human Capacity	Labor & Being Human	"Estranged Labor"	Focus on "species-being" and "universality" of humans; inquiry of "purpose" rather than "use"
	Friendship & Happiness	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>	Decontextualize from unified "ancient Greek culture"; dialogue with Marx on humans as goal-directed & social beings
	Humaneness	<i>The Analects</i>	Dialogue with Aristotle on friendship & social life of humans
	Love of Goodness	<i>Symposium</i>	Dialogue with Analects on idealized character of a teacher
III. Self in Social Institutions	Vision of Change	Bible (Gospel of Mark)	Encourage imagination of thinkers' source materials – what they observe in their worlds, what they imagine as possible to bring in to their present, what questions they keep asking and concern themselves with, what struggles (personal and social) they have to overcome, what kind of hope informs their vision...etc.
	Vision of Change	Qur'an	
	Vision of Change	<i>The Wealth of Nations</i>	
	Vision of Change	<i>Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince</i>	
	Vision of Change	<i>The Social Contract</i>	
II. Faith & Human Limitation	(Vision of Change) Freedom as Detachment	<i>Zhuangzi</i>	Emphasize the productive absurdity of his style; set his ideas up as potential a critique of all the classics in the syllabus; dialogue with other thinkers on nature (physical nature, human nature, the naturally-so)
	No-Self & Emptiness	Heart Sutra & <i>The Heart of Understanding</i>	Highlight challenges in accessing the Sutra and open up discussion on the influence of monotheism on the way religions are perceived
	Choices & Transformation	<i>Odyssey</i>	Allow for traces of gestures, worries, fears, wonders etc. to linger in students' memories of the course; open up possibilities for future rapport

INDICATIVE STUDENTS' REMARKS (collected during end of most tutorials; English writing errors from the originals are kept)

In response to Marx:

- "Well, I really don't understand this text at all, but I felt sad that the workers lives were not valuable. I think that their human rights were less than the values of products (objects)."
- "It's really great to hear other people's thoughts on Marx from so many different perspectives, because otherwise I probably wouldn't have come up with them myself. [...] I hate to have such a pessimistic view but it seems to me workers can never be spiritually fulfilled, as long as the capitalist system holds sway in this world, because not every workers' individuality and creativity is equally valued."
- "Link with Confucius 'The gentleman is not a utensil.'"
- "The world is complex. Not everything is black and white, not everything fits into neat

packed with boxes. To be able to understand Marx's beliefs, and as a result have dialogue with humanity and everything around us, we have to be able to think complexly – this will probably be a broad, overarching idea with the entire course. It's tiring, but vital in moving forward."

In response to the Gospel of Mark:

- "It feels really different reading as a Christian and reading for academic/ literature. The mindset you need to have is very different."

In response to Smith:

- "My labour is part of my wealth."

In response to Zhuangzi:

- "Critical analyses are Confucius ~ Zhuangzi; Socrates ~ Zhuangzi. Very interesting. I have seldom engaged with 'symposium' between great authorities before!"

General:

- "I learnt that it's okay to have questions about the text. There's no need to hide from the professor the fact that we don't understand something."

DISCUSSION

- What kinds of intellectual and imaginative capacity do these comments show? How could they be furthered?
- What is to live freedom in the classroom? How could I engender conditions for students to yearn for freedom and a self-determining life in the classroom? How could I register their lived experience of freedom?

REFERENCES

Butler, Judith. "Competing Universalities" in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* by Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek. London: Verso, 2000.
Greene, Maxine. *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988.

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