A Short Defense of Confusion and Superfluousness
By
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It has occurred to me of late that regardless of the class I’m actually teaching, I have two main goals as a teacher: to promote confusion and to become superfluous. On the surface these seem like odd goals for any teacher, even odder for one primarily of first-year students, many of whom have yet to satisfy the university’s entry level writing requirement. Nevertheless, and though slightly more nuanced, these are my intentions in many quarters.

The point against clarity in favor of confusion is a tough one to make, but the gist of it hinges on the complexity of the world and on the tenuousness of the boundary between clarity and absolutism. I don't argue that one shouldn't have values, or defend them, but rather that we should be willing to listen to the ideas of others and that we might actually learn why others believe what they believe. I ask students to be wary of too much clarity as it tends to obfuscate more than it reveals. In class and in writings, I hope they consider that things might be other than they’ve ever imagined them. That what once was right could become wrong; that good might occasionally bleed into bad. And that something, anything, they sincerely believed as a seventeen-year-old, might possibly no longer hold. I suggest that as they read complex material and engage in preliminary research of their own design, that they consider the potential of re-evaluating ideas and imagining the unfamiliar. In so doing, discussion might become more than sequential monologue and writing more than polemic. I try to produce assignments that ask students to respond to texts and to each other even if the material and the backgrounds of their peers are unfamiliar. In fact, I hope the material is unfamiliar. And I hope the students become confused for it seems to me that sophistication takes hold in such moments of confusion. Indeed, that move is precisely what leads, I believe, to the beginnings of more sophisticated intellectual inquiry. As faculty, we were no more born experts in our fields than the students in our classes. Like them, we are ignorant; we are intrigued; we think; we learn; we research; we write; we grow. I want my classes to offer students a venue for similar growth. And to generate this growth, I have to first allow for a bit of confusion and then I need to become superfluous. That is, if I have done my job, my students should have learned enough to not need me in the same capacity, to move on in their majors, or to return to me in a different class where a new set of confusions will loom.

In the end, I hope that the moments of confusion give way to confidence and successes as my students develop a sense of themselves as members of an
intellectual community, with something to contribute to the conversations that go on here, even if as novices for now. I expect my students to learn much more than to respond to my requests, but additionally learn how to construct their own queries, shape research agendas they find worthwhile, and present them knowledgeably and effectively to the audiences they’ve chosen. These are the explicit goals of my Writing 1 / 2 class where I guide students through the stages of a quarter-long research project, but they undergird much of my teaching.

In any class, however, there are multiple clarities that should be honored and not complicated – of seminar decorum, of my expectations and goals for the course, of the rationales for the immediate tasks at hand, among others. These aspects of any successful course must be clear, a point brought home to me in the Winter of 2006 in a class that went horribly wrong. As you can see from the evaluations for that class, a significant number of students ended up unhappy. This class, a Stevenson Core Course seminar that satisfied the C2 requirement, simply never leapt the gap between the certainty of their previous convictions and the intellectual possibilities imbedded in considering other arguments. Part of the difficulty with this class was out of my control, having as its members a critical mass of students – 8 of 25, I later learned – who truly disliked one another from experiences in the dorms. Nevertheless, as their teacher, it was my responsibility to give coherence and meaning to our work together. In the end, I achieved this only through breaking up the class entirely. We ceased to meet as a seminar, reorganizing ourselves as small groups and individual appointments. As I look back on this class, I think of it as an exception and my evaluations over the years support this belief. That said, however, it continues to remind me that there is a delicate balance between fostering a seminar filled with curiosity and one dissolving into chaos.

At its best, the university provides a space for discussions that are not diatribes – whether those conversations happen in dorm rooms, classrooms, or before last call at the Red Room. From the class that failed and the ones that work I continue to learn many things that shape and reshape my teaching. For example, I learn of the pedagogical value of confusion, and yet how important it is to give reason to my requests. I learn that what makes sense to me, doesn’t to others, and how to have a conversation about the mess. I learn about a world of in-between spaces where ideas take hold, where silence is nurturing and where it can be repressive. And most importantly, I learn that while students do need a certain form of clarity and precision, they also need the intellectual curiosity born of confusion. And they learn to end the quarter trusting themselves and to move on without me.