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Four years past writing my initial personal statement, I continue to think that teaching, at its core, is an act of composition. Not composition as rote, but composition as ritual. Composition in an aesthetic sense — beauty intensified through arrangement, simplicity of line, even negative space.

Sometimes the classroom unfolds as planned. Sometimes attention to students, material, and classroom dynamics calls for improvisation. But always composition is at play. Teachers are with their students in the midst of the material. Pondering, puzzling and probing, clarifying, criticizing and elaborating, drawing out assumptions, relationships, implications — these moves and many more make up essential elements in the repertoire of composing a context for intellectual insight. But currently, as a result of continued reflection on my own teaching and informed by interactions with students, peers, my field, and the larger context within which the project of university education takes place, I find myself exploring different dimensions of the art of composition. Were I to write my personal statement today, I would title it borrowing a phrase broadcast by loudspeakers in the London metro: “Mind the gap.” That reference to the space between the edge of the platform and the floor of the subway car, repeated for the purpose of safety, serves as an apt organizing metaphor for what I have been thinking about. I’ve become

more interested in the measure, maintenance, and effective pedagogical use of gaps — from the known to the unknown, from the easy to the difficult, between the developmental and the disciplinary, pressing the present to promising the future.

In my initial statement on teaching as a compositional act, “Composing Context for Insight,” I emphasized constructing scaffolding through tasks and questions that support students to cross the gaps. My emphasis was on the pedagogical product resulting from designing intellectual experience. And while I am no less committed to designing courses and particular classes in ways that provide that scaffolding, I am increasingly convinced that noticing, enduring the discomfort of, pondering, and respecting gaps is equally and urgently important for learning. Why? Because gaps are essential to understanding, to incisive questions, to insight and originality, to acknowledging genuine difference, and to the self-possession required for attending to any situation, text, data, or problem.

I am increasingly convinced that the capacity to recognize and revel in gaps in knowledge grounds the habit of shaping and posing fruitful questions that is integral to students learning well and continuing to learn after they leave the classroom. Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck’s work comparing learning, in the face of adversity, of children who focus primarily on being smart and those more engaged with the problem or task than with self-image, gave me insight here. Her work helped me frame a growing challenge, dealing with students so paralyzed by fear of not meeting their own self-perception that they cannot tolerate any gaps in their knowledge or skill. Hence, they cannot think, they are incapable of posing even a low-level question (see [Dweck's article](#)). Sharon Daloz Park’s book, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*, showed me more about the relationship between attention to gaps, be they unknown, confusing or complex, and the capacity to shape questions and follow out a train of thought. Her subject matter, the teaching method of Ronald Heifetz, and even more the way Parks herself wrote about it, disclosed gaps as pedagogical wellsprings.

Multiple conversations and interactions with other texts have also pushed me in attending to gaps. For one, I am alternately satisfied and frustrated with articles and books promoting active learning. Many are long on particular strategies and short on framing how and why a faculty member might choose to use those strategies. The nature of a discipline, particular material, and the purposes of the course are integral to such decisions. One example of a useful but incomplete text in the active learning vein is Angela Provitera McGlynn’s *Successful Beginnings for College Teaching: Engaging Your Students from the First Day*. It is clear on topics to cover in a syllabus and during the first class sessions. It provides a range of activities that help students to learn about each other, the instructor, and the course. It has multiple suggestions for promoting participation and so increasing motivation. Absent, however, are considerations to which a professor should attend in determining whether, why,

and how to use the techniques, other than to get students engaged. Elizabeth F. Barkley, K. Patricia Cross, and Claire Howell Major in *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* outline precisely that in their first chapter, “The Case for Collaborative Learning.” Any faculty member considering incorporating more active learning techniques into pedagogy would benefit from reading that chapter.

I am increasingly uneasy with a tendency in the active learning literature to confuse activity with learning. Students know the difference. Activities that are not framed, that seemingly lack purpose, that are experienced as disconnected and that fill space but are not situated within the flow of an entire course, quickly gain the appellation of “busy work.” Unframed, effective learning activities lose power.

Students also are uncomfortable sitting with questions not easily resolved and problems not easily solved. Thinking goes on in gaps and the more difficult it is for my students to rest comfortably in gaps, the more difficult it is for them to think. While mulling over this issue I have been reading in the area of contemplative pedagogy, a field garnering growing attention and recently the focus of a three-year project by the AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning. John P. Miller’s *Educating for Wisdom and Compassion: Creating Conditions for Timeless Learning* provides one example and Sid Brown’s *A Buddhist in the Classroom* another. In some ways they echo a strand in one of my favorite writers on teaching, the late Donald L. Finkel, whose *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* remains an artful presentation of how one creates constructive gaps for students to cross. While my thinking on the contemplative pedagogy movement is not fully formed and I am concerned about some ethical dimensions of it with regard to use and misuse of power in the classroom, I find helpful how it draws attention to the act of paying attention — to learning how to look, notice, and attend without grasping or pummeling into submission whatever the object of attention might be. The contemplative pedagogy literature is a conversation partner with whom and over against whom to further develop my own ways of inviting students to pause and ponder, to be still with whatever they are reading, exploring, and considering.

Two other texts are informing my own thinking about the pedagogical use of gaps by pushing me to be sharper in my own practice of design. One is L. Dee Fink’s *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. The comprehensiveness of Fink’s presentation of the elements of course design provides a horizon against which I am considering how to gauge and maintain appropriate gaps between what my students know how to do and what I want them to be able to do. The volume captures material Fink uses in his workshops and is a useful reference volume. The other is Dannelle D. Stevens and Antonia Levi’s *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective*

Feedback, and Promote Student Learning

. This is the most accessible introduction to the creation of rubrics that I have found. What I have not resolved for myself to any satisfaction is where the discrimination rests between the use of rubrics as an aid to artful composition of learning environments — including the maintenance of necessary gaps — and the use of rubrics as crutches that do away with the necessity of noticing, pausing, pondering, and attending to whatever it is students are asked to encounter in a class.

In the past four years, my goals for teaching have remained steady; namely, “to compose an environment in which students become able to read closely, think critically, and imagine the worlds of others accurately and with empathy” and for students to “learn to practice the procedures of religious studies/church history with disciplined subjectivity and make more adequate, nuanced meaning of course material and the world.” I continue to be energized by the challenge of aligning my students, the material, and myself in ways that contribute to learning. Teaching is to me, no less now than four years ago, an ascetical practice, one that includes, as I wrote then, “taking on the discipline of being the fitting companion for students on their intellectual journeys, not demanding that they be the companions I want on my intellectual journey” (an idea I first saw in Robert Kegan’s *In Over Our Heads*).

My current attention to gaps expands and complicates my thinking about the design of intellectual experience. It accents a different convergence of the three themes that anchor my teaching — artful composition; alignment of students, material, and professor; and an asceticism that respectfully considers the other. My hunch is that the exploration of gaps as artful pedagogical resources, pivotal spaces for generating understanding, insight, and originality, offers a way into better design of intellectual experience and so more skillful teaching.

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