

Three Questions, Three Challenges, and a Bit of Advice

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Thank you Dean Schiffer, and thank you all for coming here today to celebrate the new academic year at SUNY New Paltz. It's really a great honor for me to speak with you today although I must admit I do find it a bit ironic that I was asked to give the first lecture of your college education. Anyone who knows anything about me as a teacher knows that I *never* lecture in class. Instead of lecturing, I pose problems and questions to students, I facilitate classroom discussions, and I create active learning activities that get at the complex themes we're considering. So when I was trying to figure out what to do today, I realized it's probably best to do some modified version of what I try to do in the classroom. Now I realize it wouldn't be feasible to have us sit in a giant circle or break us into small groups—although I was tempted to try—instead, I decided to raise three questions about learning that you can discuss with your friends and family and offer you three activities or challenges that you can work on when you leave.

I should point out that the three questions that I will raise today are actually questions that I often ask myself about teaching. I view teaching and learning as symbiotic, as two sides of the same coin. Any questions that we ask about teaching can be easily flipped around and asked about learning. So while I will be raising questions about learning, I would also encourage the faculty and staff in the room to think about how these questions might relate to your life as a teacher by replacing the word *learning*, when you hear it, with the word *teaching*.

The first question I pose to you is: What are you learning? You may have asked yourself a similar question at some point in your education but you probably asked it in a much more annoyed and frustrated way such as “what the *heck* are we learning this for?” That’s actually a great question to ask yourself because it gets to this key insight that much of what you were learning in school was not something that you chose to learn. Throughout much of your education you have been told what you must learn, how you must learn, and when you must learn (and rarely was it ever explained to you why you must learn it). In fact our educational system is so screwy that much of what you were learning was not really learning; it was just memorizing.

All too often, our educational system reflects what some people have compared to a system of banking. Every few weeks teachers would deposit answers into your heads and then on a quarterly basis you were asked to withdraw the answers and regurgitate them for a test. Once this withdrawal was made those answers were pretty much erased from your memory. Just think back to all of those Regents or state exams you sweated through in high school. I would bet that many of you would do horribly on those same exams today because you’ve forgotten most everything you were forced to memorize. I know I would certainly fail many if not most of the Regents exams I took when I was a student.

What’s especially significant about the question “what are you learning” is that as a college student you should largely determine what it is you are learning. In sociology, we refer to this as agency—as the capability to act and make decisions. In primary and secondary school you had very little educational agency because you were told what you must learn. In college, you have

the potential to have a great deal of educational agency. But it is not guaranteed. You need to make the effort to exert your educational agency. And this brings me to my first challenge for you. This challenge is actually an exercise that I do in one of my classes and you can do this when you go back to your rooms. All you have to do is take out a piece of paper and number ten lines. Then, at the top of the paper write the question: *What do I want to learn?* The challenge for you is to then fill in the ten lines with things that you want to learn.

Every time I do this exercise in class it is often difficult for some students to fill in all ten lines. To me, that's a pretty sad and frustrating commentary on how we've been educated—or really mis-educated. Because if you can think back to when you first entered school, and maybe your parents can remind you of this, you were so excited to learn anything and everything. You had this unlimited and insatiable intellectual curiosity. But after years of being told what you must learn, much of this curiosity has been extinguished. This exercise challenges you to rekindle your love of learning; to tap back into that childlike wonderment about the world around you; to get back to the basics of asking the question *why*. If you can return to this point, then when you are home for break and someone asks you, *what are you learning in college*, and I guarantee people will ask you this question, you will not only be able to answer them but you will be able to do so with the genuine excitement that you are choosing what you want to learn.

The second question I want to pose to you is: Who are you learning with – or to be grammatically correct I guess I should ask: With whom are you learning? Let me bring you back again to your high school days and think about all of the people who you were not learning with. If you were like most high school students, you had a very segregated existence. You had your

group of friends that you hung out with and that was pretty much it. This social segregation was depicted perfectly in the movie Mean Girls when Cady, played by Lindsey Lohan, is introduced to the “central nervous system” of the school: in other words, the seating arrangement of the cafeteria. In this scene, which is played out in schools all across the country, you have students segregating themselves by such things as race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, hobbies and interests, academic levels and vocational pursuits.

When I do the first exercise I discussed about “what do you want to learn?” it’s actually a two part exercise. The second part of the exercise is to answer the question: What can you teach us? I do this exercise the day after we do the first one and the way we do it is to have everyone take out a sheet of paper and write down one thing they can teach us and put their name next to it. We then keep exchanging papers around the room, writing another response with our names next to it. We continue like this until everyone has a piece of paper in front of them with at least twenty things that twenty different people in the class can teach them. And each person in the class has identified twenty different things that they can teach. Thinking back to the first challenge you may see where this is going: Many of the things that students said they wanted to learn on the first day of the exercise can be taught to them by people in the class. In other words, everyone you encounter is a potential teacher if you allow them the opportunity to teach you.

This brings me to my second challenge for you. As a way to get you to tap into this largely untapped potential, and to resist the urge to segregate yourself with people like you, I want to challenge each of you to meet someone new each day. But don’t just get their name; try to learn five or ten substantial things about them. Maybe it would even help to learn what they can teach

you. If you do this every day for all fifteen weeks of your four years at New Paltz that would amount to nearly 850 new friends. And I would hope that these would be real friends and not the Facebook type of friends that many of you have. Now think about this: if these 850 people—and again, were just talking about meeting one new person a day—if each of them could identify say 12 things that they could teach you, then that would amount to over 10,000 things that you could learn in your four years at New Paltz. 10,000! That would certainly give you quite the answer if/when someone asked you: What are you learning in college?

The third and final question I want to pose to you is: Why are you learning? Or maybe another way to say this is to ask: Why are you here? I don't mean here in this room right now, although I'm sure some of you are asking yourself that question. I mean why are you here in college? I actually gathered some research on this question when I was working on my Ph.D. What I found is that there are generally three main reasons that students give to explain why they are learning in college: (1) Because their parents told them they have to go to college; (2) Because their friends were going to college; and (3) Because they want to get a good job.

I'm assuming that these are the three main reasons why most of you would say you are here in college. These may have been okay reasons to get you *to* college but to be perfectly honest, they are pretty weak reasons to keep you here feeling excited, engaged, and involved with your learning. And as a side note, I would also add that these are not very good ways to choose a major—but that's for another lecture. The problem with these three reasons is that they are all based on external motivators: your parents, your friends, and a future career which you don't even have yet. There is nothing in these three reasons that get at why you want to be here nor do

they get at why you want to learn. Much like the first question I posed to you about what are you learning, this question of why are you learning may be a very difficult one for some of you to answer.

- Are you here because you want to gain a deeper understanding of our complex and interdependent world so that you can participate more fully in this world?
- Are you here because you want to be exposed to and challenged by different ideas, different types of people, different realities, and different experiences?
- Are you here because you want to learn how to put yourself in the shoes of others in order to become more empathetic and compassionate?
- Are you here because you want to learn how to identify problems at the individual, social, and global level and then learn how to be an agent of change to address these problems?

The thing is, all of this—and so much more—can be learned here at SUNY New Paltz. In fact, all of these things should be learned by each and every one of you. But it is unlikely you will learn many of these things if you cling to those external motives for being here. My final challenge to you is to identify at least three reasons for why you are here learning in college that do not reflect parental pressure, peer pressure, or career pressure. If you can think of three things, don't stop there. The more reasons you can identify, the more you will want to learn. And the more you want to learn, the more people you will seek out as your teachers. As I hope you can see, these three questions and three challenges are very much interrelated.

Now that I've posed some questions and given you some homework—and I guess this is your first official homework assignment in college—I feel as if I have some responsibility to offer you a bit of advice. After all, it seems like that's what people do in these sorts of lectures.

The bit of advice that I want to offer you comes from a quote that I put at the top of my syllabus for my Introduction to Sociology class. I put this quote at the top of my syllabus because it serves as the motto of the whole class. In fact, this quote really serves as the motto for *all* of my classes and I would say for the whole process of teaching and learning—maybe even for the whole journey of life. It comes from a classic book of Zen Buddhism called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. In this book Suzuki says,

“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.”

Just think about that for a second:

“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.”

My advice to you is to always have the beginner's mind.

I recognize this may actually be more of a fourth challenge than a bit of advice because many of us are much more used to having the expert's mind. We have that “been there, done that” attitude; we feel as if once we've learned something or experienced something, there is nothing more to be gained; or we think that just because we know someone's characteristics—maybe

their race, their gender, their sexuality, their social class or even their hobbies—we feel confident that we know what type of person they are and whether or not they are our kind of people. These are all examples of the expert's mind. At the very least, the expert's mind results in narrow-mindedness and close-mindedness, where you shut others out and strengthen arbitrary borders instead of building bridges. At the very worst, the expert's mind results in prejudice, discrimination, fanaticism, and oppression—things we see all over the world each day.

Although the beginner's mind may be something you have to constantly remind yourself to evoke, luckily you are in the perfect position to practice and embrace the beginner's mind. This school year is a new beginning for all of us. Each class you take (or teach), each interaction you have, each situation you experience, these are new beginnings for everyone in this room. My advice, is to approach all of these things with the beginner's mind—with an open mind, an unbiased mind, a welcoming mind and a curious mind. And not just for your first semester or first year, but throughout your entire New Paltz experience.

When you have the beginner's mind for the people you meet, the ideas you encounter, and the circumstances in which you find yourself, you will feel greater connection and concern for these people you meet, you will experience a greater openness and awareness for these ideas you encounter, and you will have much more excitement and enthusiasm for the circumstances in which you find yourself. If you can get to this point, where you always have the beginner's mind, then your possibilities will truly be endless.

Thank you and enjoy the journey.