

Teaching and Learning at Saint Mary's College

By

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I always knew I wanted to teach. I come from a family of teachers, with my grandfather who served as the principal of his village school in Guangzhou, China and both my parents who taught in Hong Kong. It is not unusual to still have distant relatives and family friends come up to me to reminisce about the time they were a student in my grandfather's class and my mother still gets letters from her former students, despite having migrated to the US over 30 years ago. At an early age, I got the sense that teaching was a valuable endeavor and it did not take long for me to realize that I also wanted to be a teacher. It was a path taken by many in my family and I was proud to follow in the tradition.

The day I received my doctorate in cultural anthropology, my grandfather was so proud, as if it was his own achievement, and coming from a culture that has a more collective orientation, in some ways it was. It would have been impossible for me to complete my PhD or even discover my love for anthropology without my grandfather being brave enough to leave his entire family and his Chinese medical practice to come to the US as a paper son. In many ways, so many of us are just a small link in a long line of decisions made by those before us.

It is important for me to reflect upon my own family's history and its impact on me as I contemplate how teaching at Saint Mary's College has shaped my vision as a teacher and also because it is difficult to understand one's current condition without appreciating and acknowledging your own past. The "whole person," as referred to in Lasallian pedagogy, comes with a history, a genealogy, and a specific cultural context. Without a doubt, my family has shaped my ideas of what it means to be teacher since I had grew up around so many teachers who were always willing to help me, but I have also been blessed with several important mentors, who were pivotal in my development as an academic as well as an individual. But certainly, in the past 10 years, the social and cultural space of Saint Mary's College has played an important role in the continuing evolution of my teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Saint Mary's and the Lasallian tradition it follows corresponds quite well with many important tenants of anthropology and with the blending of these two, it has allowed me to focus on important aspects of teaching in compelling ways. In this pedagogical reflection I will discuss how focusing on the "whole person," continued spiritual exploration, and community building beyond the classroom has become vital motivations behind my teaching and approach to pedagogy.

Educating the Whole Person and Mutual Respect

Perhaps De La Salle's most fundamental contribution to education is his conviction that at the root of true teaching must lie an authentic love for the students and for the vocation of teaching. He grasped that a truly effective teacher-student relationship must be based on practical affection and mutual respect" (The Brothers of the Christian Schools 2009:20).

My introduction to anthropology changed my life. Growing up in a bicultural environment, I oftentimes had to negotiate and translate various expectations of the dominate society and that of my immigrant family. When I took my first anthropology course, it was the first academic discipline that accurately described my own life experiences and gave me a way to understand and make sense of the two cultural worlds I existed in. It was a liberating and empowering experience. Perhaps, more importantly,

studying anthropology suggested an exciting path for broader engagement with the world around me. This personal experience of empowerment, through anthropology, has strongly shaped my research interests and approach to teaching. Ultimately, for me, being an anthropologist requires social engagement and sensitivity to cultural difference, priorities which are strongly shared by the goals of Saint Mary's College and its Lasallian tradition.

As I began teaching, I was always aware of how relating personal experiences made the learning process more powerful. Especially as an anthropologist, valuing personal experiences and giving a voice to the underrepresented is central to how we approach our research. These goals are intrinsically linked to Saint Mary's Lasallian tradition which seeks to create a community based on "mutual understanding and respect." Furthermore, it was uplifting to be part of an educational community which explicitly links its mission to "defend[ing] the goodness, dignity and freedom of each person; and fosters sensitivity to social and ethical concerns."⁷ Moreover the explicit attention to these ideals allows one to be more cognizant as one teaches each day.

Each classroom has its own culture. Instructors need to identify the different cultural patterns and values that inform this space. Once I saw how anthropological concepts and ideas worked as analytical tools for understanding the social and cultural worlds we live in, I applied these tools to the classroom. Being aware of different cultural backgrounds of students and the different perspectives they may have prior to entering the classroom helps you to be a better teacher. In my teaching, I seek to reveal cultural assumptions to students about everyday issues so that they can begin to see how different cultures can have diverse ways of understanding the same concept. Central to my teaching philosophy is the belief that education should be a constant dialogue between instructor and students. In other words, learning is a dynamic process where students bring their own experiences to bear on specific concepts and topics introduced by the instructor. When students take an active role in influencing and shaping their own education, the learning of concepts and skills has more significance and students are more actively engaged in the learning process. Creating – and maintaining – a dialogue with my students means a constant balance on my part between giving student enough responsibilities to direct their own learning and providing sufficient guidance and structure for students to work in. The process of teaching cultivates students' own awareness of themselves and others. In addition, I also learn about my own teaching practice. Part of the reason why I love teaching is because as my students learn to draw kinship charts or engage in difficult discussions about race and gender, I also discover new ways to introduce important concepts, present difficult material, and perhaps most importantly, ask questions about my own teaching.

In particular the holistic approach advocated by anthropology, which utilizes an integrated perspective to understanding the human experience is very similar to Lasallian pedagogical principles which focus on the "whole person" in the educational process. Through the examination of all aspects of culture such as the political, economic, and social allows one to understand the different factors that can make up any given "perspective" and in turn cultivates an authentic teacher-student relationship that is truly based on mutual understanding. Acknowledging and being aware of cultural difference is a form of respect for others and is a means to work towards creating a truly inclusive community. I feel that my teaching philosophy, which is strongly linked to an anthropological perspective, is enhanced by Saint Mary's College Lasallian tradition that emphasizes critical thinking, questioning of fundamental beliefs and the need to make students socially aware individuals conscious of their place in the larger global community.

⁷ SMC Faculty Handbook pg.1

Spiritual Exploration

The Brother's school became places where the young were able to develop intellectually, socially, and spiritually, where they were able to determine where and how to advance in their capacities... (The Brothers of the Christian Schools 2009:20).

Working at a faith based institution is a unique experience. While the spiritual life of the College is not prescriptive, it is an integral part of the language, programming, and structure of the institution. We also have several Christian Brothers who still teach in the curriculum and their presence on campus is important as it serves as a reminder of the core motivations of some of our community members. I found this spiritual aspect of the campus quite compelling because it allowed me to delve deeper into my own spiritual explorations and I have been grateful for the space that is created at Saint Mary's College which encourages the exploration of spirituality.

Individuals at Saint Mary's College are open to many different kinds of spiritual explorations since ultimately these various forms of inquiries center around larger issues about the meaning of life and human existence. As an undergraduate, one of the most spiritually transformative experiences I had at the College was a mediation class with Brother Camilus. I had dabbled with different forms of meditation and had been an amateur mediator for several years, but this was the first formal introduction to the practice. It was powerful to me that a part of my college curriculum acknowledged and validated different forms of spirituality and I would discover other meditative practices later in life.

As an active Vipassana practitioner today, I still find time to join Brother Camilus who still leads meditation sessions. It has been wonderful to find many areas on campus where one can develop ways to be "present" in a daily practice and working at an institution where the spiritual aspects of a person is discussed, attended to, and developed makes it easier for me to delve deeper into my own spiritual practice. The openness to inter-faith dialogue is refreshing and energizing as we are able to see the strength in our diversity as well as the commonality in our needs for faith.

In...[De la Salle's] writings for the Brothers, he pointed out again and again how such a relationship is enacted day by day. Some examples: " Examine before God how you are acting in your ministry and whether you are failing in any of your responsibilities. Come to know yourself just as you are" (The Brothers of the Christian Schools 2009:20).

In relation to my own meditative practice of mindfulness, the phrase "come to know yourself just as you are" resonates quite strongly. Vipassana meditation techniques focus specifically on self-observation and through this direct experience, the nature of how one learns or not as the case may be is understood. In terms of teaching, nothing could be more useful than cultivating a sense of how one learns. Students who are able to reflect upon their own learning process are then able to discover how they learn and how they can improve the educational process for themselves. Becoming aware of how you learn can be an empowering endeavor as you realize the active role you can play. Learning to "know yourself" is a process and I believe it takes place as part of a constant dialogue between the students and the instructor. In other words, learning is a dynamic process where students bring their own reflections to bear on specific concepts and topics introduced by the instructor. When students take an active role in influencing and shaping their own education, the learning of concepts and skills has more significance and students are more actively engaged in the learning process. Creating – and maintaining – a dialogue with my students means a constant balance on my part between giving student enough responsibilities to direct their own learning and providing sufficient guidance and structure for students to work in.

A daily practice of meditation, where one pauses to cultivate self-awareness, is easily integrated into teaching and learning. I often encourage students to stop and reflect upon what they have learned or what they are having difficulties with. This is not only a sound pedagogical approach since an instructor receives valuable feedback about teaching effectiveness, but perhaps importantly, it highlights the actual *process* of teaching. The point I am trying to make here is that it is not always about the *content* or *what* is being taught, but self-awareness is about seeing the *process* by which learning takes place. Self-awareness is central to a mindful approach, where each situation is met with “right where you are” in terms of your current limitations and skills, which can change daily. As noted in many Eastern spiritual texts, “change is the only constant” and this certainly applies to pedagogy. An instructor’s own skills are different each day as well as the context of where students are during a particular class. Acknowledging this is part of honoring where we are at any given moment. As we remind ourselves that we are “whole” individuals, this means realizing that during the teaching process not everyone is going to be paying attention, read every single word from the assigned article *and* looked up each unfamiliar word. Knowing that each student, instructor, and even each teaching moment can be filled with imperfections is how one acknowledges the whole person. This practice of “knowing where you are” is both about the process of teaching and self-reflection. Honoring where I am and where the students are at any given moment is a practice, which I have inherited from my many years of spiritual meditation and readily integrate my own pedagogy and Lasallian principles.

COMMUNITY BUILDING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The Brothers’ vocation is a vocation to educational ministry, not to sacramental ministry. It is a lay vocation that has more in common with the people in the pew than with the pastor in the parish. ...Their ministry lay in their encounter, as teachers, with students and parents. And the value of the teaching encounter is what Lasallian educators today still use as a touchstone. This lay character allows for, encourages, and empowers the sense of companionship, the down-to-earthness, that characterizes the relationships found within a Lasallian school. There is a care for one another like that of an extended family. There is a sense of solidarity among all Lasallians, who know from daily experience the many modalities of the lay vocations that have sprung from the spiritual inspiration of John Baptist de La Salle. (La Salle Magazine 2006:9)

The metaphor of an extended family above is compelling to me as someone who grew up in an extended family with three generations under one roof. I was fortunate to have grown up with my grandparents and parents felt blessed to have two generations of elders who played a central part of my everyday life. This sentiment resonates with me and Lasallian pedagogy. Not only is the whole person attended to in the educational process, but in cultivating an awareness of the process of learning, one realizes learning is a lifelong process that never really stops – for the student or the instructor. This becomes apparent when students start to notice that nearly all aspects of their lives can be areas of discovery and learning. Everyday experiences can be framed by and linked back to classroom ideas, topics, and concepts. In essence, upon discovering that learning can take place almost anywhere, we realize that we all share in a community of learning. The educational process is no longer limited to just the classroom and what can be “recognizable” features of learning within that space. The “whole person” does not exist merely in the classroom, but in many different social, cultural, and economic spheres. Being able to cultivate this type of awareness of the larger community we all belong to as life-learner reflects a type of Lasallian pedagogy that has a strong impact on transformative student learning.

The companionship that is developed between students, professors, Brothers, and other community members is undeniable at Saint Mary's. Upon accepting a tenure-track job at the College, I was struck by a number of my close friends from my undergraduate time who were almost more excited about the prospect than I was. "You're living the dream!" was one response I received when I excitedly informed him of my job offer. I believe this sentiment speaks to the quality of relationship built within the learning community at our institution and the fondness one has for the type of community that is fostered here. Given the tenants of Lasallian pedagogy, it makes perfect sense that a larger learning community is central to the experience.

Concluding Thoughts

"Teach by example. Put into practice what you want your students to believe."

- From John Baptist de La Salle's *Meditations*.

I teach with intentionality and how I approach my teaching reflects, in part, my commitment to Lasallian pedagogy to develop the "full student" and to attend to the many dimensions of the human person. My work as an anthropologist also enhances these values and compliments them. The dimensions of the intellectual, spiritual and community needs of an individual all work in conjunction to bring into focus the many cultural aspects such as race, class, gender, and sexuality that make up the human experience. A learning moment can lead to transformative change, a real life change when a student has a moment that never lets her see the world the same way again. These types of changes are intrinsically linked to the education process. They only happen when you are engaged in dialogue, not lectures or rote memorization of facts and take into account different perspectives. In my teaching, I focus on the material but also remind students that learning means more than a letter grade. Rather, there is as much value in enjoying a specific reading as there is in getting an A on a quiz; both experiences are integral to of the student's spiritual and intellectual journey. We seek more than mere facts and instead, as the College's mission statement suggests, we ask difficult but important questions, even if they are uncomfortable to deal with and we do so in community and with mindfulness. The more I teach and the more I see my students transform from hesitant but interested students into confident and engaged learners, the more confidence I have in my role as pedagogue. As a part of the Lasallian tradition, I see myself as part of the learning process and continue to critically reflect upon on my learning and teaching processes along side my students as we all participate in a learning community that seeks to nurture each of us holistically.

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