

“From Sole Learning to Soul Learning”

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APPENDIX B

Before all things, always keep in mind our mutual purpose:

...to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced
– Parker Palmer

I. General comments

For many of you this is your first time at moving from student to teacher. The most difficult part may be drawing boundaries. You want to show professionalism but not be so distanced that students cannot approach you. How to do this? I think we can figure this out as we go along, but here are some suggestions that can begin our conversation:

From Facilitator to Mentor: We all learned last year that what is more effective is to be a mentor for these beginning university students. When we first started last year, we thought of ourselves as facilitators. But this did not work for a variety of reasons. First, each group needs to name a “facilitator” of the day, one of their own who initiates the day’s assignment, etc. Roles became confusing. Secondly, we were thinking more in terms of neutrality with the facilitators. We thought that what would most motivate groups to “become their own teachers” was for us to stay out of the way. In fact, what we discovered was the opposite. Groups did better when the student leaders gave direction, intervened when necessary, but most of all, inspired group commitment, encouraged risk, and pointed out when groups were doing something really well or when they were backing off and shutting down. Model what you want your students to do.

A mentor has a more influential and formative role, and more is being asked of you in terms of preparation. You should be more prepared with the readings, already have marked and discussed with yourself and if necessary, me and each other, what is confusing or not, so that you can anticipate what the students in your group may have difficulty with or want to avoid. You must always be prepared, one step ahead of the others in the group, and engaged the work both intellectually and personally.

Dress: What you want to avoid: sloppy clothes, T-shirts that make a statement, military dress, religious symbols. Why? You want to present a neutral stance that is a part of the hospitality we are trying to create in the classroom. Symbols mean different things to different people. We want to respect our different pasts.

Confidentiality: I will stress this over and over again with all the class, but one of the things we want to make sure we all agree upon is that we do not talk about personal stuff shared in the group outside of the group. They may talk about stuff in general terms, but not in a way that identifies the person or in some way puts another individual at risk.

Keep reminding your group about this. You and I are also obliged to keep all that is shared within the small group confidential except when we discuss the groups in our own small group. I will let the students know this is the case.

Authority: The Kartman character on South Park is always screaming, “Respect my author-a-ti!” but if you

notice he does this when he is trying to control the others and they are not obeying. The approach we are taking is that respect comes when you “walk the talk.” So, I think the best way to establish your position as mentor is to come prepared and aware of the kind of atmosphere you want to establish.

Again, model what you want your students to do. This is the way you will get their trust and respect. We will practice this in our own small community, so all of us can better understand who we are to the students. Read on for the kinds of behaviors you want to model and encourage:

II. Rules for successful dialogue in small groups (these ideas come from a variety of traditions and sources for small group dialogue and group spiritual direction as well as my own experience):

1. Avoid at all times and be alert when others are doing this:

- Judging
- Blaming
- Fixing
- Analyzing
- Problem solving
- Intellectualizing

2. Encourage at all times and reward when this is happening:

a). Comments from one peer to another that shows they are owning responsibility for looking critically at their own stuff, for example when another student in the group is being “too helpful”:

Example: “I think you are trying to solve my problem for me. Thanks but no thanks.” This shows an autonomy and awareness in the student that we want to nourish.

b). Good questions that help others clarify what they are trying to say:

Example: “this is what I think you are saying, but I am a little confused or puzzled by this comment” (which the person then repeats)... Could you help me understand what you mean?”

c). Expression of feelings or statements of faith beliefs as long as they begin with, “I feel or I believe.”

d). Questions that help others interrogate themselves about why they have come to believe something. In the same regard, acknowledge when student are interrogating or recognizing the influence of their own past. You could model this right away.

Here is an example from a group experience. A student said: “I think I never questioned God until my friend died instantly in a car wreck. Then I began to wonder what I really thought God was about or if God existed at all.”

This is a good insight, an example of a comment that encourages students to examine how their own histories have brought them or prepared them for acceptance or rejection of certain religious beliefs. Now the student is open to truth. The “God idea” will never be the same.

e). Any personal sharing that help others understand how a different faith stance has been embraced.

f). Any comments that help others examine the consequences of their religious stance.

For example if a student says “I believe that unless you believe in Jesus as the Son of God you are going to hell,” another student chimes in: “This statement makes me uneasy.”

Often our students will not say if they are uncomfortable, having been taught that this is not polite. Model for them. If no one questions this exclusive religious viewpoint, you might say for example: “This makes me uncomfortable because (examples: I have a very good Jewish friend who is a great person. I do not think they are condemned by God” ... or, “I can understand your position, but I understand scripture in a different way and leave the judgment of God up to God.”

3. Rules for Consensual Inquiry, page 95 of Parker Palmer’s *To Know as We are Known*.

Some of this is summarized above, but you should refer often to these rules as well. Look at them now and then so you have them firmly fixed in your mind.

In addition, here are some other things PP reminds us to do:

Take the lead in expressing feelings, speaking openly, listening, allowing silence, recognizing group dynamics and gently encouraging full participation.

Let go control by allowing silence, not giving answers, allowing and encouraging questions, and in giving a multitude of competing possibilities.

Give direction by attending to full participation by all, bringing discussion back to the topic in focus when conversation has lapsed into retreat from the challenge of knowing, and by encouraging the group to stay focused and present, even if the atmosphere is uncomfortable.

Practice daily disciplines of solitude, silence, journaling, remembering your students by name, your peers by name, and interrogation of the self.

4. Group identity as a process

Be aware that groups have leaders and followers. One of your tasks is to keep the leaders from taking over and intimidating the others and encouraging the followers to be assertive.

You can help this process by using PP’s “three times” rule. (The same person cannot comment until two others have gone first, and cannot speak but three times during a session.) This problem is also helped by changing facilitators every class period.

Be aware that groups who begin with great enthusiasm may begin to back off when things become challenging. Watch for this. Help the group to take care of this themselves by always summarizing at the end of each session what you say happen in the group that day (or what did not happen). Encourage openness, willingness to risk, good solid questions and good questions of each other.

It is important to remember that if the group is becoming passive, trying to undermine you or the process, it is often because the group has “done it right” and the truth with its many-faceted insights is coming through. They are afraid of where this is going. Help the group notice and admit when this is happening and the comfort zone has been trespassed. Suggest to them that if they push through, it will get better.

Encourage the students to talk less to you and more to each other. Ultimately, you will have to let the group decide who they want you to be, but at the very least, you want to be a moderator that watches time, brings the

group back on track and rewards appropriate dialogue and a healthy group progress towards liberating the religious imagination.