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## **Abstract - The best lesson I ever taught**

This is a pedagogical reflection. It is suggested that good teaching may involve a preparedness to be flexible and to use unscripted opportunities. It is also suggested that a tendency to micro-manage teaching may be counter-productive to effective teaching and learning.

## **Article - The best lesson I ever taught**

The best lesson I ever taught was where I said nothing. It was a languid afternoon in a Catholic senior college in the Queensland regional city of Rockhampton, where at the time I was an English and History teacher. As a teacher, you remember some of the lessons you teach, and, about three decades on, this one stands out.

The senior college at which I was teaching at the time was based on the ideal of an informal and collegial approach to learning and teaching, appropriate to the situation that there were only senior secondary students at the college. There was an absence of bells – it was assumed that students would be on time. At the end of the day there was a tutorial period, which was designed to provide students with the opportunity to consult with individual teachers on specific subjects.

I suspect that the idea of the senior secondary college was the result of the ascendancy of progressive educational theory in the 1970s. There was an underlying assumption that if you gave students more autonomy, then you would create more independent learners. And creating more independent learners is arguably a key aim in education, as the student will then in effect teach him or herself.

On that particular afternoon, there was a storm threatening, as is often the case in tropical Queensland in the summer, but it was still very warm. It was the period immediately after lunch, and at the designated starting time students were wandering into the classroom. I was at the front desk, shuffling through my lesson plans, and I hardly noticed that, at the front row of desks, two students had started a discussion on whether there was any necessary conflict between religion and science.

The male student was arguing the case that evolution posed real challenges for religious belief, and the female student was arguing that there was no necessary conflict. Looking back, I suspect there was perhaps just a little frisson between the two – although I could be mistaken on this.

I was still shuffling through my papers, but I soon noticed that, as other students entered the room, they were gathering around the two discussants. She was seated at a desk, and he was leaning against an adjacent desk. And around them gathered the class, in a large semi-circle, most seated on desks, and listening to this emerging debate.

Instinct told me to let this run. I walked from my teacher's desk, a symbolic position of power and authority in any classroom, and moved to the side of the classroom. I leaned gently against the wall at the side of the classroom, and smiled benignly. The class was engrossed in this debate, although there was the occasional glance to me, as if to check on my reaction as to what was happening.

The gist of the argument from the science proponent was that evolution provided some serious challenges to religious belief, especially to the more literal interpretations that the world commenced a few hundred years prior to the modern era. The student was not proposing a particularly aggressive approach to religion, such as is the wont of more recent atheistic attacks on religion, but was I think raising a valid objection.

The response from the female student was less robust and articulate. But her equally valid point was that there were approaches to religion other than that suggested by a literal interpretation of creation narratives. There was thus no necessary contradiction.

And so the discussion continued for 40 minutes. The issues included the role of religion within education, the nature of scientific fact, the nature of religion and faith, and the role of education itself. I continued to stand at the edge of the classroom, silent, and ready to intervene and perhaps commence the formal lesson. Yet that never happened. At the end of the 40 minutes I thanked the two discussants, and reminded the students of an upcoming assignment.

Since that time, all those years ago, much has transpired. We've seen the invention of the internet, where every opinion seems to be as valid as every other opinion. I, like many others, have also grown weary of much of post-modern relativism, which seems to suggest that there is no reality, and no truth, only differing opinions. Within teaching I believe that there is a role for teacher-centred instruction, for the conveyance of information and facts to students.

For all that, this particular lesson remains precious for me, and I think my action was the correct one. It is an example of what educationists call "the teaching moment", that is, seeing spontaneous opportunities for teaching and learning which arise at the time, and seizing those opportunities. This was an example also of students seriously debating an issue, and an example of how students can also engage in intellectual work, without prodding and external mandates.

The fact that this did happen also points to a supportive environment, namely, the particular senior college I was working in at the time. It was not brilliance on my part. Students were encouraged to voice opinions freely, to respect each other, and staff were likewise valued and given a wide degree of independence of action. Give people freedom, and the results are often surprising.

I no longer work as a regular classroom teacher, but I do work as a support person for beginning teachers. What strikes me as I visit schools is the degree of micro-management which is impacting upon the teaching profession, that is, prescribing the detail of what teachers must do in the classroom. This is not to decry the value of teaching specific management techniques and skills to beginning teachers. Yet I am surprised at the extent to which what is required is now structured and mandated.

How do we encourage creativity in the classroom, and with this ultimately good teaching? That's a key question, and I think that a starting point is to encourage and support teachers making their own judgment calls. And, if needs be, in a lesson, to say absolutely nothing.

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