Re-Gaining the Student's Perspective in the Classroom: A Sabbatical Adventure

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After spending six years as a tenure-track faculty member and ultimately gaining tenure and promotion at my home institution of California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM), I was set to begin my first sabbatical in fall, 2002. As is no doubt true of many sabbaticals, one of the great successes of my semester-long break from teaching was a renewed interest in the classroom. "Renewal" is frequently identified as one of the primary purposes of a sabbatical; Good (1992, B3), after all, wrote that he became "surprisingly nostalgic for the company of students once the initial shock of being on leave ha[d] worn off." But my renewed excitement for teaching came largely from once again entering the classroom as a student. Given my own experiences in returning to student life, I enthusiastically encourage faculty colleagues to take occasional opportunities to step away from the instructor's podium and enjoy a class as a member of the student body: not only did I have the opportunity to expand my perspective on interesting subject matter, but re-experiencing life from the student point of view reminded me of why I began teaching in the first place and reinforced important aspects of good teaching practices.

My primary research goal for my sabbatical was to resume a long-neglected study of the Constitution's Ninth Amendment. As a political scientist, I wanted to take into account the perspective of the legal historian, and to become more familiar with methods of historical research more generally. Thus, much of my time away from campus would be put to good use in continuing education to broaden my methodological repertoire and to gain a fresh perspective on an existing research question by looking outside my own discipline. Ultimately, I finally admitted to myself that I simply thought it would be fun to relive a bit of the student experience, even if just for a little while.

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Fortunately, I lived close enough to a major research institution, the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), that I could commute to courses daily. Ultimately, I chose to sit in on an undergraduate lecture on early American constitutional history (unfortunately, no graduate seminars in my areas of interest were available during this quarter). And, since I was already on campus and the times perfectly suited my schedule, I decided to sit in on a course in formal logic as well in the hopes of ultimately offering a workshop for students on my campus interested in taking the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). The thought of returning to the students' side of the podium was intriguing, though obviously my return to student life would be incomplete. The professors I contacted agreed to let me simply sit in on their lectures and discussion sections, so I would be spared the hassles of registration and fees (not to mention the inconvenience of exams). And, this time around I needn't worry that every day I spent in class and on campus was contributing to my financial peril or wonder whether all of my work would eventually lead to a well-paying job and help jumpstart my career goals. I was certainly going to miss out on invitations to fraternity parties this time around.

On the other hand, some of the challenges and travails of student life came back in a sweeping wave of déjà vu. Would my preferred classes be offered at times I wanted? Would they be offered at all? What to do when the bookstore has run out of books, yet the professor forges ahead with reading assignments? How fast could I make it across campus to my first class when a parking spot was nearly impossible to find? And, not inconsequentially to one who is most definitely *not* a morning person, how could I force myself out of my nice warm bed in the first place when the lecture halls were filled with so many bodies that no one would ever notice my absence?

Again, my own outsider status made many of these challenges mere inconveniences rather than crises; more importantly, I found that my outsider status allowed me the additional opportunity to observe both the instruction taking place and the student perspective on that instruction. Not only was I able to engage with intriguing subject matter from new analytical perspectives, but I was also able to contemplate the instruction and the learning taking place in these other professors' classrooms. An unexpected benefit of the sabbatical would be an opportunity to evaluate my own teaching philosophy and practices by re-examining the classroom from the student perspective.

First, watching good instructors in action helped remind me of why I had wanted to teach in the first place. These professors' ability to challenge their students with exciting material brought home why I had wanted to spend my adult life in the classroom. In particular, as an instructor who typically teaches courses of around 40 students, I was mesmerized as one professor consistently engaged and held the attention of several hundred students at a time. (Admittedly, from the back of the room, I could see some students catching up on e-mail and playing games on their laptops. However, most of the student audience was engaged.) In watching others at work, I was able to consider which aspects of their pedagogical repertoires I might want to add to my own and, indeed, which parts of my own repertoire I consider the most valuable.

But just as important, even while I was conducting my own silent assessments of my instructors, I found myself hearing and listening to the students' perspectives on their instructors, which assignments "mattered" or "worked," and even of what constituted a reasonable student workload and level of course difficulty. While such considerations should not, of course, dictate the instructor's decisions in designing and running a course, they serve as powerful reminders not to forget the student's perceptions of the classroom. This was particularly helpful as I was also simultaneously revising several of my own courses to include such active-learning exercises as simulations and role-plays, and these student observations provided considerable "food for thought" in my planning.

Zahorski (1994) notes curricular and pedagogical development as two commonly specified goals of faculty sabbaticals (8), and he also encourages faculty to use this time to audit classes to sharpen their own teaching skills (118–119). While he quotes one faculty member who viewed the course he audited during sabbatical as a "teaching clinic" (118), he also notes how Lowenstein's sabbatical experience as a part-time social work trainee in Vienna reminded her of the "powerlessness, helplessness, fear of exposure, and fear of [displeasing] authority that students confront" (119, quoting Loewenstein, 8).[1] Franse's (1994, 167–168) sabbatical experience as a student

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occasionally included physical symptoms of stress when graded assignments were mentioned in class. While I was personally spared such direct discomforts, I could (anonymously) listen to students' concerns about their grades, their perceptions of grading practices, and their thoughts regarding how the professors interacted with students. Again, such considerations were helpful in contemplating my own return to teaching.

In addition, even the simplest of classroom practices can be easily forgotten when standing behind the podium every day. For example, in watching students in both classes frantically take notes to keep up with their professors' thoughts, I was reminded again of the importance of simply pacing class lectures and discussions so that students have time not only to take notes but also to consider and reflect on the material presented. Just as importantly, the lectures I observed reinforced my own interest in active-learning strategies. The lectures I observed were provocative, but I was reminded of the need to encourage interactive classroom discussions. In one of my classes, I constantly ached for some give-and-take with the professor and for a chance to hear how the students were processing the ideas being presented. In the other class, in a lecture hall of more than 300 students, the professor frequently stopped for questions, and the effect was significant. Students had opportunities not only to clarify specific points but to gain insights into different ways of approaching a particular question or problem, and they eagerly took advantage of this.

The issue of incorporating and maintaining active learning strategies in large classes is particularly salient to many of us who were once accustomed to teaching smaller classes. For example, in California budget cuts to our public colleges and universities are pushing our class sizes higher; how can discussion and give-and-take be maintained in these larger classes? In particular, I was reminded of the importance of building a classroom environment in which students can feel safe to participate; such an environment is more difficult to create with more bodies in the room.

Perhaps the most important lesson I took away from the semester was this: we as teachers can never allow students to lose sight of the *relevance* of the subject matter in our courses or to forget why they should be taking our courses in the first place. This is my greatest criticism of both professors I observed; while they were masters of their material and frequently brought it alive for their students, they also frequently overlooked the "so what" question. For example, in my logic course I was struck by the fact that, while the course was building key critical thinking skills, many students persevered without much of a sense of why they were taking the course in the first place.

This question may be particularly significant for those of us who teach lower-division courses in which many of our students register only under duress. For example, my introductory U.S. Government and Politics sections are typically filled almost entirely with students taking the class only because it meets a state-mandated graduation requirement. I allow my students to lose sight of why we are in the room together to my own peril, but more importantly, to theirs. A huge part of my task in such a course is to bring home to students *why* their own state government would make such a demand of them.

In addition, even as we work to make clear the importance of the subject matter, we need also to constantly reiterate how specific assignments and lessons tie to our broader objectives. It is too easy for us as instructors to merrily guide students through various lesson plans and assignments without necessarily making clear to them how these lessons fit into the bigger picture of our course. Franse concluded from his own sabbatical experience as a student that professors frequently need to clarify expectations and criteria for student work, in part to relieve student stress (167). But why are particular aspects of assignments crucial not only to their grades but to their overall success in the course, and indeed the rest of their lives outside the course? Providing students with such specific goals and objectives can help them to carefully put together assignments that provide them with the maximum benefit.

My observations during this semester were not limited to the classroom, and I benefited from observing glimmers of student life on campus. The contrast between my own institution and the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) was striking. For example, my own institution, California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM), remains largely a commuter campus populated by returning students. At UCSD, I was suddenly thrust back onto the campus of a top-tier research institution with a thriving traditional student body and student life, including student organizations ranging from fraternities and sororities to a vast array of political organizations. From this, I was reminded of the need for student opportunities, and I am again motivated to enhance my work as an advisor to student organizations.

In short, in addition to gaining new insights into what may have become too old and familiar a research project, I was able to reinvigorate enthusiasm for the classroom and my students. I returned to CSUSM with renewed energy and a host of new ideas and approaches from which my students should benefit significantly. The chance to return to the classroom was an experience I wouldn't trade, and I urge colleagues to take advantage of such an opportunity.[2]

Postscript: As this manuscript is being prepared for press, I am concluding my fourth semester back from sabbatical. Reading through these lines again, I'm struck by how easily the day-to-day pressures of lesson plans, grading, and committee meetings can squeeze out opportunities for reflective pedagogical practice, and I'm thankful that I recorded my reflections on this sabbatical experience to remind me of some powerful lessons I learned that I need not to forget!

Notes

1. Bracketed text corrects Zahorski's slight misquote of Lowenstein.

2. For an anthropologist's analysis of her field research after spending her sabbatical year living among college students as a full-time freshman and her assessment of the contemporary student experience in the U.S., see Nathan 2005 (this book was not yet available as this essay was being prepared for press).

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