In the Shadow of Ms. Gradgrind

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With her head handing down, Courtney shuffled into my office and gingerly pulled the research paper from her backpack. "You wanted to see me about this?" she asked. There were some passages in the paper that were clearly not written in Courtney's voice. In other words, Courtney was probably guilty of the "p" word, and I called her into my office to talk over the situation.

I made eye contact with Courtney, smiled, and said, "Hey, this is a problem, but it's something we can work out." She breathed a little easier, reassured by my calmness. "Let's find the places in the paper that are clearly lifted from another source, and then you can take the paper back and revise the passages that haven't been cited properly." Courtney and I spent a few minutes going through the paper, identifying passages that were not written in her voice and talking about ways to correct the plagiarism. We even had some fun with it. "Courtney," I kidded her, "do you know what 'insidious' means? Because you use it in this sentence and it doesn't really sound like you." "Oh, well, no, not really," she stammered. "I'll fix that." Afterwards, Courtney and I had a serious discussion about some of the problems involved with making plagiarism a habit—in addition to getting you a zero for the paper or the course, it can set an unhealthy precedent of prevarications and lies that could have negative affects on your personal and professional life. Moreover, it's just plain wrong.

This was not the first time I'd had a conversation about the "p" word with a student. During my first year as a full-time professor, I caught a student who lifted from another source large chunks of her paper on "The Ambiguity of the Letter A in The Scarlet Letter." Suspicious of the paper's language and sources, I trudged up to the library and found the exact book and references the student had used. "Ah Ha," I cried, stamping my feet with satisfaction like Chillingworth's gleeful reaction when he discovers the identity of his wife's lover, the town's preacher, Dimmesdale. I photocopied the plagiarized pages from the book, stapled them to the student's paper, called her in for a conference and, no questions asked, handed her a zero for the assignment. Thinking back on that assignment, I wonder why more students didn't plagiarize. Still, those were the punitive measures of a young, insecure professor who was probably pretty unsure about his role and his, ahem, authority.

Over the course of twelve years teaching in higher education, I've called between 20 and 25 students into my office to "discuss" their liberal use of quotations. My strategies for handling these situations have gone from draconian to collaborative, and reflecting on these changes, I realize the importance of learning to teach with my heart as well as my head. These two different ways of dealing with academic violations and conflict tell me about the transformation my teaching life has gone through. Thinking back on these shifts, I began to wonder less about how professors should deal with conflicts and problems like plagiarism, and more about how we can learn to care about the success of our students by modeling compassion and understanding.

Taking the moral high ground in these situations is reductive and short sighted, especially in the face of recent plagiarism allegations against three of America's most respected historians, Stephen Oates, Stephen Ambrose, and most recently, Doris Kearns

Goodwin. If these acclaimed professionals are guilty of sloppy citations, what could I possibly expect from my eighteen-year-old students? More importantly, what kind of effect would my anger and disgust have on Courtney? Would it draw her in, help her to realize her mistake, and give her incentive to learn from the transgression? Or would it push her away, shameful, resentful, and hardened to the process of learning?

For me, the answers to these questions comes through the integration of my teaching and personal life. As a young professor, I did not understand how to connect my teaching life with my identity. At the same time I was tracking down students for plagiarizing I was also being a courteous colleague, a dutiful son and a thoughtful friend. It took me twelve years to understand that it's okay to bring to the classroom and the office the compassion I feel for my family and friends. The shadow of Ms. Gradgrind hovered around my teaching life for a long time, and I felt a pressure to discipline my students, to exact punishments on them when they deviated from accepted norms of academic behavior and to guard the gates of academic integrity with an iron fist.

In The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer reflects on his teacher training and notes that, 'Like most professionals, I was taught to occupy space, not open it: after all, we are the ones who know, so we have an obligation to tell others all about it' (132). Implicitly, I was taught that my responsibility in the classroom was, in Palmer's words, 'to occupy space,' or to perform my intelligence by demonstrating mastery of the material, an ability to prepare an organized class period, and a skillful articulation of complex ideas.

Perhaps it's time for the teaching profession to train teachers who can practice compassion in the classroom as well as master a discipline. A friend of mine who is in the final stages of medical school often refers to discussions in their medical ethics classes about bedside manners and the question of compassion: is it something that can be learned and taught, or is compassion and understanding a trait that we are born (or not born) with?

My medical student friend gets frustrated with me because I will not even entertain the question. My answer to this problem is simple: Of course compassion can be taught. None of us emerges into this world with a capacity for compassion. If we are lucky, our parents model these emotional capacities for us. If our parents can't do that for us, then we may find models of compassion in our grandparents, neighbors, friends or mentors. It took me a long time to realize that as a teacher, it is incumbent on me to model compassion and understanding to my students. There is a pretty good chance that they may not be getting this kind of teaching and learning in their other relationships. Learning to understand, to break down my own egos and, yes, to love my students was a critical aspect to developing an I/Thou relationship with the university community.

Most of us in any profession can master or at least fake our way through a body of knowledge. What's more difficult, though, is finding ways to make that esoteric information palatable and useful to others, our students, who are, mostly at the bottom of a learning curve. As higher education professionals, we clearly have a jump on them, and bridging that gap is one of the most difficult and challenging parts of the job. I've learned that I have to spend a lot more time and effort coming to meet them across that bridge of intellectual and disciplinary understanding. Sometimes, I have to walk over to the other side, pick them up and carry them across the divide. Reflecting back on my career, during those early, insecure stages, I found myself shouting across the divide,

beckoning them into the wonderful world of English Studies and critical thinking that, I boldly promised, would give them a set of intellectual tools to succeed in life and careers.

But what about the emotional tools? What kind of responsibility, if any, do professors have in helping their students develop a set of emotional skills to collaborate with others, listen with an open heart and an open mind, remain neutral in controversial discussions, respect other people's opinions and stay intellectually and emotionally flexible. Lots of universities pay lip service in their mission statements to helping students develop holistically, which I take to mean acknowledging the intellectual, emotional and spiritual makeup of individuals. Nevertheless, we continue to separate these concerns in the arbitrary institutional divide between Student Services and Academic Affairs. The rationale goes that academics feed the head and the student affairs side massages the cerebral cortex and fills it with self-esteem. What's wrong, though, with closing the gap between Academic and Student Affairs and each side of the divide taking responsibility to both massage and feed the heads of our students?

I grew up in a Protestant family, and when I was ten years old, my mother took me aside and told me that I was going to be a minister one day. I trembled. I did not want to be a minister! I was a tremendously shy child, and the thought of speaking in front of hundreds of people every Sunday morning and evening shook me with fear. In the Protestant tradition I come from, there is a belief that we don't really have that much control over the direction of our lives. We are 'called' to perform some kind of service, and in the mythology, you accept the calling and live a fulfilling life, or you resist it and meet one disaster after another. Think about the story of Jonah and the whale. So when my mother told me this, something inside of me clicked, 'This is your destiny, whether you like it or not.' Well, from that day onward, I spent the rest of my life trying to run away from the Protestant tradition. Reflecting on my teaching life, I realize that, in some ways, my mother's words were prophecy. As I acquire more experience in the classroom, and as I gradually find ways to connect my teaching life to my inner life, I increasingly approach my vocation in higher education as a kind of ministry. Serving students and giving them opportunities to succeed academically, spiritually and emotionally—these are the kinds of things that interest me now.