

The Cooperative Wave

I had a stuttering problem from pre-adolescence into my late twenties. And so, when I look back from the perspective of three decades in teaching, I have to wonder what possessed me in those early days. What were the organic impulses, the origins of hubris and self-sabotage embedded in that decision to accept my first teaching job as a Latin teacher? Though my commitment in the early 1980s to deflecting the conversation back to my students was a survival strategy and not a deliberate pedagogy, I was also recreating, to some degree, the undergrad classes I liked best: small seminars where, despite the vulnerability of having no place to hide, I felt necessary, part of a team. Perhaps the subtle pressure to articulate something insightful—on my own terms—among a small group with a common cause sanded the edges of my fear and anxiety. If I were going to teach, this would be the least threatening environment. At the core, however, was this certainty: if the students were speaking to each other, then I wouldn't have to.

The summer before I launched my career at that small independent day school north of Boston, I had woven together strings of jobs the year after graduating from college: construction, house painting, landscaping, working at a bookstore, a liquor store. Anything to stave off the inevitable corporate vacuum by which I'd seen my peers swallowed and which I'd been dreading for years. I even considered joining the Navy, going so far as taking the OCS exam (and how is that *not* corporate?). But that summer, having fraudulently secured (I was an English major who'd taken a few Latin classes) a teaching job for the following year, I decided to squander my savings for a three-month improvisational ramble around Europe. I remember the moment when the sheer folly of this adventure (teaching not traveling) reared up, palpable and voltaic. About halfway through the journey, I found myself sweating and almost broke in Rome, studying some ancient graffiti on a massive stone block at the Coliseum; I couldn't translate the phrase to save my life. And yet, in about one month I'd be expected to lead (see *lecture*) beginning and intermediate sections through the rudiments of vocabulary and syntax, while introducing them to the nuances of translation. Until that moment, I had effectively transcended the inevitable by fording the snowmelt streams in Norwegian mountains or following some island's burrow path in search of the next best Aegean swimming hole. After Italy, however, I couldn't think of anything but teaching. And, that I had made a terrible decision.

What followed is pretty predictable: whether the topic was fourth declension nouns or indirect statements, I was up until 2AM on a regular basis scrambling to stay a page ahead of my charges. But, because I was the dispenser, the font, there was also the awful daily anticipation of when my mouth would freeze or catch at the threshold of some poisonous consonant (like "w") in mid-explanation of, say, the vocative case. As a student, I had weaseled my way without drawing *too* much attention to myself, relying on written work to prove myself, so this new responsibility (what I now refer to as *The Dog and Pony Show*) amped up the potential for long, humiliating riffs. No wonder I was more

comfortable when I circled the desks or arranged tables around a democratic plane; there was neither a bunker, nor a dais for the tribunal.

The Latin word *rostrum* means “beak” or “prow”, but some English speakers might not be aware of either the ornithological or nautical context. If we recognize it at all, it’s that raised platform from which an orator addresses the audience. I remember being captivated by the etymology of this word for many reasons, especially that *rostra*, the bows of captured galleys, adorned as trophies a particular space in the Roman Forum. But when the word emerged in my students’ vocabulary lists, I looked to it as a guide-star in the shaping of classroom: the *anti-rostrum*. The less frequently I found myself spouting from the prow, smearing my sleeves with chalkdust or having my back to the board as if I were the target of a firing squad, the more comfortable I was. And the chances of being tripped by either my limited, desperate grasp of the language or the hurdle of utterance itself were diminished. In the eleven years before coming to Exeter I was unconsciously preparing the ground to be more self-effacing, a part of the conversation rather than its monolithic source. But even more profound in my first ten years at Exeter was the emerging revelation that it didn’t have to be about *me*. There’s a certain threat in unpredictability when the instructor depends on complete control; conversely, there’s a liberating and exciting current generated by the unforeseeable in a conversation *facilitated* by a teacher who’s seated among students. Once I grasped that control was more germane to curricular choices (texts, writing assignments, exercises, etc.) and not in how I doled out *knowledge*, I started to forget about myself; rather, I began to understand my role *in the moment*, and that teaching and “knowledge” could be the provision of tools and skills students need to be collaborative scholars.

Though I’ve always admired the scripted elegance of classical music and how the nuances of tone, style or approach can distinguish great musicians from each other, my love and respect for the virtuoso improvisers in jazz— John Coltrane, say, or Bill Evans—trumps my admiration for their classical counterparts. As a mediocre and perpetually aspiring musician, I’ve found the greatest—and most rewarding—challenge in variability, in adapting my voice to a conversation that is flexible, open. True, there must be enormous talent and subtle communication among musicians in a chamber orchestra playing Mozart. But the demand on performers in a jazz ensemble, to me, is a more fitting analogy for the fruitful energy that fuels the best discussions and enables, liberates the quirks and strengths of its participants.

Though the following quote from John Dewey is an apt description of a symphonic phenomenon, it also seems to evoke the nucleus of improvisational excitement:

"The experience, like that of watching a storm reach its height and slowly subside, is one of continuous movement of subject matters. Like the ocean in the storm, there are a series of waves; suggestions reaching out and being broken in a clash, or being carried onwards by a cooperative wave" (from Art as Experience).

I’m a sucker for any analogy or imagery that draws its comparative energy from the sea—especially when it simultaneously evokes the colloquy of jazz—but the parallels between Dewey’s simile for the experience of thought and the dynamics of the Harkness table are inescapable and resonant. No

discussion is ideal, and that's why I like aligning Dewey's image of "suggestions reaching out and being broken" with an allied group at the table. However, it's that "cooperative wave" that intrigues me the most—what any class should strive for, or rely on, even in the darkest moments of chaos or tension (which are, paradoxically, essential too). Struggling is not the same as floundering. The table in full action is a sort of emblem of the individual thinking mind; it is a forum of spontaneity, an organism that must tolerate, distill, and perhaps utilize not only its collaborative impulses, but its contentions as well. At the age of twenty-three, I didn't fully appreciate that improvisation was a safe mode for me, actually my intrinsic and generative locus. I had always mistaken my discomfort as a planner to be a weakness.

But there's seat-of-pants...and *seat-of-pants*. I can't say precisely when the refuge of the stutterer evolved into a pedagogical space that had reconciled itself to building something out of the unexpected. Once the industrial/utilitarian model (desks in rows, etc.) in which I had been steeped as a student was diluted by time, I realized that the success of any class wasn't necessarily dependent on a teacher's passion, enthusiasm and mastery. These could be secondary when it came to facilitating a discussion. It was a two-way street.

To remind myself of my role, my *usefulness*, I regard each class, each discussion, as a potential "paper" that is being written, orally. And we've all read papers. So, I began to envision myself as the *editor* of that discussion, an overseeing mind that has a stake in the process at hand but which doesn't claim ownership. As I'm there in the moment to help individual students articulate and advance their ideas in a series of paragraphs in a critical essay, I'm there to help the students at the table make the most of the topic that seems to be the source of gravity around which their conversation orbits. I insert my comments as I would in the margins of an essay, not necessarily imposing my own agenda, but steering the *authors* in the direction that will be most promising or relevant, that will do justice to *their* impulses, which started the discussion in the first place. If the teaching of writing is helping students to become their own editors, then Harkness teaching is simply helping them to *teach* themselves, to become their own teachers.

Keeping a focused and scholarly literary discussion from turning into a fragmented and tangential chat about a book is exhausting but exhilarating work. In my role as an auxiliary force that propels and tweaks Dewey's "cooperative wave", I am absolutely certain that I have found my place. When I feel apprehensive about the unpredictability and mystery of turning each class over to them, I take heart in being liberated from The Rostrum, energized by the thought that two groups' discussion of the same text can be different. I put my faith in what Binx Bolling, the narrator of Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*, describes as "the search"—a state of being that guarantees freshness, discovery, and the gift of learning something from my own students:

"... The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. ... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."

So, how is "the search" reflected in the silent absorption of knowledge in lecture halls or the high-octane Socratic interrogation of that clearinghouse perched like a raptor on the corner of his desk?

Though I'm sure the table didn't cure the breathing disorder that aggravated my speech impediment, it gave me a way—as I matured as an educator—of gaining confidence. I took greater joy in those moments when my students were “onto something” together, and that my unscripted, timely choices, interventions and suggestions seemed to be of use to them. If I had known this in Italy so many years ago, I might have diminished that self-conscious despair at the thought of becoming a teacher as I stared into the indecipherable scrap of language delved into limestone. I might have realized that it was *their* fingers that should be struggling to probe the grooves of those chiseled words, and that it was my job *not* to possess all the right answers and meanings, but to hold my students accountable, to cheer them on.

These days, it's a relief to have their patience reciprocated. Once, I appreciated their generosity as I stammered my way through an over-prepared lesson. Now, however, I imagine they value my presence among them, my self-restraint during their struggles, my trust in their searches.

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