

As the debate swings between the teacher-centered model, with its concern for rigor, and the student-centered model, with its concern for active learning, some of us are torn between the poles. We find insights and excesses in both approaches, and neither seems adequate to the task. The problem, of course, is that we are caught in yet another either-or. Whiplashed, with no way to hold the tension, we fail to find a synthesis that might embrace the best of both.

Perhaps there are clues to a synthesis in the image of the community of truth, where the subject “sits in the middle and knows.” Perhaps the classroom should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered but subject-centered. Modeled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher- and student-centered education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student, but subject at the center of our attention.

If we want a community of truth in the classroom, a community that can keep us honest, we must put a *third thing*, a great thing, at the center of the pedagogical circle. When

student and teacher are the only active agents, community easily slips into narcissism, where either the teacher reigns supreme or students can do no wrong. A learning community that embodies both rigor and involvement will elude us until we establish a plumb line that measures teacher and students alike—as great things can do.

True community in any context requires a transcendent third thing that holds both me and thee accountable to something beyond ourselves, a fact well known outside of education. In religious life, when a community attaches ultimacy to its ordained leadership or to the mass mind of its members, it will fall into idolatry until it turns to a transcendent center that can judge both parishioners and priests. In political life, when a nation lacks a transcendent center that can call fear-mongering leaders and fear-filled followers to purposes larger than their fears, its civic life will degenerate, sometimes into fascist evil.

The subject-centered classroom is characterized by the fact that the third thing has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do. In such a classroom, there are no inert

facts. The great thing is so alive that teacher can turn to student or student to teacher, and either can make a claim on the other in the name of that great thing. Here, teacher and students have a power beyond themselves to contend with—the power of a subject that transcends our self-absorption and refuses to be reduced to our claims about it.

I can illustrate this essential idea with a humble, even humiliating, example. I am thinking of an awkward moment that I—and perhaps you—have known, the moment when I make an assertion about the subject, and a student catches me contradicting something I said earlier or something from the text or something the student knows independently of the text or me.

In a teacher-centered classroom, getting caught in a contradiction feels like a failure. Embarrassed, I may resort to footwork fancy enough to impress Muhammad Ali: “Well, it may sound like a contradiction to you, but if you look at the primary sources on that question—which you probably haven’t, since they are still in the original Finnish—you will find that . . .”

But in a subject-centered classroom, gathered around a

great thing, getting caught in a contradiction can signify success: now I know that the great thing has such a vivid presence among us that any student who pays attention to it can check and correct me. In this moment, the great thing is no longer confined to what I say about it: students have direct, unmediated access to the subject, and they can use their knowledge to challenge my claims. It is a moment not for embarrassment but for celebrating good teaching, teaching that gives the subject—and the students—lives of their own.

In a subject-centered classroom, the teacher's central task is to give the great thing an independent voice—a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand. When the great thing speaks for itself, teachers and students are more likely to come into a genuine learning community, a community that does not collapse into the egos of students or teacher but knows itself accountable to the subject at its core.

Lest the subject-centered classroom sound a bit exotic, consider the kindergarten. Watch a good teacher sitting on the floor with a group of five-year-olds, reading a story about an elephant. Viewed through the eyes of those children, it is almost

possible to see that elephant in the middle of the circle! And with that great thing as the vehicle, other great things also come into the room—things like language and the miracle of symbols that carry meaning.

Or consider the service-learning programs that are flourishing on more and more campuses these days, programs that place students in community activities related to the field they are studying. In a large political science class at a state university, three-fourths of the students were assigned a normal syllabus while the remainder were assigned all of that plus a field placement. One might think that the latter students would suffer academically; after all, they had to spend extra time and energy on field assignments and might even have resented that fact. But those students did *better* academically and became more personally and substantively engaged with the course because the great things they met by being involved with the community made their bookwork more real.²

Or consider the way students are now learning by means of digital technology—a remarkable way to hold great things at the center of our attention, if my own experience is any measure. I have long been spellbound by the solar system and

its workings, but neither the astronomy classes I took in college nor the books I later read satisfied my hunger to understand. But recently, sitting at my computer, using an astronomy “lab” on CD-ROM, I have started to digest the fundamentals of that discipline in a deeply fulfilling way.

One reason for my accelerated learning is the computer’s power to create virtual reality. With it, I can make and manipulate models of the planets, their moons, their relationships, and the play of gravity that allow me to place this immensity at the center of my attention, then walk around it and into it as if it were my home (which, in a way I now understand more vividly, it is!). At the same time, I have immediate access to photographs and technical information to refine my understanding, as well as charts that tell me where to look in the night sky. Using similar technology, students in many classrooms are now able to relate more personally to great things in disciplines ranging from architecture to zoology.

It is ironic that objectivism, which *seems* to put the object of knowledge above all else, fosters in practice a teacher-centered classroom. Objectivism is so obsessed with protecting the purity of knowledge that students are forbidden

direct access to the object of study, lest their subjectivity defile it. Whatever they know about it must be mediated through the teacher, who stands in for the object, serves as its mouthpiece, and is the sole focus of the student's attention.

At its extreme, this purist approach is represented by the math professor who resisted the movement to reform pedagogy in his discipline with the following claim: "Our primary responsibility as mathematicians is not to students but to mathematics: to preserve, create, and enhance good mathematics and to protect the subject for future generations." Good students, he claimed, the ones destined to become mathematicians, "will survive any educational system, and those are the ones with whom our future lies."³

The idea of a student-centered classroom arose from such abuses of the teacher-centered model, but it has encouraged abuses of its own. In a student-centered setting, there is sometimes a tendency toward mindless relativism: "One truth for you, another truth for me, and never mind the difference." When students are put at the center of the circle, teachers may yield too much of their leadership; it is difficult to confront ignorance and bias in individuals or the group when

students themselves comprise the plumb line.

Having seen the possibility of a subject-centered classroom, I now listen anew to students' stories about their great teachers in which "a passion for the subject" is a trait so often named (a passion that need not be noisy but can be quietly intense). I always thought that passion made a teacher great because it brought contagious energy into the classroom, but now I realize its deeper function. Passion for the subject propels that subject, not the teacher, into the center of the learning circle—and when a great thing is in their midst, students have direct access to the energy of learning and of life.

A subject-centered classroom is not one in which students are ignored. Such a classroom honors one of the most vital needs our students have: to be introduced to a world larger than their own experiences and egos, a world that expands their personal boundaries and enlarges their sense of community. This is why students often describe great teachers as people who "bring to life" things that the students had never heard of, offering them an encounter with otherness that brings the students to life as well.

A subject-centered classroom also honors one of our most

vital needs as teachers: to invigorate those connections between our subjects, our students, and our souls that help make us whole again and again. By putting the “Secret” that Frost wrote about at the center of the circle, we re-member the passion that brought us into this work in the first place—a re-membering that cannot happen when we and our students sit in that circle alone.

TEACHING FROM THE MICROCOSM

When I remind myself that to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced—that I need to spend less time filling the space with data and my own thoughts and more time opening a space where students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other—I often hear an inner voice of dissent: “But my field is full of factual information that students must possess before they can continue in the field.”

This voice urges me to do what I was trained to do: fully occupy the space with my knowledge, even if doing so squeezes my students out. As I listen to this voice, the model of a