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Of Hobbits and Wizards: Righteous Anger in the Classroom

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Of Hobbits and Wizards: Righteous Anger in the Classroom

I went all Gandalf on my ENGL 200 class last week. This section is entitled “The Lord of the Rings,” so it’s appropriate to have a Gandalf appearance, but by “going all Gandalf,” I mean that I showed them my anger. Those who know the book will remember that Gandalf was “quick to anger,” but that he also had a caring, softer side. I am a bit like Gandalf in both ways, as well as with my bushy eyebrows and my occasional puffing on a pipe.

The first day of class, I divided them into groups: Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, Men, Wizards, and Orcs. The groups will be responsible long-term for some reports. Nearly every day, they break into their groups to answer a question, to solve a problem, to discuss, to write. As chance would have it, the hobbits look and act like hobbits; the elves have a bit of an elvish quality in looks and demeanor; and fortunately, the orcs are quite pleasant in both departments. As anyone who uses groups in the classroom knows, groups always develop their own personality, but the naming of these groups seems to solidify and hasten that development.

From the first day, the Wizards were trouble. They would line up in a row rather than form a circle. One student sat far away from the others and looked off in the distance. There would be long stretches where they just sat there, none of them talking. I monitored them from a distance, and I intervened, as I knew I must. I first tried sarcastic humor: “Ah, you are Wizards! You are able to do this telepathically!” That got them working, for a time. And then, last Thursday happened.

As usual, all the other groups were doing their work. As usual, the Wizards were not even sitting as a group, with three of them lined up at a table, the lone guy off to himself, head buried in the book, and nobody talking. But what set me off was the student who was sitting at a desk in front of the other three, with her back turned to them. I could feel my anger rising. I did not suppress it. I knew that I could use it.

As the other groups were working, I approached them and said, not all that loudly, but quite insistently, “Get in a group!” They just sat there, staring at me blankly. I repeated, a bit louder, “Get in a group!” They did not move. I felt my anger go past the boiling point, but I also knew that I could let myself totally lose it. I felt controlled, focused anger as I said, my voice actually a bit lower, “Turn your chair around. Get in a group!” I knew that the other groups had watched all this, that their work was interrupted too. That was unfortunate, but perhaps not totally—if the Wizards were the most dysfunctional of the groups, all of them had their moments, and this was probably an instructive scene for them to witness. And then at last, the Wizards snapped to and formed a group. And they got to work.

I have had times in my long teaching career that I lost my temper to the point where I was over the line and my actions were counter-productive and hindered learning. I know what I am capable of, so I
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try to watch myself carefully. But I also learned long ago that a bit of carefully-controlled anger, sometimes even manufactured and theatrical anger, can yield a positive result. I am sure this will not work for everyone, but every now and then, I find anger to be an effective teaching tool.

I walked over a few minutes later and apologized to the group for losing my temper with them, and I thanked them for getting to their work. Yesterday, I sent the class an explanation, an explanation that hinged on the centrality of group work for this class. I could lecture to you every class, all class, I told them. I could study The Lord of the Rings a great deal, and I have a wealth of knowledge about it, which I could impart to you by lecturing if I chose. But the point of our class is not for me to give you knowledge, I continued; the point is that each of you learns to read and analyze literature better and more fully. That is why, I said, what you do in your groups is so important. That is why I care so much about what happens within those groups. Why did Tolkien take Gandalf away from the hobbits at two critical junctures in the first book? How much would the hobbits have learned and grown if Gandalf had been there as they left the Shire and journeyed to Rivendell? How could Frodo have set off on his quest if he had a wizard to guide him? I have a pretty good feeling that my controlled and somewhat theatrical anger, combined with my explanation of pedagogical principles, will make class time more effective, learning deeper. At least for a time.

I am not advocating boundless anger or intimidation in the classroom. But I do think that, occasionally, a bit of righteous anger, properly controlled and focused, can be an effective teaching method and learning tool.

Academic Responsibility ---- FERPA

Last spring, we adopted new guidelines that grew out of the Faculty Roles and Rewards Taskforce, a document entitled “Faculty Roles”; I would like to take this space for a few weeks to start a discussion about some aspects of one part of that document, academic responsibility. I wrote previously about final exams, office hours, and faculty governance. This week: understanding of and compliance with FERPA.

The Faculty Roles document cites one academic responsibility as guarding “the privacy and confidentiality of student information.” That would fall under the category of FERPA—but there is much more to the law than that. Last week I attended one of the TLC sessions that our registrar, Gina Jones, conducted, and it was certainly informative and eye-opening.

The first thing I learned is what the acronym stands for: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. It is actually an outgrowth of the Buckley Amendment, which was passed in 1974. Any of us who deal with student records and
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information have a duty to understand and follow FERPA guidelines. Among many possible infractions, we should never put graded work out in a public place for students to retrieve. Eye-opening to me was learning the penalty for non-compliance: the university could lose its ability to administer student aid. As Gina said, that would effectively shut us down.

Gina Jones has one more session scheduled, on Wednesday, September 19 (tomorrow as I write this; link for registration below). We will post her PowerPoint when she finishes her sessions. FERPA is an issue we must all pay attention to, an important part of our academic responsibility.

XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/ or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu. The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Thought for The Week

“When angry, count four; when very angry, swear.”
--Mark Twain