

## What Matters?

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I like to assign the same final exam question for all of my courses, regardless of topic: “What did you learn in this class that really matters?”

When I mentioned this to a colleague who teaches pre-law the other day, she tried her best not to scoff. I like this colleague, and she likes me, but the unspoken was pretty clear in her expression: “Maybe that works for *your* field, but in *my* field we have real stuff that they need to know. I don’t have time for fluffy questions like that.”

In my own defense—and, I’ll admit, a little defensively—I’m known as a hardass in the classroom. Years ago, at the English Department banquet of my former institution, students gave out awards to every faculty member: “Most likely to quote Shakespeare in a casual conversation.” “Most likely to show up five minutes late for class.” Each one captured some essential component of the faculty members’ personality. Mine was “Most likely to Give An ‘A.’” As she handed it to me, the student in charge leaned forward and whispered “It’s meant to be ironic.” Which I already knew, of course.

And also in my own defense, there’s more to the above exam question than just an opinion. In addition to telling me WHAT matters, students are also asked to explain WHY, tying their answers to at least three components of the class—theories, literary works, essays, paintings, whatever content drives the course—employing the appropriate methodologies of the field. It’s not, in other words, fluff: I’m asking students to show me both that they can do the intellectual work of the course *and* connect the course material to life beyond the syllabus. Over the years, as a response to this assignment, students have turned in some of the most memorable work I’ve ever received: an essay on how we should do everything we can to avoid becoming a Prufrock; an piece on how the study of painting reminded a student of what she was missing from her life by majoring in business; musings on how the metacognitive requirements of a pedagogy course helped a student face his depression; an essay on how the readings from our course helped a student understand both why she distanced herself from her dying mother, and gave her solace in her layers of grief.

Why am I raising this now? My guess is that the answer is fairly obvious: as of yesterday, my family and I have been quarantined in our house in Virginia for exactly a month. As I draft this, nearly thirty thousand grandmothers, fathers, sisters, and nephews have died of COVID-19 in the United States alone. The economy has

tanked. Every single university and college in the U.S.—if not the world—has shifted to online or virtual instruction. Institutions are starting to have conversations about whether or not they'll be able to open, come August. Or even January. Or even August 2021. Some institutions will not survive. Many of us will lose our jobs. Many will have to fight off administrators or trustees or state senators, who feel that, if nothing else, the shift to virtual instruction has demonstrated face-to-face teaching is unnecessary, even "inefficient"—you know, because the struggle to grow intellectually is all about efficiency.

Meanwhile, whatever form instruction takes after all of this is over—if ever it's truly "over"—we'll be facing a generation of traumatized students unlike anything we've ever seen before. The long-term consequences of these events, on learning, on intellectual growth, on the ability to solve complex problems, on the ability to function, on the ability to be happy, on the feasibility of democracy or globalism—all of that is completely unknown.

What matters?

Yes, endocrinology. But also public policy. And psychology. Ethics. Art. Chemistry. Physical Health and Nutrition. Economics. Mathematics. International Politics. Computer Science. Poetry. Architecture. Indeed, it's difficult to name a field, a major, a discipline that *doesn't* matter in the current circumstance. Were we to design a course called "Responding Effectively to a Pandemic," the reading material would draw from every single building on campus.

What else matters?

Recognizing that none of these fields stand alone. Science can do very little without effective public policy. Effective public policy can do very little without the ability to find the words and images to constructively communicate. Statistics are meaningless on their own. Architecture has always relied on sociology to be effective.

In *The New Education*, Cathy N. Davidson makes the persuasive argument that the profession we occupy is over-reliant on models developed in the mid-nineteenth century. The very concept of disciplines is residue from factory-driven conceptions of "efficiency" (there's that word again!) (2017). As faculty and administrators, we need to acknowledge our own investment in these constructs: we gain a sense of identity from our fields. And we gain even more from being recognized as experts in our fields. We take pride in our laser-thin focus on Dickens's portrayal of lower-class men, on the red horse sucker fish, or assignment design in the digital humanities (he says, looking in a mirror).

What's more, our constructions of how our fields operate—or, more accurately, how we assume our fields *should* operate—has consequences for our students. We often act as though every student in all of our classes will follow our own path and become a university instructor in our field, never mind that this path is becoming less and less attainable—and less and less desirable. We build our classes

around content delivery: the more content covered, the better, never mind the evidence that coverage doesn't equal learning (Zull, 2002). We design gen ed around a distribution model that distinguishes, rather than blurs, fields (Hanstedt, 2012). We do all of this based on . . . what? Tradition? Assumptions? Our own experiences?

Certainly not based upon evidence.

What *really* matters?

What I love about this issue of *InSight*, honestly, is that it answers that question, over and over again, by breaking down artificial barriers between one field and another, between tradition and risk, between informal and formal, between affective and cognitive. What matters, as Lindsey Ives shows us, is ensuring that STEM students move beyond memorization into critical thinking, and that writing—more than just a tool for communication—is essential to that movement. Similarly, H. Russell Searight discusses not only how film can be used to teach bio-ethics, but how such an

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approach exposes the interplay between cognition and emotion. Ekaterina Arshavskaya also explores elements of the affective on the cognitive, all the while examining a more holistic, intercultural approach to the teaching of language

instructors. Julie Ann Ward's research moves between the formal academy and open-access, between students as learners and students as producers of knowledge, between individual work and group dynamics. Robin Nilon dares to suggest that we use poetry to teach—*gasp!*—law students!

What really matters?

Understanding that the brain is a web of connection, and that we often find solutions to complex problems when we capitalize on the way neuronal networks fail to recognize disciplinary borders. Allowing that we can actually prove this, by implementing experiments that capture meaningful results. Insisting that, as scholars and instructors—as scholars *who are* instructors—we have an obligation to be as deliberate in our approach to the classroom as we are in our approach to our own scholarship.

What else?

Remembering that most of our students are *not* just like us, and that our habit of pretending that life beyond the academy is just like life in the academy places many of them in a detrimental position when it comes to addressing the messiness and complexity of the former.

What really matters?

As I write this, the death toll for COVID-19 in the U.S. now stands at 42,000 people. Florida is insisting they will end lockdown measures in three days. Some are saying the worst is over. Public health officials are urging states to be cautious, arguing

that the infection rate must drop below one-to-one before it's safe to even consider a gradual reopening. If history has any bearing, the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic would indicate we're likely to witness a second and perhaps even a third wave of deaths. But it's Spring. The weather is nice. People are getting antsy.

What really matters?

Our students. Their families. Our families. Understanding that simply doing things the way we've always done them just because that's how we've always done them is not enough. Learning. *Real* learning, that ensures that this never happens again.

## References

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