June 26th, 2014

Dear Graham Giles,

Conventions of the academic “Inquiry” are changing. We used to present our findings in formal research papers to one another, revelling in each esoteric expression with the utmost immaculate precision to rival (and perhaps best) the world’s greatest surgeons. I’m afraid that this seems to be shifting towards to more informal, interpretative, and ultimately liberating forms of communication, perhaps due to the demands for expression more palpable to the language of the lovely Sheeple, perhaps for the sake of our own boredom and dismay of the enormous weight and burden of academic etiquette.

For what is knowledge if we cannot understand it among ourselves and Other people? I don’t really believe there is any such thing as a secret, so much as dead history. So perhaps this is a good thing. Yet we are losing even the most obvious knowledge in our language itself, which feigns no secrets but to the ignorant. Thom pointed this out to me in the onset of the program, with his wicked English major acuteness. *Inquiry* is a formal legal investigation. *Enquiry* is a question. Well, at least according to British etymology. The Americanization / Globalization of Canada has collapsed and confused so many things, including our language, so we hardly know what is what anymore.

So, in the spirit of relaxing language and formalities, I have decided is to write this final testimonial of what sort of “ethical inquiries” I’ve been thinking of lately in the form of a letter. The Long form, old-school letter, written mostly off the top of my head with a few minor edits for punch. I have excelled at typing over my handwriting, and lament the lost authenticity my handwriting affords, yet I am relieved for this technology this morning. I used to painstakingly write a perfect cursive; I never did master it quickly to beat my printed speed. Did you?

And on to the search for the Truth, *quid est veritas*. Is Truth a divine human conception? …I think if I had to meditate on all these things I think spontaneously to the fullest, I would probably spent a lifetime in traction. Le sigh.

I suppose I have delayed a captivating story somewhat, but although I deal in history sometimes I have a great dread in re-capping the past…you see, it can never be captured at all. That really is the beauty of it!

We went for Gelato last night and outside of 201 flavours, I finally got onto something closer to the Truth, aside from the obvious bliss of a chocolate oreo cone at dusk. I managed to explain it perfectly in one brilliant sentence, unfortunately, this morning I am not so eloquent, however I will try to recap without self - doubt. *Inquiry,* I told Thom, is the way education is trying to progress [in BC] (and with just cause/hope)*.* Student-centred learning is what “we” want. But in its extreme successful form, with students self-educating, the teacher loses their status as the More Knowledgeable Other, by reserving personal truths in favour of discovery learning. Yet on behalf of the public, state, and adult humans, I am, as a teacher, am entrusted with providing the youth a certain measure of knowledge – or professional opinion, at the very least- in sharing a voice of [my] truth with these students, for being both the sage and a guide towards students acquisition of knowledge / experience. How ethical is it for teachers to relinquish their own recognition that they are holders of interesting truths, experiences and perspectives *worth sharing* for the sake of supervising self-guided student development?

Suddenly I chided myself on being such an extreme conservative, traditionalist for teachers of all time. It happens when the contrary tendency of critique rambles away without time for meditation in traction, or those formerly “Canadian” ‘sober second thoughts’.

Granted I think the extreme version of Inquiry is often too quickly critiqued. We have gotten past the fear of what would happen to a [youth] populace who could really be left to their own devices and forced to think for themselves. After all, this is what we want for the future, what we currently value. This is what has happened as post-modernism and relativity has challenged ‘answers’, knowledge and truth-seeking to the point where individuals must take up their own quest. It sounds exciting, democratic, and chaotic. Perhaps revolution, evolution, is again a promise in modernity. One voice laughs, they will never be allowed to get that far. Another is curious. Why not try? Here is the voice of the state and curriculum writers. ( One of these (under)writers is, incidentally, a local teacher I volunteered for to get into the BEd program. Small world indeed.)

In practice I don’t think teachers will be so extreme as to relinquish their own opinions to the point of being simple automated bureaucrats instead of learned people imparting some form of knowledge or experiences in communication. The question is how will people draw their own ethical lines about how much, and which, information is shared going forward – and how to keep this exchange *genuine.* Will more self-censorship be at hand? It should, if we as teachers wish to let students form their own thoughts relatively free from influence. Perhaps the craft returns to [Socratic] questioning, guided inquiry, somewhat void of intentional ‘transfers’ of knowledge communications. Like in a counsellor’s office, when they ask you what you think you can do to feel better rather than offering any known suggestions. Like in the BEd program, where students have to teach themselves how to be teachers, and find their own lessons, largely devoid of pragmatic suggestions for fear of influencing our sacred unique practices.

But the influence of greater knowledge (if there is such a thing, I’m sure there is some more adept expression), I think, is how we have arrived at some of the most complex and captivating ideas of all time. Wouldn’t it be faster and more efficient to offer the “best of” to students to make their own use of? Why reject canons so painstakingly constructed, critiqued, destroyed, and re-imagined? Dear god, are we actually promoting for each individual to re-invent their version of the wheel?!

What carries meaning and importance will inevitably come down to individuals of course, I’m not advocating for teachers to impart rigid cultural transmissions in the name of history or canon. But how it’s done seems to hang in the balance of inquiry…is the historical action and purpose in teaching:

a) changing? b) will change? c) will never change? d) all of the above?.

I slept in on all this. I think you’re right about calling things into Being, Graham, and I agree we must be cautious in defaulting to choosing any of the above as opposed to questioning all. I think there is a great deal of power in affirmation which is not being used positively to see the ends we hope for. Affirmations are only as powerful as far as they come close to the “truth”, and strikes a chord with more of our internal morals than not. These become conversations, policies, ethics. And then – etiquette.

This is the piece I am currently fascinated with, and a scenario yesterday tipped me off to it. Yesterday I was also saddened, and disturbed by, a peer’s deep emotional reaction (judging by the quivering jaw), as they profusely apologized for making a valuable comment in Kedrick’s last class, in a conversation we had about abolishing grades. I mentioned the Affirming thing (theory?) again. If we decide grades on not valuable en masse, we call value into being and change contemporary paradigm and practice. It did not seem to matter. What mattered was the standards of behaviour in university [academic discourse] seemed to be on trial. In *crisis*. We do not call our behaviour into Being, how we ought to act, because it is too obvious and implicit, embedded in the structure and history of the Institution and the role models which guide our way here. Fearful of conflict, [mis]conduct, social condemnation, and a host of apathy, self-guided students have opted to vacation in class. I read a concept essay about students as tourists. But I don’t even know if it is [consciously] known what kind of etiquette exists for the tourist student. We may surmise such a framework. It is too depressing for me to indulge in at this moment, however.

Thinking about my recent job interview, I have lamented several times at my weakest point in articulating what I think are the most crucial aspects of Classroom Management. My supervisor spoke often about the effectiveness of routine and consequences. I suspect knowing how to address each unknown situation may also fall under etiquette. The rules of convention are bound not just by the principles we strive to uphold in the search and bringing into being of Ethics and ethical teaching practice, but how we practice their enactment, and this is etiquette. Etiquette is often thought of as banal ways of adhering to standards of behaviour. Wait your turn. Say please and thank you. Be conscious of the Other. And we have practically cast out the word in the overturning of colonial history. Etiquette is a concept I personally associate with antiquated values. The Victorian era. Women walking around with books on their heads. Yet one of my favourite recent finds is a ridiculously dated book called “Home Entertaining” – copyright *1960*. This book tells the reader how and what to do to throw a perfectly acceptable gathering for every occasion, according to the standards of convention of the occasion in 1960. So many of these once-valued conventions have fallen by the wayside, and so has the endeavour to continue updates in current etiquette on a larger societal scale. ‘Each to their own’ rules the capitalist system, and rules our engagements now, too.

I do not think we spend enough time calling etiquette into Being in education, speaking aloud what banal kinds of behaviour we want to produce in our students and in our society, if only to spark a reflexive conversation with students themselves. We have contemporarily cast aside character education, and beyond that, an old conversation on what it takes to be a “good” person. (This is actually the object of study for Plutarch in *Parallel Lives*, incidentally one of the most interesting historical works I know.) Now, I realize my perception of the deficiency in use of etiquette runs counter to the argument that you’ve been making about the danger of calling anything related to how we ought to live into being. But might we be better off by offering some more stability at the most basic levels of behaviour by providing an updated rule book (or more options for how to host a party)? Sure, the object of the game is to win. [on our own terms?] But how is it played? No wonder we have so many problems with the generalized ethics that ‘guide’ us. They need to be so all-encompassing to include all games instead of variations. > Go fish.

I’d be interesting in hearing more about this from the elementary program. You probably have direct experience with the effect of etiquette as a means to an end in achieving principled, ethical ‘behaviour’. I have heard complaints ‘within and without’ schools about how parents are not disciplining their children enough anymore…and so this duty to correct behaviour falls more often to teachers.

This presents a challenge for me personally I seem to defy, unintentionally, some concepts of etiquette and certainly challenge notions of convention. I suspect that is partly a function of being raised in the 1990s, partly of function of genes, personality, and unknown corroborating variables. Do you know I won an award for being outspoken? I was affirmed for being valued as both engaged with dialogue and unconventionally ill-spoken as AMS Councillor of the Year in my term as representative for Education students. It is a ridiculous honour.

Why then, have I been through the same system that has encouraged critique and engagement as so many others, and yet I seem to be deficient in a common etiquette of fear? How will I then acquire the correct set of etiquette to be a role model of behaviour for youth? Should I remain reserved, without the truths of my personality for the sake of a professional personae? Surely that is a part of the process – a part of teacher ethics! Will my administrators buy into a personal, professional pedagogy of self-discovery of etiquette for the 21st century? How will this transfer across the time and space of generations I work with?

I have striven to find what morals I can, to respect ethical principles when they attempt to speak truths I understand. Etiquette seems to fall secondary to achieving the principles of Ethics, but this does not seem to be the case for Others, who have a real sense of how Etiquette is practiced in the classroom. Surely someone of these gifted people will write people like me a handbook. There is probably one out there, though I haven’t found it. Teachers wouldn’t be on the same page anyway, that’s a part of the autonomy of the profession.

Perhaps this is nothing more than a minor quibble over which are the most correct words to use in English towards achieving a means and an evolving end to how and what we teach. The BEd uses “Practicum Guidelines”, “Professional Conduct”, and excerpts from the BCTF “Code of Ethics” to elaborate on what model behaviour looks like. As we have noticed in our class, how this is enacted in the classroom is largely left to the imagination.

They say that without risk, there is no reward. Others say the nail that sticks up, is nailed down. Are these proverbs all that is memorable and guiding in our collective behaviour within and without the classroom? Every school has a general set of expectations of students, which mirror the generalities embedded in our other policy documents. I just think there is so much unspoken which is missing. Maybe those are pieces that have been missing all along, constantly in flux and changing as we interrogate our past, present, and future.

Graham, I do not think this is my best work, mostly due to a lack of time for mediation and editing, though it is genuine in a sense of being written as an inquiry through the questions and thoughts which have guided this narrative. I think I have fulfilled my endeavour to reflect seriously on what ethical quandaries I am faced with as a new professional. I am almost inclined to apologize for the lack of brevity, which is becoming normalized as a kind of polite etiquette in literature today. We wondered in Kedrick’s class if letters are a thing of the past, along with the historical authority of letters as communications among the literati. I am glad you have been a man of replies. Without the exchange of information, of a narrative, of whatever opinions or truths we fleetingly possess, I don’t think the words in project education or teaching would carry as much meaning, significance, or understanding as they do today.

Sincerely,

Phaidra Ruck

Further Reading

*Etiquette. Reflections on Contemporary Comportment.* [Ron Scapp](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/results?section1=author&search1=%20%20Ron%20Scapp), [Brian Seitz](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/results?section1=author&search1=%20%20Brian%20Seitz).(2007)