

The Teachers's Good Judgment

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“Does the teacher use good judgment?” is rarely a component of teaching evaluations and is unlikely to figure in self or peer appraisals of our teaching. The question seems vague, somehow incomplete—good judgment about what?

References to a teacher’s judgment are more predictable in situations where students, administrators, or both are calling one’s teaching performance into question, that is, where the issue is bad judgment. I cite two instances of this sort from my 20-plus years of university teaching. Both involved Honors teaching, once when I assigned Milan Kundera’s novel *Immortality* and the other when students were invited to view Lasse Hallstrom’s “My Life As a Dog” (edited for the University’s foreign film series). In each case the administration’s letter of censure referred to my possibly poor judgment and reported parents’ complaints about their child’s exposure to sexually explicit material and the coarsening and indelible effects thereof. While explicitness may be considered relative, in the eye of the beholder (certainly I did not consider the material sexually explicit nor did most of my students), the incidents can reasonably be considered lapses of my good judgment in not properly assessing the risks associated with what I asked students to do.

The teacher’s good judgment is usually defined in the negative sense, much like the intuitive, negative sense of freedom defined by Isaiah Berlin—freedom **from** rather than freedom **to**, a matter of don’ts rather than do’s. To have good judgment as a teacher means that you refrain from, that you do nothing foolish, nothing humiliating or demeaning, nothing intemperate, illegal, or illicit. No one gets hurt. Of course, since teaching (and learning, too) is inherently probabilistic, we can never be certain about the consequences of what we say or otherwise do in the classroom or in other teaching venues. Innocently, inadvertently we may be the agents of offense, reduction, or harm where none is intended.

Given such vulnerability, are there precautions by which teachers can reduce their exposure? Are there specific rules for promoting teachers’ good judgment? Answers to

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these questions depend on one's concept of teaching. To the extent that the concept centers on the dissemination of information, good judgment is a fairly simple matter. It can be secured by assuring the accuracy and appropriateness of (i) the information and (ii) the means for detecting its installation in one's students. Simply put: tell them then test them. Neat, predictable, safe. The tidy closure that epitomizes teaching for information breeds a reputation for good judgment and does so within a semester: most every student (who isn't a miscreant) makes it through and is accounted for. Grade variance is straightforwardly ascribable to variance in remembering.

To take a quite different tack, such as one that favors teaching as the never-finished project of understanding, necessarily complicates the achievement of good judgment. Teaching for understanding is nondeterminative and vagabond. It can be messy and insecure. It is also hopelessly liberal, since it has to leave the door open to the different, even the strange. To teach on the premise that "anything goes" ideationally, that any idea has a place in the conversation, means being at a chronic loss to know quite what to do before the fact, except to be open. Teaching with this end is ripe with risk. It is a wrestle. Things can go wrong by day and by night (such as in the frenzied late-night call or e-mail from the student who is freaked because "I'm really stuck and can't figure out how to get my ideas to fit together and this paper is due in the morning").

In this case, the teacher's reputation for good judgment is as much a matter of luck as anything, since there is so much that can go bad. While there is certainly a place for emphasis on information, it is hardly unquestioned. One can never be quite sure about the adequacy or accuracy of information, even if the teacher or the textbook is the source. Furthermore, what one thinks is openly susceptible to question: "Why do you . . .", "How is it you . . .", "Where did you . . .", and so on. Problems evolve and solutions shift as better grounds for one's assertions are realized. What was thought to be settled has the troubling tendency to morph into an array of alternatives, often complex. One trembles before the prospect of never knowing for sure. Similarly, trusting one's fate to one's fellows in collaborative efforts at understanding may well prompt dread if not loathing. "Aarrgghh" becomes the operative exclamation and the end of the semester the occasion for demonizing: "That was the worst . . .", "I will never, ever take . . .", "Who does he think he . . .", and so on. The landscape of the course has become soaked with intellectual sweat and sometimes real tears, and there is a palpable sense of having survived.

In time the verdict may be kinder as students realize that they are better for what took place. Indeed, the good judgment of the teacher who taught for understanding may only be evidenced in retrospect, even at a remove of several years. What once felt oppressive, violating, painful, exhausting, and pointless may now be appreciated as integral to maturity and wisdom. Life's lessons in the meantime may have underscored the unreliability of information, the invalidity of sureness, the virtue of openness, the headiness of the play of alternative views. In this way, the teacher's reputation for good judgment will be slower coming and harder won.

Others', especially students', perceptions of teachers' good judgment may be formed both in the short term as well as in the longer term. It would not be surprising for perceptions to change over time, for what was earlier viewed as good judgment to be later questioned and recognized as ultimately working against the student's best interest. Conversely, what was previously viewed as poor judgment on the teacher's part may be redeemed by subsequent developments in the student's life. As a teacher whose judgment has been questioned at regular points and whose aspirations are to teaching for understanding, I offer the following calculated advice, that is, calculated to establish a reputation for good judgment in the long run:

1. Avoid posturing, particularly as one who knows it all;
2. Never take advantage of your students' usually naïve trust;
3. Eschew dogmatism (which I state undogmatically);
4. Provide your students with liberally-minded caveats in advance;
5. Do what you can to develop an "in this together" approachability, availability, and succor;
6. Be ever-learning.

In response to the concerns about *Immortality*, I wrote to each student in the subsequent semester and reiterated the rationale by which I selected the text in the first place, including what I hoped it would eventually mean to them. I invited each to contact me for further discussion. Some did. In the case of "My Life As a Dog," I wrote to each concerned parent in a similar vein, pointing out parallels between the young protagonist's coming of age and the dilemmas incident to making one's way in college. None wrote back. Nor is it the case that my letter-writing efforts ever prompted an appellation of "good judgment" from the administrators who were aware of them. Perhaps it is still too early.