



Teaching the Great Books with Josh Gibbs

Lesson 6: How to Teach Great Books – Part II

Outline:

The Three Roles of a Teacher

- Stage Setter
- Stand-in for the Author
- Provocateur

#1: Setting the Stage

- Setting the stage requires thorough preparation. Know the setting of the text:
 - Philosophical convictions of the age
 - Economic conditions
 - Religious conditions
 - Where the author is from
- Provide a “peopled landscape” for students.
- Often teachers are not sure where an author’s view comes from so they respond with a quick, generic worldview response. This does not satisfy.
 - “His eyes were not open to the light of truth.”
- Students cannot see a real human from the past without an honest background.
- Without demonstrating the humanity of the past people and just saying that they believe what they believe due to darkened old views, the student leave with an idea of history that says the past got it wrong, but we in the present are right.
 - Students learn only to listen to the “Oligarchy of the Present.”
 - G.K. Chesterton: “Tradition means giving a vote to most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead... Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”
 - Students do not learn to see God revealed on earth in the past.
 - The students themselves might be satisfied with shallow views of past humans, but to allow them to continue in this does not inspire a love of the people they learn about, but instead a love of self as one who gets to judge.
- Set things up so that the students hear the words as the author would hear them.
- Help students to know if the author is a product or reformer of the time.
 - Example: Jane Austin’s examination of aristocracy.
- This set-up makes the book easy to yield to because it makes it less distant and foreign.



- A good essay on a background aspect of the work can be very helpful (see recommended books).

#2 Standing-in for the Author

- If the ideas can be divorced from the author/his nation/his time, they can be divorced from the text. (Author makes the ideas personal/incarnate.)
 - If they can be divorced from the text, there is no reason to read the text and you might as well use textbooks like progressive education.
 - The worldview takes on flesh and color when we give the personal context.
- We think about how our worldview impacts what we eat, but fail to consider how what we eat might impact our worldview.
 - People ought not to be seen as “avatars of an idea.” (The author is likely presenting a unique position not just repeating a general popular ideology.)
 - An author is likely not a complete product of the time — they were real people not copies of the cultural trends — so learn who the author was intentionally.
- The biography at the beginning of the text is not perfect but it is better than nothing. Ideally, read a longer introduction to the students — perform it.
- Do not blast the students with a barrage of facts. Artfully integrate the information throughout the class. (Consider even acting like the author.)
 - “A good teacher is like a good conductor.” Good teaching requires a sense of time, dynamic, proportion, and volume to determine how best to integrate information.
 - Leave space for how the students (the musicians you conduct) will respond.
 - Make your conducting melodious — do not blast with noise.
 - Show pictures, tell stories, and do things to make the process beautiful and melodious.



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#3 Disrupting

- The teacher is regularly looking to unsettle students of their ease with a book.
- Disrupt students' complacency, presuppositions, and prejudices (especially if they arrive that these too quickly).
- You do not want students to throw their idea away, but to delve deeper.
- Do NOT disrupt simply to rebut students but rather to show students how much more there is. Reflection can “resurrect moments of insight.”
- “He who answers a matter before he hears it, It is folly and shame to him.” (Proverbs 18:13)
 - We deny Solomon if we ask a student to pass judgement before hearing the work speak for itself.
- “In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross- examines.” (Proverbs 18:17)
 - The first to speak is not necessarily wrong but there should still be a through cross-examination.
- We must hear, contemplate, and ruminate before giving a verdict



“The Judgement of Solomon” by Hans Von Kulmbach