
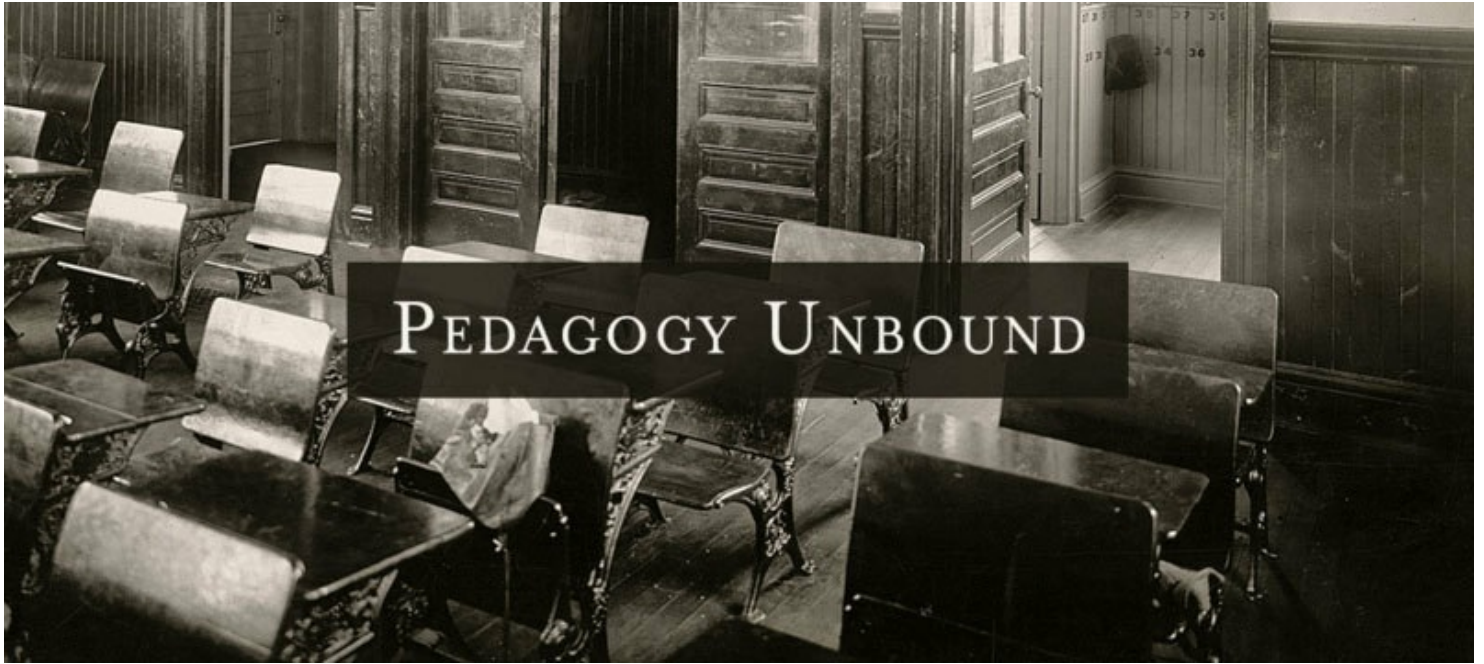


# 4 Resolutions for the New Semester

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I've never been too big on New Year's resolutions. That probably has a lot to do with January's place in the school year. The changing of the calendar year is really just a short gasp of air between semesters. The *real* new year in academe—the time for new beginnings and fresh starts—comes now, in August. I've had time away from the classroom to recharge my batteries and to forget about teaching for a while. I want to be a better teacher this year than I was last year. August is my month of big plans, of good intentions, of new leaves ready to be turned over.

Given [the apparent importance of making such plans public](#), I thought I'd share some of my new (school) year resolutions, and ask you to share your own in the comments below. Here are some of the things I want to do this year:

**Talk less.** Like most people who enjoy teaching, I'm an over-explainer. I talk too much, give too many examples. Explain, explain, explain. And while such exposition has its place in the classroom, I have to work to remind myself that students need to [take an active role](#) in their own learning. I can't make them learn. Instead of explaining a concept to them, it's much better to design an activity in which they can learn the concept for themselves. I'm there to guide them and offer help where I can. But just telling them what they need to know isn't enough to engender real learning.

My instinct is to talk, to rush to fill up any silence with edifying words. So I have to make a conscious effort to shut my mouth, to open up the floor to student voices, to be OK with silence, and to replace ["continuous exposition"](#) with activities that encourage active learning.

**Take more risks.** My progression as a teacher, [as I wrote last spring](#), has generally been toward less rigid planning — leaving more to the in-class moment. I want to continue that progression this semester. Don't get me wrong: I plan to come to class prepared. I won't slack in my dedication to teaching.

But such preparation shouldn't involve planning out every minute of class time. I'd like to pay more attention to the particular dynamic that develops in each class session: the interplay between the specific people present, the moments that cannot be planned for. I want to remind myself that the ultimate goal is not to cover all the material but to help students — these specific students — change in significant ways. To do that, I need to be fully switched-on while I'm teaching, and I need to be prepared for things to go any which way at any time.

**Grade better.** Specifically, I'm referring to marking essays. First, I've resolved to return papers back to students sooner. I always tell students they will get their essays back within two weeks, and I always — always — miss that deadline. And while it's important to acknowledge that grading takes a lot of time, the truth is, I rarely get going on it until a week after students turn papers in. I'm convinced that the earlier I can return my students' work to them (within reason), the more likely they'll be able to make use of my comments. I want the work to be fresh in their minds, so they can connect my response to their approach and revise that approach going forward.

Second, I want to continue to focus on teaching with my comments. Too often, I get bogged down correcting little errors and fail to leave students with clear recommendations for improving their work. If I want students [to read my comments closely](#), I need to make sure that they are constructive, clear, and do more than merely justify the grade.

**Pay more attention to student goals.** I've [written before](#) about the importance of soliciting student goals at the beginning of a semester, but I haven't done a good-enough job of that in my own classes. It's equally important to make clear my own goals as the instructor. But I need to remember that students will have their own reasons for wanting to master the skills and knowledge offered in my courses. The better I understand their goals, the better I'll be able to help students excel.

That means trying to get to know my students better — their particular motivations and circumstances, the things they struggle with, the things they find easy. I want to be able to find and tap into the sources of their [intrinsic motivation](#) so I can help students make the course their own.

Those are the ways I'm hoping to improve my teaching this year. Now you can all hold me to those pledges. What are you resolving to do differently this year?

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