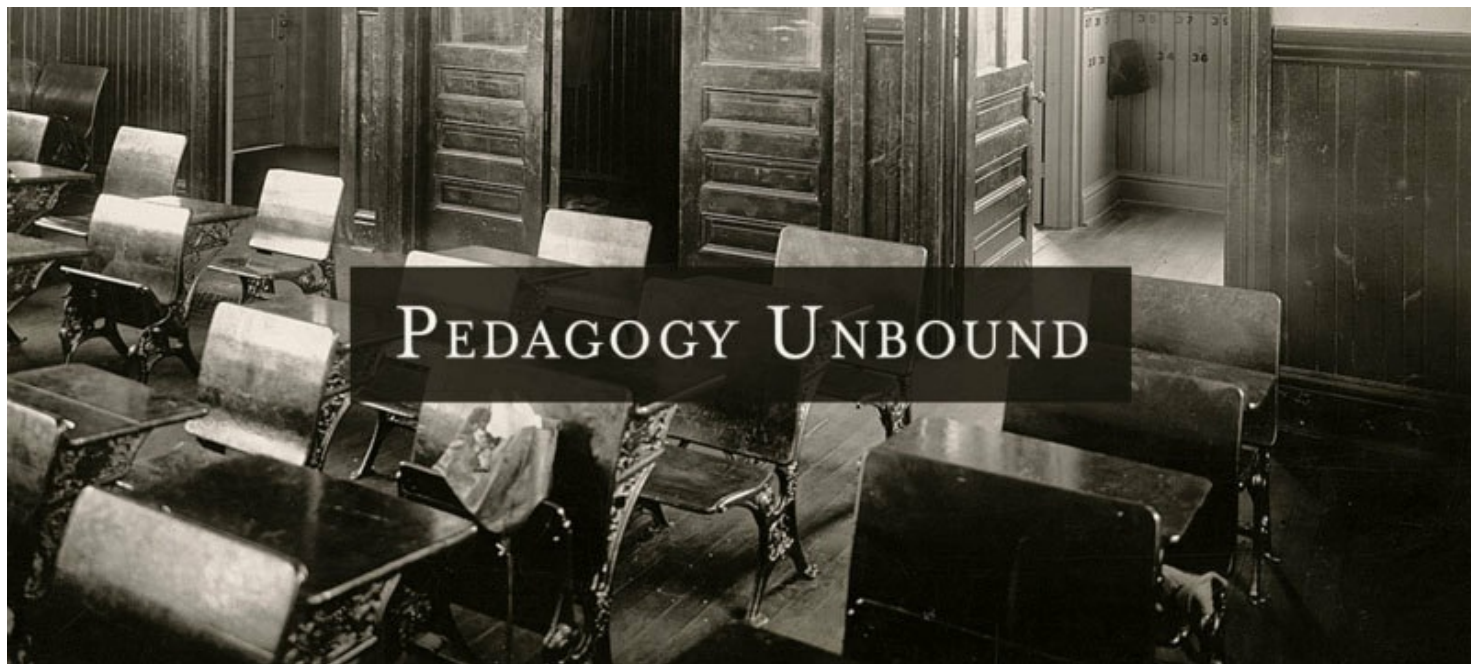


How to Undermine Your Own Authority

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As I've [mentioned before](#), my 7-year-old daughter takes piano lessons. One of the biggest challenges has been getting her to play for herself, not for her parents. Often I'll ask her how she thought she played a song and I'll get a shrug in return. She plays, but she doesn't listen to herself play. That lack of listening, I fear, is a sign that she's just playing because we're making her.

Many of the teaching tips I've suggested [in this column](#) have been meant to encourage your students to take responsibility for their learning. For active-learning strategies to really work, [I've argued](#), we need students to buy in completely to our courses. They need to want to learn for themselves — not for us or a grade. To accomplish that, we can invite students to [take some control](#) over the syllabus. We can [turn course policies into collaborative projects](#), in which students have an equal say in determining important aspects of the course. We can encourage students to [articulate their goals](#) for the course, rather than just expect them to meet ours. And we can design our courses to make sure [we haven't foreclosed](#) any of those possibilities.

But my experience with my daughter suggests there's more we can do. If we're serious about our students taking ownership of our courses, we need to divest some of our ownership first. My daughter takes lessons from a very good teacher but my wife and I oversee her practices six nights a week. We don't choose which songs she works on or decide on the pace of progress, but we do actively monitor her playing at home. If she makes a mistake, we let her know. If her left hand is louder than her right hand, we let her know. If she forgets to repeat at the end of a song, we let her know.

Given all of that, it's no surprise that she doesn't know how well she plays. Why would she need to pay attention when we do it for her?

In the college classroom, there is much that reinforces faculty ownership of the course. In the eyes of the university, we are responsible for the courses we teach. And students have been trained over many years to be obedient and subservient in class. Those traditions and habits, among others, serve to reinforce faculty domination of the classroom space and encourage students to remain passive, deferential, and apathetic. And that limits how much students will care about a course. I'm more and more convinced that it's not enough to give students some control over aspects of the course; we have to actively work to give up some of our own control.

Here are some small things you can do this semester to undermine some of your own authority.

Lose your voice. In a 2015 essay called "[The Silent Professor](#)," Joseph Finckel wrote about losing his voice in the middle of a semester and being forced to teach without speaking. He found that his silence provoked students to speak up more and take a more active role in class. He still came up with classroom activities — prompted by instructions and questions projected on the board — but found that students, not able to rely on the teacher to tell them the answers, worked to find those answers on their own. Finckel now "loses his voice" every semester and offers tips to those who want to follow his example (silent office hours, anyone?).

You don't have to pretend you have laryngitis to make a conscious effort to speak less in your classroom. I've tried to become more aware of how much I talk, how much I fill in the silences during class. Try to let those silences linger. Every time we tell our students an answer we deprive them of an opportunity to figure it out themselves.

When you do talk, let yourself be human. We can make space for students to own the classroom by chipping away at the traditional teacher persona. If we hold ourselves at a remove or pretend we have all the answers, we keep our students at a disadvantage. Better to admit our uncertainties, express what we're excited about, and show ourselves to be flawed and strange sometimes.

In her 1994 book, [Teaching to Transgress](#), bell hooks wrote about the benefits that come from a truly engaged instructor, one who opens up to students: "When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators." Share yourself with your students, let them see that you're risking something by being there, and they'll take risks as well.

When students talk, really listen. Managing a class discussion is one of the hardest skills teachers have to learn. Too often, because of the difficulty, we set up discussions with leading questions and shut off debate once we get the answer we're looking for.

If we're always trying to steer students to our point, or if we cut off discussion after a certain amount of time because we've got something else planned, students will understand that the game is rigged — it doesn't really matter what they say. But if we truly listen to students, and let what they say change the trajectory of the class period, we can open up the classroom for students to take the lead.

That isn't easy, of course. We've all got a lot on our minds when we teach and it's not always possible to distinguish between a pointless tangent and a intriguing change of topic. But try to remember that the answer students arrive at on their own is almost always more valuable than the one you tell them. And the side effect — students feel that there are real benefits to their full participation — will pay off again and again.

With my daughter, I've been trying to keep my mouth shut. Now I tell her: I'm not allowed to make any comments when you play — not even to tell you when you've played a bum note. You're in charge, I tell her. If she thinks she needs to play a song again, she does; if she's satisfied, then she moves on to the next one. It's really hard for me to keep quiet. But she does seem to be listening to herself more when she plays now.

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