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THE WEATHER IN HEMINGWAY

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The idea of the student-faculty partnership, I admit, gave me an anticipatory pang. In my first semester on the tenure track, it registered initially as one more weekly commitment. More remotely, it produced the anxious expectancy of classroom observation as a (real or perceived) form of benevolent surveillance. Yet I also saw the value in having an informed student “consultant” as I adjusted to the rhythms and rigors of a new institution. I was tensely optimistic. Or maybe: enthusiastically ambivalent. And then I met Emma.

Emma offered observation without judgment — a rare gift — and along with it, a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose. In our initial conversations, Emma and I established a set of shared goals and points of focus, which ranged from broad pedagogical commitments (such as articulating clear learning objectives for each classroom session), to the details of pacing, to balancing lecture with discussion. In addition to helping me track these goals over the course of the semester, Emma’s minute attention to detail and sensitivity to the dynamics of classroom discussion meant that I came away from our weekly conversations with a stronger sense of which strategies were working and which weren’t. In particular, Emma consistently reminded me that learning is heterogeneous and unpredictable — it doesn’t look the same from student to student or from day to day.

I quickly came to see our partnership as a model for professor-student partnerships more broadly. While I worked to introduce students to the production of knowledge as a collaborative endeavor, Emma helped me recognize the importance of bringing students to an awareness of their own learning process as a prerequisite for robust participation in that larger scholarly effort. Emma’s perspective allowed me to consider how students inhabit their own role as learners in the classroom — as observers or contributors, unconsciously, self-consciously, awkwardly, skillfully, or (more likely) all of these in turn. Our conversations helped me remember and reflect on my own hesitant first steps in the direction of scholarship, and to see the classroom as a space of encounter that students and teachers negotiate both individually and collectively, all while learning — always learning — to be generous interlocutors of our critical objects, and of each other.

Most crucially, conversations with Emma helped me make a series of concrete adjustments over the course of the semester, from marking time more deliberately (“we’re going to work this way until 3:45”), to emphasizing close reading, to modeling how to think “with” a text rather than around or beyond it. Emma’s perspective gave me tremendous insight into how to manage students’ expectations and anxieties in the classroom, which allowed me the space to focus on learning. She also helped me see how some of my unconscious tics or habits actually signaled deep pedagogical commitments, which in turn allowed me to make those commitments more explicit. Emma noted how I use the word “lingering,” for example, when I want the class to sit with something longer. It was tremendously useful to realize that, in fact, I do want students to linger: to change the tempo of their engagement with literature, as well as with the world that literature brushes up against. And to do so against the felt need (my own included) to get on with things, to cover a certain amount of material, to keep up with the frenetic pace of the semester.

While giving me the tools to become more deliberate in my pedagogy, Emma also helped me embrace the unpredictable aspects of teaching and learning. Negotiating the space of the classroom in my American modernism course, for example, became both a logistical and an intellectual challenge, as the lack of elbow room and the difficult arrangement of our physical space seemed to echo the perceived difficulty of the texts we were studying. In fact it became useful to mark, with Emma, how my weekly effort to create a perfect circle — to transform our unwieldy seating arrangements into an orderly, inclusive, satisfying shape — was continually thwarted; over the course of the semester, I slowly began to embrace our more fragmented and free form compositions, as well as the moments where we seemed stuck or rooted in place. To make our misshapen circle a place of possibility, rather than a site for the static rehearsal of ideas, became my new goal. And while we read Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," I reconsidered my own pedagogical commitment to the orderly, thinking instead about how to introduce a kind of productive disorder: a way of modeling the resistance to inherited forms and polyvocal playfulness of modernism itself.

In large and small ways, Emma helped me track the successes and setbacks of this work over the course of the semester. We registered the usefulness, for example, of experiments in reading aloud, using our voices — sometimes all 34 of them — to appreciate Gertrude Stein's iterative insistence, to sound out the troubled italics of William Faulkner's narration, or to register the charge of Nella Larsen's strained collectives. Breaking into small groups encouraged students to focus in on modernism's fragments, and then perform (often physically) the difficult work of reassembly, or piecing things together. Asking students to read literary texts through their sonic or visual intertexts, or to explore the contemporary work of adapting and remixing modernism, pushed each of us beyond our interpretive comfort zones. We made room for discomfort and surprise. We weathered the fall semester's varying energy levels, and we read the weather in Hemingway.[1] Throughout, conversations with Emma were crucial in helping me explicitly frame the goals of these exercises, which made them infinitely more effective. It was equally crucial to break down the missteps with Emma afterwards; our conversations often gave me a much-needed dose of perspective on the value of these experiments for student learning, perhaps especially when they didn't go according to plan.

That things most often don't go according to plan was something of a weekly refrain, and registering the uneven pressures and joys of that inevitable uncertainty became, for me, the most valuable aspect of my partnership with Emma. Emma gave me a consistently sharp read on the performance of pedagogy — the details of timing, transition, gesture, and tone — but she also helped me to see that collaborative learning is strikingly, perhaps fundamentally, improvisational. Which is to say that what Emma and I both learned through our partnership is that our role as teachers and students is surprisingly similar: we do our best to create the conditions for learning, and then enjoy its curious, contingent, always incomplete unfolding. And we keep each other good company in the meantime.

Notes:

1. In my course planning, and in this essay, I drew from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Weather in Proust* (2011), Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007), and Wai Chee Dimock's "Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald" lectures through Yale Open Courses (Fall 2011).