Advice giving & the classroom

By Adam J. Copeland
October 19, 2015

When it comes to teaching, I think a lot about maintaining the fine balance between clearly, loudly, explicitly teaching my students *things to know*, and subtly, quietly, implicitly teaching them *ways to think*.

I wonder if—and how—to reveal to students what *I* think. And, if I do, does that help or hinder their ability to make their own thoughtful, reflective, fully developed claims?

Depending on the situation, my instincts lead me different ways. For example, a reason I like preaching is that it calls for an explicit proclamation, a faith claim—the *gospel*.

On the other hand, even in the seminary classroom I've tended to steer clear from traditional lecturing for fear of making things too straightforward for my students. Plus, I already know where I stand, so it's much more interesting for me to draw out other voices so that we can learn from one another.

To oversimplify, these questions make up part of the postmodern conundrum: in an era in which we question all absolutes, what of substance do we pass on to others?

I was ruminating on such things when I recently ran into a thought-provoking post, "Why giving advice is not as helpful as you think," by Israel Galindo, associate dean for lifelong education at Columbia Theological Seminary. Galindo links advice giving to overfunctioning and points out that giving advice is prone to impose one's own values systems on another, to perpetuate dependence, and rob others of growing in their journey to make their own decisions.

Instead of giving advice, Galindo suggests strategies that help identify options, offer resources, share experiences, spur thinking, and encourage imagination.

Of course, every situation is different but I really resonate with Galindo's lists and, more broadly, his instincts to shy away from advice giving. (He's written plenty on

teaching too.)

Teaching shouldn't be confused with advice giving, but in practical theology courses there certainly are significant places of overlap. Rather than shouting absolutes from the front of the classroom, I prefer to surface areas to consider, questions to ask, onions to peal (not literally, it's not science class).

As for my classroom, most often this approach tends towards pedagogies that include minimal lecturing.

And yet, I love a beautiful lecture. As Molly Worten put it in the *NY Times* on October 17, "Lecture Me. Really." Accepting that lectures are unique and, in their own way, countercultural today, Worten sees a benefit in lectures' power to shape the mind by requiring focused listening and note taking, skills that faculty must actively cultivate for students of today.

She's right, too (though I won't comment here on the *quality* of most lectures that students encounter today). I can still recall snippets from great lectures from back in my college days: James May on Homer and Cicero, Jonathan Hill on Picasso, Jim Pence, Anne Groton, Taliaferro, Holt, Langerak, DuRocher, Cherewatuk. And then later, of seminary I could go on and on: Stroup, Moore-Keish, Brown, Yoder, Long.

Which all draws me back to my opening query. Because, at its best, I think a great lecture can play both sides. The best lecturers teach how to think, not just what to think. Skilled lecturers invite hearers to make their own claims. Superb lecturers raise questions even as they answer others.

And so, I'll leave it here for now: good teaching isn't advice giving, no matter the means.

Originally posted at Copeland's blog