

Hospitality in the Classroom

I learned a teacher's hospitality from the best-loved teacher at Carthage College, Dudley Riggle. Dudley is one of the finest human beings I have known. He has a profound theology of grace, and everything he does is informed by it. He is a quiet, unassuming person who thinks carefully through everything he says and does. He was the chaplain at the college, and he preached some of the best sermons I have ever heard. I have this enduring feeling about his sermons that they persuaded you because they met every objection that you might have had in the course of listening. As I listened to his sermons, some reservation on my part would arise in my mind. And just as I was formulating it, Dudley would then say, "You might be thinking . . ." And he hit the nail on the head every time. As such, his sermons were profoundly dialogical in very pastoral ways by anticipating your responses and addressing them. By the end of the sermon you were right with him—experiencing some new-found freedom or ready to love others in a richer way or prepared to share as never before.

Dudley carried the same forethought into the classroom by anticipating how students might feel and then putting them at ease. That forethought is one of the best exercises I know for good teaching. Put yourself in the place of the student, and try to imagine their experience in your classroom. Imagine what it is like walking in the first day, looking around for a safe place to sit, getting yourself oriented to what this class will be and who will be in it, and what will be expected. Dudley imagined all that and sought to anticipate the students' concerns at every step of every class! This was not easy in light of the subjects he taught. His most popular class was "Issues in Living and Dying." This class required enormous sensitivity on his part, because people brought with them so many personal experiences of death and grief and so many fears of what lay before them. Many students were in the midst of tragic situations even as they were taking the class. The capacity to anticipate the student experiences of the class were crucial for this course. Dudley was always up to the task.

While I was at Carthage College, I consulted with many of the faculty about their philosophy and practice of teaching. When I asked Dudley, here is what he said. "Much of my approach to teaching has to do with hospitality. I arrive ten minutes early and greet my student guests at the door. This enables me to ask how they are doing and to relate to each one personally. When they enter the room, they will see on the chalkboard the list of things I plan to do during that class period. This way, there will not be any guesses for them about how the class will proceed. I start the class on time, make announcements, proceed to do what I write on the board, and end the class on time. This seems to be a way of being respectful of the students. I learn their names at the beginning of the course and call them by name when they have questions or comments. I get their papers back on time. I see all these matters as issues of hospitality—making them comfortable in the classroom and taking them seriously." "I find," Dudley concluded, "that if I take them seriously as students, they will take themselves seriously and do their best work."

This image of "hospitality" and the insights that have followed from it have informed so much of what I have tried to do in the classroom. The idea of being a host has led me to develop many new aspects of my relationship with students. It has also made me realize that hospitality is not something added on to the learning experience, like seasoning to a meal. Rather it is an important ingredient of the recipe itself for good learning.

At its simplest level, the image of hospitality relates to our homes. If I imagine the classroom to be my home, how would I act if I had guests? Actually, hospitality is a lost art in

our society. Where I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania in the 50's, people who came to the door were invited in, workers were offered a drink and a snack, door-to-door salesmen were listened to politely. Now we are reluctant to let anyone into our homes at all. Or we call out threateningly from inside the door: "Who is it?" There may be a difference when we take the initiative to invite guests to our homes. My wife is a wonderful person to welcome people. She sees hospitality as sacramental. From the time she begins preparing for their arrival until after they leave, her attention is wholly devoted to our friends and the experience they are having at our house—the orderliness of the house, the welcome, the food, the attention to meaningful conversation, the goodbyes. Absolutely none of this has anything to do with making an impression. It has everything to do with being natural and making people feel at home. She has her mind off of herself and onto our guests. To her, hospitality is a sacred art designed to give the guest—friend, acquaintance, or stranger—the most meaningful experience we can offer.

In ancient Israel, hospitality was a sacred trust whereby Israel cared for and protected the strangers and aliens in their midst. Hospitality is not just for "people like us," but for people different from ourselves. There was a solidarity with the guest that required their needs be met and that they be treated with kindness. Israelites would offer a great deal and risk a great deal to treat their guests well. Israelites were told to recall that, at one time, they too had been strangers in Egypt and that they should learn from their experience. So too, we teachers were students once. Can we imagine back to what it was like for us? Can we not treat those student-strangers who have been entrusted to us with kindness and thoughtfulness?

Hospitality was also central to the early Christian movement. Proclaimers and healers went from place to place depending on hospitality. It was a means of solidarity, a sign of those with whom you have made a covenant of peace and protection. To give and to receive hospitality was to gain "brothers" and "sisters." In fact, some New Testament writers portrayed hospitality as a metaphor for all Christian relationships. Paul writes the admonition to "Welcome one another." This places hospitality as a sacred act that imitates the way God has welcomed us, as Paul so aptly adds: "just as Christ has welcomed you." Can we as hosts in the classroom not commit ourselves to give such unconditional hospitality to those who come under our pedagogical roof?

I do not know if Dudley thought about such high-minded ideas as he modeled hospitality in the classroom, but I suspect he did. In any case, I have tried to learn from him and to improvise my own version of such welcoming hospitality. How could I make students feel welcome? How could I make them feel at ease? How could I create an atmosphere where people were free to speak and learn without being anxious or fearful? How could I provide an experience that made them glad they came to class on any given day? How could I provide the kind of hospitality that would facilitate for them the most meaningful classroom experience? These are questions that have occupied me in my teaching vocation.

First, like Dudley, I try to arrive before the students do. I know faculty who rush into the room at the last minute or a few minutes late, with an armful of books. They quickly shuffle their papers into some order and then go right into teaching. I do not think that creates the best atmosphere for learning. Often I will come early in order to arrange the chairs and tables in the room to my satisfaction. I will get my papers out and ready for teaching. Then I just walk among the students as they arrive, greeting them, talking with them and asking how they are doing. On the first day of class, I will shake hands with them as they enter the classroom. I will often thank them for signing up for the class and tell them I look forward to being together with them. I, as a teacher, am genuinely grateful that they are there, and I want them to know that. If I have not met

them before, I will learn something about them—where they are from or what program they are in. After the class has been going for some weeks, I will sometimes use this time to ask someone how they are feeling (if they have been sick) or how their family is (if I am aware they have had a crisis). Sometimes I will be able to take a student aside at this time before class and forewarn them confidentially that they did not do so well on a paper I am about to return and inviting them to talk with me about it later if they would like. I also linger after each class as a means to make myself available. From the beginning of the course, I assume that my relationship with individual students will last through the semester and beyond. I would welcome people to my home in this way. Why not to the classroom?

Second, I try to begin on time and end on time. This seems to me to be a matter of basic respect. If some students are late, I do not wait for them. This would penalize students who come on time, and it would teach people that if they come late they will not miss anything. At the same time, I am glad to see students even when they arrive late—and often there are very good reasons why people are late. I just start on time without making a point of it. Many of the students have made great sacrifices to be in school. And some have traveled a good distance on that day to be there. So I feel like I owe it to the students to fill all the class time with good learning experiences.

And I try to end on time. Despite my best efforts, I sometimes find in myself an urge to just keep on making that important point at the end of class, even if it means the students must stay a few minutes longer. But this is not respectful. Besides, at this point, they are giving signals by putting away notebooks and zipping up backpacks. So what are they learning? I used to wait until the last few minutes of the class period to go over the assignment for the next class. Invariably, there was not time to do it well and not time to field questions for clarification. So I would go past the end of the class. Now, I give the assignment for the next class period at the beginning of the class or just after a break. This way I can be sure that the assignment is clear, that the students have had time to ask questions about it, and that I will not go past the ending time of the class. Going beyond the end of class is fundamentally a matter of taking myself and my subject *too* seriously. There is seldom anything so important that it cannot be interrupted or wait until the next time. Otherwise, it is just a matter of poor planning that is thoughtless and inconsiderate.

Third, as an expression of hospitality, I get to know their names. After registration, I request the class list and I begin to memorize it. If there is a photo directory, I correlate the names with the pictures and practice them. Then when I arrive at the first class period, I already know the names, and I begin to correlate the names and photos with the real people. I repeat their names in my mind as I meet them. I usually find some reason to have them talk in pairs during the first class; and while they are talking with each other, I will take the list and practice the names in my head. Even with a class of thirty-five or forty, I can usually name all of them personally without the list before the first class period is over. Of course, I quickly forget! But I practice before the next class and try to recall their names when I see them outside of class. By the second or third class, I know everyone by name. Even at Carthage College, where there was no directory and forty-five students in a class, the effort to know their names was quite workable and paid dividends in establishing the personal nature of learning in the classroom.

This learning of names on my part is helped also by the fact that I lead students through a process that will enable them to know each other's names as well. Knowledge is power, and if the teacher is the only one who has a class list, then students are placed at a decided disadvantage. If they were guests in my home, I would spend a considerable amount of time

introducing the guests to each other. So, all students get a list with the names of all the students. Often, in the first class, I will spend time letting each student introduce herself or himself to the class with a comment of some kind on their part. Then I will stop every few minutes and see if the students could recall the names of the last six or so students who have introduced themselves—without looking at their class list. This gives a chance for them to practice the names. I have the students do this in pairs, so that, as partners, they will begin to get to know at least one other person well.

This business of students knowing each other's names is crucial for generating an ethos of learning in the class. I expect the students to work together in the course—both inside and outside of class time—and to learn from each other. They will meet throughout the class in pairs and triads and small groups. I say to them: "You are going to spend thirty hours together. It would be a good idea if you knew each other's names!" Thirty hours is only for the quarter system. In a semester system, the number of hours is forty or more. People will be together a lot. The point is that the classroom provides a wonderful opportunity to build community. Learning should be a social event. People should come to be with their friends in order to talk about things that matter to them. So the class is a chance to get to know people better and to make new friends. I make sure they get in small groups with different people on a regular basis in each class period, so they can learn from new voices. I have often had students write on their evaluations: "I learned as much from other students as I learned from the teacher." Learning the names in the first class period is a message—that the relationships among the students matter and that they will be your learning partners.

Another thing I do as a matter of hospitality is to communicate with students between classes. Of course when I see them outside of class, I greet them, and I often ask how the class is going for them. But I also e-mail them. I confess that I have done very little to incorporate technology into the classroom or to use the internet site provided by our seminary to foster communication with and among students. I believe everyone would be well served by that, and many of my colleagues use it to great benefit. Nevertheless, what I have managed to do is to prepare a distribution list on my PC of all the students in each class. I will send an e-mail to them before the course begins, welcoming them and saying how much I look forward to the class. Then after each of the weekly classes, I will send an e-mail message telling them how much I appreciated the class, their enthusiastic participation, some conversation that was especially meaningful, or something else that I genuinely enjoyed about the last class. I usually also include a copy of the assignments for the next class as a reminder and as an anticipation of some things we might be doing then. I do this a day or two after most classes. The message is brief and takes little time to share. But it makes clear to the students my own experience of the class and the fact that I am thinking about it beyond the scheduled time. I realize that for some students this is just one more e-mail to open. But for others students, the brief message is an important connection with me, with the class, and with the subject matter. And occasionally I get a response back posing a question or telling me how much the class meant to *them*.

Dudley identified another feature of hospitality as the act of putting on the chalkboard the outline for the day's class period so that people could see what was happening and be prepared for it—a sort of syllabus for each day. I never did so well with tight schedules for an individual class period, partly because I am not that organized and partly because I think of my classes as workshops and therefore change the class plan as I go! Only recently did I come to appreciate fully the importance of what Dudley was doing, especially in relation to the syllabus for the whole course. For years, I had given to students only the barest outline of a syllabus, with a list

of class dates and the overall subjects to be dealt with. I tended to give the assignments class-period-by-class-period. I distributed handouts to be used during the class as the course went along and the handouts for the next assignment. *I* knew what I was doing, but unfortunately the *students* did not know what would happen next until they got the assignments.

Then, some years ago, there was an illness in my family that led me to change my practice. My wife got cancer and endured a three-year siege of it before she got a stem cell transplant that saved her life and restored her health. Also, my wife and I were raising two grandchildren. In addition, we lived ninety miles from LSTC. I came in to the seminary on Sunday evening, stayed at an apartment on campus through the week, and then went home for the weekend on Thursday or Friday. During my wife's illness, however, the seminary helped me work out an arrangement whereby I was able to work at home more days of the week. Even so, I could not be sure I would be able to arrive ahead of any given class to photocopy the handouts. Nor could I be sure I would not need, on any given day, to turn the class over to one of the many colleagues who so graciously volunteered to substitute for me when I could not be there. So I spent the summer developing the entire syllabus for whole semester—class dates and subjects to be covered, assignments for each class in complete detail, every handout for every class, and directions for writing papers. I gave the whole thing out the first class period, almost ninety pages!

I was astounded what a difference it made. It made an extraordinary difference for me. I did not ever have to rush around to get handouts copied and ready. I did not have to formulate the assignment. I could concentrate on planning the class period itself, developing the subject matter, and preparing my spirit for it. And what a difference it made for the students. All their handouts and assignments were organized in one place. They could plan ahead for assignments and papers. They could consult ahead on just what would be involved in the writing of the papers and the basis upon which they would be evaluated. I have always believed that students already have enough reasons built into the classroom experience to be anxious. They do not need *unnecessary* anxiety due to a lack of information or to the inability to plan ahead. So, part of the hospitality I show now is to give them all the information they need about the course so as to alleviate any unnecessary apprehensions. Then they can focus better on the learning itself. I know many teachers have done this as a no-brainer from the beginning of their career. I am just glad I eventually learned it. It's never too late!

Along with this thoughtfulness in letting people know what to expect in the course comes the importance of giving timely feedback to the students' work. When students do an assignment for class and then do not have a chance to discuss it or deal with it in class, this is discouraging. Why prepare for class when the assignment is not relevant to what happens in the class? So I try always to have the students discuss or do a cooperative exercise with their preparations. I also try to return work they turn in on the next class period. For some students, there is a psychological block to moving on to the next material for class until they know how well or how poorly they may have done in previous work. So I am committed (even though I sometimes do not succeed), even when there are written exams or papers due, to give back papers with many comments in the next class period. And it is clear to the students that I have read their work and given extensive reflections and evaluation of it. It seems to be a matter of hospitality to take students seriously by taking their work seriously.

Finally, food is an important aspect of hospitality. Sharing food and drink is the greatest form of community building. Obviously, students cannot share meals together, unless the class agrees to go to a local restaurant before or after class. But much can be done to share food. I have

not done this well, but I know faculty who bring snacks each class period. It creates a festive atmosphere to learning and takes seriously the fact that students will need a break and some sustenance to get through a three-hour seminar—or whatever length it might be. One colleague begins the course by inviting students to take turns bringing snacks for the class. She sets up a calendar of dates for the class, and everyone signs up. Each week the students can look forward to sharing these goodies at break time. Such a practice increases the social relationships among members of the class. Instead of scattering at break time to find coffee machines or student lounges, they stay in the vicinity and talk with each other. Besides, such an arrangement also makes it easier to reconvene the class so as to begin on time again after the break. We should never underestimate the extent to which students appreciate someone bringing nourishment to help them enjoy the class time.

What is the point of all this? All of these elements of hospitality are integral ingredients to good learning. They not only create the safe space for learning; they *comprise* the safe space for learning. They contribute to an ethos of trust and openness. They generate an atmosphere where students and what they say will be received in a hospitable way—honored and engaged constructively. They enable honest and meaningful conversations to take place. They foster learning that can involve challenge and growth. They create community where, at any given time, all can be teachers and learners. In the end, hospitality does not have to do with a series of activities or pedagogical strategies or contextual mechanics. Rather, hospitality has to do with relationships. There can be no productive dialogue without good relationships.

There are other aspects of hospitality that Dudley Riggle did as means to take seriously the work of the students. Everyone has to find their own meaningful way to do it. And when hospitality becomes a natural and integral part of the classroom experience, the results are well worth the effort.

A added note. In an academic institution, hospitality is not just for the classroom. It is for the entrance to the seminary, the library, the cafeteria, the President's office, the Dean's office, the business office, the Registrar's office, the Community Life office, the Admissions office, and so on. In some sense, hospitality belongs to everyone who works at the seminary, from the maintenance staff to the president's secretary. I consider us to be very fortunate at our seminary. I believe I can send a student with a problem to any office in the school and be confident they will be well-received.

I want to lift up as exemplary one of the hospitable places at our seminary: The Language Resource and Writing Center. It is abuzz with activity. When you enter, you see people from domestic and international students conversing with each other in many accents and languages. Here students gather to mentor each other in writing, do group assignments for class, use the computers, take classes on how to study, and get tutoring in English as a Second Language. As you enter, a person sitting at a desk facing the door welcomes you and orients newcomers. The student may also be engaged in his or her own studying. There is a basket of candy bars on the desk for purchase at fifty cents each. Behind the greeter is a large table for conferences or just conversations. It is not unusual to see four or five people around the table meeting and perhaps also eating lunch. All around are colorful art displays, many appearing to have been done by students or their children. Artwork from around the world is everywhere. Photographs of folks at the center dangle from the ceiling.

On the right, is a small kitchen with refrigerator, microwave, dishware and silverware, a mug rack, a sink, and a small table with a few chairs. The refrigerator holds sodas and fruit drinks, also for fifty cents each. Sometimes covered dishes or an order of food from a local

restaurant will be on the table for sharing. There is also a worm compost bin, which everyone knows to use. Next to the kitchen is a kind of meditation room with soft light and soft chairs for intimate conversations. Behind that is the director's office, door always open. On the left are three small side rooms with doors for speaking privately but with walls that are windows for openness. In each room, one can see two or three people talking to each other across a table. Behind the main entrance room is a larger room with stations for sixteen computers. Most of the time, these are occupied with students doing papers or projects or checking e-mail.

The director of the center, Rob Worley, is a quiet and affirming person who provides the comfortable presence that allows people to find the resources and the kindred spirits with whom to work. It is the closest thing to a Montessori classroom I have seen in higher education—excellent ingredients for teaching and learning. And it is the atmosphere of hospitality and mutuality provided by everyone that is so striking. We can all learn from it.