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Reviewing *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom*



I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom.
by Patrick Allitt.

University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, Copyright 2005. xi + 244 pages.
ISBN 0-8122-1887-6. \$21.95 (paper).

by Jeffrey W. Barbeau, Ph.D.

What distinguishes teaching excellence in higher education today? Patrick Allitt's *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom* answers this question through insightful pedagogy and an upbeat narrative of his experience teaching American history to undergraduates at Emory University. Allitt, who holds the Arthur Blank Chair for Teaching Excellence, uses the title phrases "I'm the Teacher, You're the Student" to convey the central theme of the book: the distinction between faculty and students creates space for meaningful learning and teaching in higher education. "It's a great life being a professor," Allitt reminds his readers (*passim*), but the work of a faculty member encompasses a range of pleasures, challenges, and professional and ethical responsibilities. Allitt's book is a stimulating account of university life, pedagogy, and lessons drawn from American history; it describes the joyful labor of a professor shaping the lives of university students in North America during one semester.

Allitt's narrative style distinguishes his work from other texts on education. Each chapter tackles a major theme—technology, plagiarism, and grading, for example—while maintaining a continuous sequence of 42 class meetings with his students. The story begins with a description of how he prepares to teach the course "The Making of Modern America: 1877–2000." Allitt draws reader interest quickly by conveying in a lively style the mindset of the professor and sets the tone of the book early on by explaining how he establishes goals, prepares the syllabus, and engages student interest at the commencement of every course. He avoids assigning books by academic historians, for example, since excessive jargon and arduous prose send "most undergraduates into a deep sleep" (p. 10). He learns every student's name and wears a shirt, tie, and jacket as a visible sign of his authority—but the jacket appears only briefly:

[i]t was new once, a long time ago, but now it's something close to a mere theatrical prop, always hanging on the back of my office door and just picked up a few times each term for moments like this. (p. 27)

Allitt's observations on university life extend to students and faculty alike, and he rarely withholds his opinions. Students are often "quirky about religion" (p. 22), are unable to locate nations and states on maps (pp. 45–46), and, almost universally, cannot write:

They have not done enough writing to become good at it. They've been cursed with a lifetime of multiple-choice examinations instead, so even the highly intelligent ones come to writing as a strange and alien activity that is occasionally

forced upon them. But writing is an activity that needs constant practice if you're going to be good at it. (p. 83)

Although Allitt admits that he finds each new class "unattractive" (p. 18), he grows fonder of each one as the semester progresses by learning the students' names and learning styles, calling on them to draw diagrams on the board, dialoging with them in discussion periods, and challenging them to read aloud "with feeling." Allitt subjects university faculty to the same rigorous scrutiny with humor that will delight most anyone who has dared to teach others. New lecturers discover a host of awkward bodily gestures and verbal ticks that require conscious self-management:

The first few times you try lecturing, you discover that your body does things over which you have no control. In the early days I used to have a rather acute sway, backward and forward and from side to side. The effect brought to onlookers' minds the old song "What shall we do with the drunken sailor?" Mrs. Allitt caught sight of it once and brought it to a hasty stop. . . . We've all got mannerisms and gestures, of course; the issue is to make reasonable ones and to know what you're doing. (pp. 18–19)

Allitt's pedagogy naturally won't appeal to everyone. He certainly recognizes the difficulties of both teaching and the experience of being a student, which he modestly exemplifies through an amusing account of his own cross-cultural learning experience in Spain:

Sitting there in class, it all came back to me: being a student is difficult. . . . I practically wept with frustration sometimes at my inability to grasp a concept due to the teachers' determination not to explain it to us in a language that we could already speak. (p. 65)

Allitt's account of serving as a teacher for local senior citizens (an "unalloyed pleasure" [p. 106]) illustrates how every student audience brings something different to the table of learning. His title phrase "I'm the Teacher" exemplifies the awareness of distance, authority, and experience that he holds sacred in the profession. He refuses to allow his pupils to discuss their personal relationships with him, preferring, for example, to leave a weeping student to work through her difficulty in private while he sheepishly retreats to the hallway to assist a classmate. He isn't cold, but intentional. Yet the instance sheds light on the ambiguous relationship between teaching and learning, especially in the context of Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries where the line between mentoring and counseling, spiritual formation and enmeshment, can be especially difficult to distinguish. In some schools, professors may quite literally serve as pastors of the same students they teach. One wonders how Allitt would advise professors to approach these common educational contexts.

Allitt also idealizes some teaching practices that would be difficult for professors at many teaching-oriented institutions to fully realize. His emphasis on rereading every assigned text in the course along with students is a daunting, if noble, recommendation, a nearly impossible expectation when paired with heavy course loads, administrative duties, and persistently-deferred research projects in many undergraduate institutions. Notably, his movement from the nuts-and-bolts of method to the practice of education risks allowing his story to turn to a series of lessons in modern U.S. history, but I found

these later sections on Vietnam, communism, and the Cold War to be helpful illustrations of the relationship between pedagogy and everyday classroom experiences.

In sum, Patrick Allitt's *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student* is a delightful book for current educators as well as students thinking about a career in higher education. Although Allitt claims that he is not a "great fan of educational innovations" (p. 84), readers will find in Allitt's reflections a range of innovative and thoughtfully-crafted techniques for bridging the gap between professors and students. The text includes a useful index as well as an appendix with a copy of the syllabus, research paper instructions, and the final exam (with answers). Allitt's *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student* contains witty writing and numerous practical applications, as well as successfully engages readers' attention from start to finish. As he notes in the preface, "One thing I always hope to show students is that what at first glance seems dry, technical, and dull is really absorbing, exciting, and entertaining" (p. x). Allitt's book exemplifies that crucial aim.

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