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Learning to Hate Learning Objectives



Geoffrey Moss for The Chronicle Review

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PREMIUM

Like many of my colleagues, I assume, I'm growing deeply frustrated with the need for "learning objectives"—that list of superficial projections and assumptions that most syllabi these days are required to contain ("Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to ..."). Perhaps

learning objectives make sense for most courses outside the humanities, but for me—as, no doubt, for many others—they bear absolutely no connection to anything that happens in the classroom.

A colleague of mine says that, for him, "there is no teaching, only learning." That is true for me, too. I can teach only when I learn. If I'm asked to teach the same course more than once, I always reshape and renew the material, sometimes in its entirety, so I can gain different kinds of insights and ideas from what my students have to say; indeed, I never really feel I've fully encountered a text until I've discussed it in some depth with my students in class. The problem is, this kind of teaching does not correlate with the assumption of my local accreditation body, which sees teaching—as perhaps it is, in many disciplines—as passing on a body of knowledge and skills to a particular audience.

Last academic year, for example, I taught a film course for clinical-psychology students on the ways in which documentary cinema, creativity, and psychological pain illuminate one another. We discussed how the camera can document (and fail to document) psychological suffering, and we considered some of the ethical questions that arise when these documentaries are shown to the public for the purposes of entertainment. We talked about what psychoanalytic insights can bring to the relationship between cinema



and emotional experience, considering the ways in which cinema can help us to understand what takes place in the therapeutic situation.

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I also taught a literature course for depth-psychology students, in which we talked about the insight that literature can give us into the human condition, suffering, and our responsibility to one another. We talked about the ways in which the study of literature can help to develop and nurture observation, analysis, empathy, and self-reflection, all of which are essential for the practice of psychotherapy, to which language and narrative are fundamental, in the sense that psychotherapy is the retelling of a person's life in the form of a new narrative. Psychotherapy deals with motives, especially hidden or disguised motives; as such, it helps clarify literature on two levels: the level of the writing itself, and the level of character action within the text. We discussed how both reading and writing can be illuminated by the psychotherapeutic mind-set, as they respond to motives not always available to rational thought.

I do not expect the students who take my courses to absorb any particular "body of knowledge" or attain any new "skills." On the contrary, for the most part, they will probably develop new kinds of doubts and anxieties, concerns and hesitations. They will not learn anything that has any advantageous practical implications, nor will they learn anything that can be "applied" to any other situation, except in the most oblique ways. They will not develop any new "transferable benchmark skills." They will not achieve any "goals or outcomes." Indeed, they will not have "achieved" anything, except, perhaps, to doubt the value of terms like "achievement" when applied to reading literature.

I'm currently working on a syllabus for a new course I'm planning to teach on animal studies, based on the essays in Cary Wolfe's anthology *Zoontologies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003). For those unfamiliar with it, this marvelous book contains a series of scholarly reflections about "those nonhuman beings called animals," which, according to Wolfe, "pose philosophical and ethical questions that go to the root not just of what we think but of who we are. Their presence asks: What happens when the Other can no longer safely be assumed to be human?" In this course, I hope, along with my students, to advance my insight into human relations both now and in the past, and to learn more about animals as beings in themselves, separate from our human knowledge of them. To describe this as a learning objective is demeaning and reductive to all



I know this will be a difficult class to teach. It may well be a depressing, soul-crushing experience because it will involve confrontation with the torture suffered on a daily basis by animals bred solely for slaughter. Sadly, though not often acknowledged openly, killing represents by far the most common form of human interaction with animals. Humans kill animals for food, for pleasure, to wear, and even as religious acts, yet despite the ubiquity of this killing, analyzing the practice has generally remained the exclusive purview of animal-rights advocates. That is something I hope to discuss in my course. It is not, however, an "objective."

Yet I need to include a set of required "learning objectives" in my syllabus for this class. If I had a choice, I would—like many of my colleagues, no doubt—ignore this requirement, which I feel is cosmetic at best, and, at worst, specious and arrogant. (Who am I to say what others might learn from a book, a film, a discussion, an insight?) That is the problem with learning objectives for courses like these—courses in the arts and humanities whose aim is to expose students to various texts (visual and material as well as written) and let them draw their own conclusions.

But since I have no choice, the least I can do is come as close as possible to telling the truth. Here is my first draft:

After completing this course, the student (and the professor) will be able to:

1. Agonize over the barbarity of our treatment of nonhuman Others.
2. Lose sleep over the pointlessness of human and animal suffering.
3. Identify themselves as complicit with torturers every time they eat meat.
4. Passively accept their helplessness in the face of enormous injustice.
5. Doubt all their existing moral and ethical assumptions.
6. Rethink their assessment of themselves as decent human beings.
7. Start to worry about the futility of human and animal existence.
8. Discover how little they really know.

 Obviously, none of these "objectives" are "assessable," nor would I ever want to "assess"  them. I don't know how I will measure student "performance" in this class, except to observe certain habits of mind, nuances of thinking, an appreciation for subtleties and ambiguities of argument, and an appreciation of the capacity for empathy, as well as the need, on certain occasions, to resist this capacity. There is no reason for anyone to take the course except a need to understand more about the consciousness of others, including nonhuman animals.

I don't know whether accreditation works or whether it matters. I only know that, for me, teaching and learning are inseparable and driven not by "learning objectives," goals, outcomes, performance indicators, or assessment rubrics, but by complicated, often painful, but always irresistible compulsions.

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