



THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Sometimes Courses Can't Be 'Enjoyable'

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | AUGUST 01, 2003 ✓ PREMIUM

Last fall, for the first time, I taught an undergraduate course I'd entitled "Understanding Suicide." Through an unfortunate accident of scheduling, the class was held late in the evening, from 7 to 9:45 p.m., in an airless basement classroom with no windows. The setting seemed to create an appropriate mood. Over the semester, I guided 18 students (eventually, only 12) through a series of difficult, often cheerless texts that describe and analyze the disturbing phenomenon of suicide. We studied attitudes toward suicide in different times and cultures, from ancient Rome to modern Japan. We read Durkheim's *Suicide* and Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus"; we listened to a tape of Sylvia Plath reading her last poems; we discussed the pros and cons of euthanasia, and watched movies like Robert Bresson's gloomy existential treatise *The Devil, Probably*.

The course was offered as an academic elective for art students, and those who had enrolled in the class, I soon discovered, had a variety of reasons for doing so. One young woman told me she wanted help understanding the death of her best friend, who had committed suicide the previous summer. Some came from families with a history of mental illness. Some had attempted suicide themselves. One student disappeared from class halfway through the course. It turned out that he suffered from manic depression, and had been institutionalized after experiencing a psychotic episode (he returned to class with his head shaved from the electroshock treatment). I intended the course to be challenging and rigorous, but I hoped it would also prove enlightening, especially for the gifted, creative artists who make up the student body at the Maryland Institute College of Art. As a result, when reading my teaching evaluations for the course, I was slightly disturbed to discover that one of them had described it as "great fun."

Perhaps, I thought, this was simply the student's somewhat inarticulate way of

explaining that he'd found the course exhilarating and eye-opening, or perhaps that he appreciated watching movies in class and talking a lot about American pop culture (I remember that he was especially animated during a discussion about the death of Kurt Cobain). The expectation that successful classes will also be "entertaining" may be so widespread that students can conceive of no other paradigm with which to frame their positive education experiences. Or perhaps this student did, in fact, find the course "fun," in a ghoulish, cemetery-tour sort of way. If so, then I regard myself as having failed, at least as far as this young man was concerned. My main objective in the course was to help the students begin to think about some of the most fundamental -- though perhaps the most bleak -- questions confronting human consciousness, such as why some of us elect not to go on with our lives.

Most challenging university courses can be made enjoyable, of course, by a gifted teacher. Still, it seems to me that there are certain fields of inquiry -- mostly, but not all, in areas of the humanities -- which, if they are well taught, should be anything but fun: a literature class on Greek tragedy, for example, or a history class that examines the Holocaust, or a philosophy course on the writing of Schopenhauer. Such classes, if successful, should motivate students to think about some very profound and important questions -- about evil, about consciousness, about the human condition -- which, while in many ways rewarding, should lead to the kind of enlightenment that is sobering rather than pleasurable. Eventually, students may come to understand the role played by such questions in human existence, and that understanding may lead to a form of pleasure. But if such courses are taught well, there will be little immediate gratification. Disillusionment is a more likely outcome, in the short term at least.

For the last four years, I have also taught an undergraduate course called "Apocalypse Culture" -- another class that, if successful, should be anything but "great fun." We begin by studying the Books of Daniel and Revelation, and go on to consider some of the many ways in which the end of the world has been depicted -- in art, literature, and contemporary popular culture. My main aim in the class is to try to get my students to make sense of the eschatological impulse in American culture, from Pentecostal evangelism to Hollywood's multiple versions of Armageddon. Of course, there are

always some light moments; it's hard to keep a straight face when looking at some of the more bizarre contemporary illustrations of the rapture, in which the righteous are suddenly whisked skyward, leaving neat piles of clothes scattered around suburban lawns. On the whole, however, it is a very serious course, developed not only to introduce students to the apocalyptic imperative in American culture, but to familiarize them with some of history's more destructive and violent episodes. I require students in this class to read some very disturbing texts, including Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* and *The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosinski's horrifying account of human brutality during the Second World War.

It is not only in the humanities that one finds areas of learning that, if well taught, should not be much "fun." Medical residents, for example, are subjected to notoriously exhausting shifts, partly -- at least in theory -- to help inoculate them against their patients' individual suffering. Although it has become increasingly controversial in recent years, the boot-camp-like experience of being on call for 36 hours straight is supposed to toughen the young physician. Without it, many argue, the doctor's ability to cope with the anxiety, frustration, and seeming chaos of the hospital ward would be undermined. Somewhat similarly, students of mortuary science are generally required to take courses in topics like thanatology and grief counseling, which prepare them to deal with handling human corpses and face the anguish of bereaved relatives.

Clearly, there is a great deal of sense to this: An overemotional doctor would be as impractical as a weepy or squeamish mortician. But in nonvocational humanities courses, where there is nothing "practical" at stake beyond pure intellectual inquiry, there is little that compels educators to offer courses dealing with the more dismal aspects of the human condition. After all, many students expect their courses to be in some way entertaining, and it's a lot easier for professors to meet that expectation by designing courses on subjects that are in themselves considered pleasurable and uplifting. In addition, many professors may have a natural fear that, by asking their students to read depressing texts, they themselves may be considered depressing, even dislikable people. As we all know, positive student evaluations are an important criterion in the tenure process, and for a faculty member to risk teaching courses that students find painful or miserable is to risk those same students' "blaming the messenger" for the



Looking back at my own days as a student, there were plenty of courses I found "fun," plenty of lectures I never wanted to end. The most enjoyable of those courses tended to be taught by professors who were also great performers, whose lectures were often vehicles for the display of their captivating, charismatic personalities. In retrospect, however, I realize that although I remember those professors clearly, I don't recall much of what I learned under their guidance. In fact, I see now that the teachers whose classes had the greatest influence on me were those I didn't find particularly enjoyable at the time.

In an essay published in *The Journal of Educational Sociology* in 1941, Mortimer J. Adler argued that "the practices of educators, even if they are well-intentioned, who try to make learning less painful than it is, not only make it less exhilarating, but also weaken the will and minds of those upon whom this fraud is perpetrated." Adler, founder of the Great Books program, believed that all genuine learning involves some degree of suffering. "Unless we acknowledge that every invitation to learning can promise pleasure only as the result of pain," he argued, "... all of our invitations to learning ... will be as much buncombe as the worst patent medicine advertising."

Perhaps Adler overstates his case a little. There are many university courses that can be insightful and challenging while also being vastly enjoyable. Many of my students report getting great pleasure from courses in film history, popular culture, children's literature, and modern comedy, to name but a few examples. In courses like "Understanding Suicide" and "Apocalypse Culture," however, "enjoyment" is usually out of place, if only because the most sobering aspects of the human condition are not easy to come to terms with.

In situations like these, the teacher should best be considered an equivalent to the understanding but necessarily remote psychoanalyst, whose insight into the patient's condition derives from a lack of emotional involvement in the case. Or perhaps teachers should consider themselves analogous to priests, whose distance from the flock is an important condition of their elevated position; lively sermons may be acceptable from time to time, but most of the congregation would look with suspicion on a priest whose



services have a reputation for always being "fun."

My favorite comparison for the teacher of such courses, however, is to the psychopomp -- the shamanic leader who acts as a mediator between the spirit and the realm of the dead. The psychopomp orients her charges so that they can safely embark upon the next level of existence. The spirits may eventually appreciate their guide's expertise -- but the journey is unlikely to be fun.

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