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Dealing with Detraction on the Fly

Richard Newton, *University of Alabama (formerly Elizabethtown College)*

Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events

May 16, 2018

Tags: teaching methods | lesson plans | distractions | detractions

Over the past few years, I've come to cherish the opportunity to observe others teach. Teaching my own courses, I don't get the chance to do this as much as I would like, but it's one of my favorite parts of the profession.

I love a good lesson plan. I appreciate the confidence carried by teachers who know where they want to take a class. A detailed outline plotting the way one intends to lead students impresses me. I am that guy . . . the one that will start the slow-clap after witnessing an instructor's smooth execution.

Although these are the moments that make the highlight reel of best pedagogical practices, my sense is that effective teaching is truly on display when the plan falls short. It's when the setting—whether a classroom, conference, presentation, or one-on-one discussion—presents detractions and the teacher must deal with them on the fly.

When a traumatic event factors into the syllabus, we should take extra care to distinguish between distractions and detractions. Trauma can leave students raw, and we would be callous to begrudge the wandering or even hardening of the mind. Distraction can be a way of dealing

with the circumstances. To me, detraction is a different story. It involves the active placement of obstacles to impede the learning agenda. This is when someone comes to loggerheads with the teacher and the lesson being taught. Detractions have to be dealt with or the class, and those on board with it, will flounder.

Detractions also differ from disagreement. The contextual experience of trauma makes consensus near impossible. Although life would be easier were we all to agree, consensus is a bonus, not a condition. The problems that disagreements bring pale in the face of those caused by detractors who use disagreement to threaten the educational agency of those in the room.

The HigherEd journalism beat and the academic blogosphere have chronicled the reasons why faculty might steer clear of engaging traumatic events in the classroom. There's no reason to rehash those here. Nor will I repeat the ways this isn't a choice in the same way for all people. But as the semester wraps up, and teachers get reflective (after recovering, of course), I thought I might share a few of the more subtle ways I've seen teachers deal with detraction on the fly. The moves were improvised, but my sense is that the tactics can be practiced.

Put Out the Fire

If you teach long enough, you are bound to get someone intent on harming the people interested in your lesson. This sort of detractor is a flamethrower, using every chance to burn your lesson plan into cinders. Some do this for sport. Others have a bone to pick. You'll never really know in the moment. Nor will they.

Some teachers shut this down with decisive quickness, but if this isn't a play available to you, then you need to keep in mind the physics of the situation. As much as we're supposed to "reach one, each one," the job is to teach those in the room. Obstacles to that teaching must be navigated, even when that obstacle is a student's behavior. Left to their own devices, flamethrowers will combust, so how might you starve the fire?

Don't give the flamethrower the air of your attention. Choose to engage other people in the class by inviting only those who have not spoken with a chance to share. Or find one neutral-to-productive element in the flamethrower's statement, interrupt with a restatement of the point, and redirect toward someone else. Ultimately your job is to win the room, not to throw flames with the heckler. If you get them on your side, you'll have contained the flamethrower until it burns out.

Disrupt the Momentum

Detractors remind us just how much teaching relies on momentum. When everyone is agreeable and goes with the flow, teaching feels easy, or at least easier. At the same time though, we know that learning involves stress, pressure, and tension at the intersection of preconceived notions and the challenge of new information. Detractors keep us honest about this process, even though they're not helping us bring the class to the desired educational destination.

We can repurpose disruption, the detractor's favorite tool, for the purpose of teaching. If you can tell that something has happened to stoke the detractor's fire, call a class time out. You can hold a few moments of silence from the front of the room until you're ready for class to resume. You can take a five-minute break, let people stretch, use the restroom, and leave the class for a moment. Some have implemented the latter to great avail. Putting the brakes on a class is a good way to marshal the favor of the group and disrupt the detractor's plan.

Take Notes

I began this post professing my love of the lesson plan. My affection has many facets. The written lesson plan gives the teacher a tangible record of intention. It is proof of what you wanted to happen and an explanation of what you were willing to do to manifest that wish. In these times a paper trail is never a bad idea.

Lesson plans are living documents. Some people like to take notes on them after a class (and even during if they're feeling dexterous) to note the changes as they come. I like having a record from which I can make sense of what occurred. It can help the next time one runs in a detractor. And in case the situation doesn't go away, you have documentation to show how invested you were in making the class work. Detractors rarely can do the same.

"Know when to Hold 'em...Know when to fold 'em."

Finally, and this cannot be stressed enough, you might need to call it a day. Excellent teaching doesn't have a time quota. One certainly should not exceed an agreed upon time, but we so easily forget that there may be a virtue to ending a class early. Some teachers can gracefully introduce a prompt that class time is better spent leaving students to reflect on their own. When detractors are involved, participant energy can be depleted in an unusual manner. If there's no more good to come from being together, then don't stay together. Bring the class to a coda and resume at another time.

These are just a few tactics worth keeping in your back pocket for the next time you encounter a detractor. If you have some to share, please do so in the comments section or on social media. The more, the merrier.

<https://wabash.center/2018/05/dealing-with-detraction-on-the-fly/>