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"On the other side, it didn't say nothin'":

Boundaries, Limits, and Trespasses

I hope most people will have recognized my title, but I've been wrong before. It's drawn from Woody Guthrie's original version of "This Land is Your Land," and it's a verse that often gets skipped. I was reminded of it when Pete Seeger died. I won't sing it, but it's about a "no trespassing" sign. The other side, Woody sang, "was meant for you and me." I've spent much of my career considering those signs, and some of it on the other side of them.

Let me start with some anecdotes. I'll begin by quickly describing five situations.

One. Last fall I volunteered to be a faculty mentor, and was assigned to a new part-time teacher in another department. Early in the term we met a couple of times to discuss things in general, and at one point she talked about how much she dreaded the end-of-term course evaluations. They seemed useless, she said, and she was especially concerned that the numerical scores would have consequences for whether she might have her contract renewed. I suggested that she might try a mid-term evaluation, and share the results with the class, partly because she might be able to improve the course, and partly because it would help the students see that their views actually counted for something. She thought that might be a good idea, but could not imagine how she could spare the time it would take from the heavy, regular demands of the prescribed curriculum.

Two. A few years ago a student in my "The Page and the Stage" course stopped participating along about the end of February; he didn't add anything, as far as I could see, to his group's research on a play to be produced locally, and though he showed up for their group presentation he didn't actually contribute. A week or so later was the last time I saw him in class; a few days later he posted on a class online bulletin board discussion, but that was

the end of his engagement. I didn't know why. I wanted to put a grade of
"Withdrawn" on his transcript, so he wouldn't have to have three credit hours
worth of zero in his grade point average: it seemed to me that losing the time
and the tuition was plenty of penalty. (A colleague at a conference called a
variant of this "root beer grading": "A and W," she explained; "you either get
an A or you withdraw without penalty"). But St. Thomas, like many
universities, has a deadline beyond which you cannot withdraw from a course
without academic penalty: in other words, unless you officially withdraw from
the course before that date, your grade is F.

Three. During my first couple of years of teaching at St. Thomas, I began to
believe that what almost all of my first year English students really needed
in order to read literature was to learn how to read differently. I thought
that in order to help them read actively, to engage deeply with the text, I
needed to be working with texts they found familiar and apparently easy, so
that I could help them see just how problematic they really were.
Unfortunately, the English Department's curriculum required me to begin with
Chaucer and Spenser, whose syntax and diction posed problems as daunting for
them as Anglo-Saxon had posed for me as a graduate student. Five parallel
sections of the course all followed that historical sequence, and lunchtime
conversations among my colleagues all dealt with ways of helping students
through *The Canterbury Tales*. They regularly reported how their students came
to love "The Knight's Tale." I didn't have much to say.

Four. For most of my career almost all of my most rewarding work, as a scholar
or a contributor to community activities or as a participant in university
governance, has been done in close collaboration with others. The best
experiences were ones in which, at the conclusion, none of those involved was
sure who had contributed what. As a teacher, though, I worked in a sealed
silo. I wasn't exactly conscious of that, at first, but it was certainly the
case that there was no real possibility of sharing in any authentic way what
you were experiencing, much less involving another teacher in it. As I became
more aware of that isolation, I began thinking about the possibility of
teaching collaboratively. Everything about the situation made that seem pretty
much beyond the bounds of the possible.

Five. After a couple of decades of spending most of my time making extensive
comments on student papers, I began to realize that students rarely read the
comments, and when they did they understood them as "corrections," as me
telling them what they shouldn't have done, fixing their mistakes. I made the

comments longer, more elaborate, more ingratiating, more conversational. It didn't work – and it remained true that the comments on the final term papers generally didn't get read at all. I remember once seeing a student pick up a term paper, check the mark at the end, and casually drop the paper, covered with my thoughtful, helpful comments, into a wastebasket.

Inkshedding

At this point, I'll invite you to write for five minutes. What I'll be asking you to do is something you may be unfamiliar with, but it began in the mid-seventies; it's called "inkshedding," and [explanation; it's not the sort of "jot something down" that folks sometimes ask audiences to do; we're going to be reading and using these text, so take the time you need to make your issue clear].

I'd like you to take a couple of minutes to think about about something you wanted to do but couldn't – or did even though you thought you shouldn't. Or something you think someone else might have wanted to do, and didn't. When you've decided on something, write without stopping for five minutes about that, being explicit enough that a stranger will be able to see what the issue is. Save what you've written; we'll come back to it.

Institutional Contexts

When I talk about teaching with colleagues at conferences or over coffee, often the conversation is about the institutional constraints faculty labour under, about what makes our jobs so difficult. We know that such complaints are often dismissed by university administrators – and, of course, the public. It's easy to say that postsecondary teachers in institutions like universities are far less constrained than their colleagues in the schools and the community colleges. It's easy to say it because it's true. Compare the freedom enjoyed by, say, a full professor of eighteenth century literature with the onerous obligations dumped on a fifth-grade teacher in any public school: lesson plans, reports, special education programs, parent conferences, high-stakes tests, "volunteer" extracurricular commitments. You'd think that should preclude any whining about constraints by us privileged denizens of the ivied halls.

I used to call it rationalization when my colleagues explained that they thought some teaching idea a great one, but that their circumstances made it impossible to try it. The dean would never stand for it, they said, the department chair would veto it, the students wouldn't go along with it. I

argued, for example, that in fact no one was going to force a tenured full professor not only to give a final examination but also to count it as some arbitrary percentage of a final mark, even though the university calendar mandated such a practice. I claimed that failing to hold formal classes for the required 150 minutes a week of seat time was not going to bring the wrath of the Dean down upon them. (In fact, as I discovered in a short sojourn in administration, the wrath of a Dean is a singularly ineffectual tool.)

I still believe that many of the perceived boundaries limiting what we can do are less real than many think. But I have changed my mind about the power of those institutional and situational constraints. I've become much more aware of the potential such constraints have to shape our behaviour -- especially when they are not consciously recognized or explicitly stated. They can prevent us from acting in ways that are consistent with our own most important values and priorities.

A handy term for the consistency we lose as we ease into our professional niche is offered by Patricia Cranston: she says that as we lose the coherence between deeply held values and everyday practice we sacrifice what she calls "authentic teaching."

Like everyone else, we live and work in situations in which our choices are radically constrained, often in ways we're not even aware of. I'd like this morning to invite you to think with me about some of those boundaries, those borders, those constraints, especially the ones we usually don't notice.

Structural constraints

There are, of course, limits that are structural and physical. Some are very obvious; for example, logistic constraints like timetables, classroom configurations, enrolments. Yes, in composition courses or seminars explicit control over enrolments is exerted, but in general class sizes are seen as a matter of waiting to see what happens and coping. This matters. Too many students, for a teacher who believes in dialogue and one on one meetings, or too few, for one who believes in organizing groups to do explorations of the subject matter, can leave you falling back on what works most easily, often what is most conventional.

Similarly, it's only very recently, in my experience, that physical classroom configurations have been considered to be anything one had much control over.

University teachers commonly are assigned whatever is convenient for the

institution -- usually determined by enrolment numbers, tracked by an impersonal administrative database. Whether the room you walked into in September had fixed seating, ranked auditorium rows, tablet chairs or movable tables, was a matter rather like the weather, except that fewer people talked about it. The physical space is simply a given, to be coped with like a blizzard or exulted in like a few weeks of balmy sun.

Timetables are a similar issue. Whether a class meets three times a week for fifty minutes, twice for 75, or once for 150, for example, is not usually seen as under anyone's control, or as a pedagogical choice. (Or at least it hasn't been for most of my career. If you see engaging students in group processes around shared enterprises as central, you'll need to deal somehow with the constraints imposed by a class meeting lasting a mere fifty minutes -- and similarly, if you're a lecturer you'll find a potentially interminable three-hour evening class a particularly difficult challenge. Obviously, in such cases a teacher forced to teach in a way which does not fit her priorities must either rethink those priorities (this is not always a bad thing, incidentally) or simply succumb -- a consequence which can lead to a long-term unconscious acceptance of alienation as a condition of employment.

Some institutional limits are less explicit -- equally important, but perhaps not quite so obviously marking boundaries and erecting "no trespassing" signs.

Consider, for instance, the elaborate structures we've built around credits and marks. Of course, it's regularly argued when the issue is raised that we have to have marks, that the system would break down if students had nothing to work for and we had no way of evaluating them -- for them, for each other, for the rest of the university, and for the world at large. Our institution could not survive without a system of credits, so that we can track what students have taken, establish structures of requirements that everyone has to follow and that can be transferred from one context to another, and that are commonly understood.

But suppose you were a teacher committed to the principle that paid work is likely to be perfunctory work, that inauthentic or "extrinsic" rewards lessen engagement and learning, as argued by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, and popularized by Alfie Kohn. The fact that each student expects every piece of her work to be rewarded with a mark, decided unilaterally by the teacher, creates a situation in which that teacher's actions are necessarily in conflict with her beliefs. To continue in such a situation for years is either to continue to be profoundly uncomfortable or to make the adjustment, to get

used to it, to forget about it, and to become a teacher working in conflict with your own fundamental values without knowing it. Over time it's difficult to avoid developing calluses on the more vulnerable parts of your identity.

Policy constraints

There are, of course, university policies that create explicit constraints and limits. Paradoxically, many of them are the ones intended to promote "good teaching": university guidelines on teaching, structures for evaluating candidates on the basis of teaching for hiring, promotion, tenure, awards, etc. Like many of the other pressures on teachers, these cannot be characterized as necessarily negative. Indeed, many universities are justly proud of the progress made in recent decades toward properly valuing teaching as part of a university's central mission. It is important to recognize, however, that such measures and policies can have unintended and damaging consequences for individual teachers. Structures for evaluating teaching, particularly mandated and summative teaching evaluation forms, generate "ratings" which can be used by promotion and tenure committees, and sometimes published.

Leaving aside questions about the validity of such strategies or the reliability of the numbers generated, it is often noted that young teachers in disciplines that depend on challenging deep-seated assumptions among their students find that pursuing such challenges can generate a good deal of discomfort among the students. This in turn can result in "low numbers" on the teaching forms. Similarly, we all know about teaching practices which render many students uncomfortable -- a common example is "group work," which students used to the competitive, individualistic practices of most school contexts often object to. This can pose a serious problem for a teacher – especially a young one, beginning a career – who finds herself threatened by the use of the ratings numbers in her tenure portfolio or her application for a job elsewhere (paradoxically, often a job at a university most explicitly concerned with hiring good, committed teachers).

Social constraints

And then there are social constraints, boundaries which can be nearly invisible. They're embedded in the language around us and thus much less likely to be recognized. The social assumptions around the role of "professor," for instance, among colleagues, the public, and especially students, have powerful influences on what we do, even though we may not

regularly attend to or be conscious of them. Expectations about what happens in class sessions are built into the language we use to talk about them -- we still do usually call them "lectures," even if what happens isn't lecturing at all; and people hired to conduct them are often still called "lecturers." Or "Professors": indeed, a colleague of mine once remarked that just as we expect students to study, we expect professors to profess.

The tacit shaping of thought facilitated by this kind of discourse affects students' assumptions about, and expectations of, teachers. It's easy to say -- again, because it's true -- that a central part of a teacher's job is to confront, make explicit, analyse, and alter such assumptions and expectations. But in important ways we are like fish in a position to have to "deal with" water: keeping the presence of these elements in our consciousness is, in practice, extremely difficult, not only for our students but for ourselves.

Every teacher, for example, is subject to the virtually universal expectation of students that her language will be evaluative -- and summatively evaluative at that. One classic example occurs in moderating class discussions, where the teacher's standard move to promote further thought about an issue -- "Yes. Anyone else?" -- is interpreted by the student as actually meaning, "No. Wrong." The attempt to generate authentic dialogue faces this challenge in every class, and a teacher who believes that engaging in real talk is an irreplaceable way to learn has to push this rock up the slope every term – or gradually slip into accepting the call and response of an interrupted lecture as dialogue.

In the same way, as an English teacher, I have been aware for many years of the way in which my marginal comments on student writing are read -- regardless of my intentions -- as evaluations. "I don't understand" is taken not as an invitation for explanation, or a recounting of a reader's experience, but as another brick in an incremental evaluative wall, equivalent to "bad." Though of course it is possible that any given teacher, over an extended period of time with a given student or class, might be able to alter this first, and fundamental, character of the relationship, the tacit presumption that the teacher's fundamental role is an evaluative one remains a "default mode" against which one must unremittingly struggle. Or which one gets used to.

I first began thinking about this after a presentation at a writing conference in 1994, where Janet Giltrow and Michele Valiquette of Simon Fraser reported an impressive study of individual conferences between writing centre tutors

and students. They were exploring students' understanding of, and reactions to, marginal comments written by professors. Almost universally, what the tutors reported was the student writers' profound misunderstanding and their repressed anger. This anger often occurred in response to comments that (to an observer) seemed clearly non-evaluative. Students took them, almost always, as negative evaluations. They heard inquiry as sarcasm, and took helpful advice as unilateral condemnation. Even when the commentary was not actually negative or sarcastic -- as too much was -- students expected that the discourse register was not one which would occur in a dialogic situation, but in a one-way evaluative one. They understood their job as being not to respond, but to submit.

More recently, Patrick Dias and his colleagues at McGill and Carleton (in a book called *Worlds Apart*) have demonstrated just how ubiquitous this response to teacher language can be. In one context after another, they find that recent graduates of professional schools experience profound difficulty in learning to accept editorial commentary from co-workers and superiors on their written texts as anything other than summative evaluations, equivalent to an unsatisfactory mark.

My own way of characterizing this is to say that the teacher always has a megaphone strapped to her face: every utterance is magnified by the power relationships inscribed in the classroom. It is no accident that a recent fad in elementary classrooms (one that is widespread, and growing) has the teacher wearing a mike which is connected to a classroom amplification system. The elevation of the teacher's voice out of a conversational context is made more apparent by the amplification, but in fact it's not a huge exaggeration. Every utterance is pushed by that megaphone toward becoming, and toward being responded to as, monologic discourse, language that does not invite or expect a reply.

What makes this such a challenge is precisely the persistent universality of this model of teacher-student relations. Every student, every class, arrives with these expectations. This is perfectly reasonable, of course, as it's based on their consistent experience with educational institutions. Because of this, forging a more dialogic frame for classroom discourse is a task which not only is never complete, but has to be undertakena anew with each student, each class, each semester.

That the situation may never be "solved" is, as I have suggested, not necessarily a bad thing. If we watch for them, continuing, persistent

challenges can keep us honest. A continuing commitment to authenticity, to an ongoing negotiation between theory, practice and context, is the best possible way to ensure continuing growth and change.

We need to remain conscious of the problem, to preserve the discomfort, to avoid allowing awareness of the disjunction between ideal and real to fade -- but there's no guarantee that this particular oyster's discomfort is going to produce a pearl.

Let's turn back for a few minutes to the practical world of boundaries, constraints, and no trespassing signs.

Reading inksheds

Take a minute to add anything you like to your inkshed, then pass it to someone near you. Everyone should read at least four or five other people's inksheds. If you like, mark on them to indicate what the next reader might want to pay special attention to, or comment. When you've finished one, look for someone else who's finished to swap with.

I'm hoping that your reading of the inksheds will generate some issues for us to discuss. Watch for issues you'd like to bring to everybody's attention. You might even want to hang on to one you think worth noting.

While we consider that, let me quickly comment on the five episodes I began with.

Anecdotes again

One. I don't yet know whether my colleague did a midterm course evaluation; I suspect she didn't. But I do them for almost every course, and they don't take up much class time. They're completed online, voluntarily. I ask questions that are specific to the course, and the responses come to me as text, anonymously. Because they're online I can easily reformat them and put them on a Web site, with all the responses to each question together. I also add my own comments, where I think it might be useful, and sometimes I invite students to post new anonymous responses to my comments or those of others.

Two. I have argued on various occasions for the university to change its policy regarding drop deadlines, and leave the choice up to the teacher. I've not succeeded. But I've found, here on the other side of the sign, that it's not always necessary. I've managed, in most cases, to invite the student to appeal to the Registrar, and supported that appeal. In every case I'm aware of, the student has in fact had the F removed from her record.

Three. For the first few years of my career, I argued persistently and at first unsuccessfully for the department to rethink its historically structured curriculum. Eventually, in fact, it was changed. Perhaps I persuaded my colleagues that a sequential tour of the great English texts wasn't a particularly effective way to help first year students become better readers. Possibly it was because the larger academic community was going through a cyclical pattern of concern about students' writing abilities, with pressure on English departments to "do something." But eventually the curriculum was broadened to allow individual first year teachers to design their own courses, under the umbrella of a set of agreed learning goals. I no longer had to begin my first year course with Mr. Chaucer's brilliant, daunting Middle English pentameter couplets.

Four. It took a lot longer, and a lot more institutional politicking, but (with the help, as it happened, of your ex-president, Roger Barnsley, who for a while was the academic vice president at St. Thomas) the university created an alternative first year program, called the Aquinas Program, which amounted to an umbrella under which any three teachers could propose an eighteen-credit, full year introductory package which would enrol a limited number of students in all three courses. The interdisciplinary unit which resulted could be planned and taught as the three teachers chose, as long as the departments concerned accepted the courses as equivalent to their usual introductory ones. For the next fifteen years or so I got my wish, to design, plan and teach with colleagues, and it was the most powerful learning experience I've ever had.

Five. I no longer assign essays or term papers, and I comment on student writing only when the writing is to be revised before some sort of publication – usually to the rest of the class, and when I can arrange it, to a wider audience. Writing in my courses is created to be read by others and used (in the way that we've used inksheds this morning), and it takes many forms – discussion postings (like inksheds, but conducted on online forums), research reports to a project group, collaborative group reports to the rest of the class, arguments for a course of action, and so forth. I don't read all of this writing, and I don't comment on any of it: because of this, students can write many times as much as in any other class, and get responses from real readers, who want, or need to know what they have to say.

Here's an example of one of the ways this works. Groups produce, through collaborative research and writing, what I call "Playgoer's Companions" -- four-page handouts giving audience members some background on the author,

script, context and previous productions of plays produced in Fredericton during the term. These documents are photocopied and distributed to the audience along with the theatre company's own programs. The students attending the plays have the experience of seeing their own writing actually serve a function in the world. If they are anything like I was as an undergraduate student, it will be the first time in their lives that an extended text has been written for any purpose other than getting a mark, and some feedback, from a teacher.

In conclusion -- and not at all incidentally -- it's important to be repeat that constraints are not bad things. We cannot be without them, and they help us shape our actions. As Robert Frost remarked, "You have freedom when you're easy in your harness." But we do need to be aware of the existence and nature of that harness, and to be conscious of the ways in which it enjoins tasks and limits flexibility -- and consistently, regularly, inexorably invites us to be conscious of our own need to retain our authenticity.

Let's talk.