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Abstract

The scholarly legacy of the late Derek Pearsall is well documented in his publication history, yet his importance as a teacher has not received the same degree of attention. This personal essay reconsiders the idea of a teaching archive by exploring the impact of a teacher thirty years after the conclusion of a class, upon a student who did not go on to become a medievalist. Through an appreciation of Derek's conversational approach to pedagogy, the author champions the dialogical relations at the heart of education which hold particular value during a time of social and professional disengagement.

It was during the strange and isolating period of the pandemic that I learned of the death of Derek Pearsall, a teacher from my graduate school days at Harvard in the early '90s.[1] Hearing the news, I immediately had a mental image of Derek smiling, quite broadly, his eyes twinkling as if he'd just heard or told a funny joke. There's something remarkable in that lasting image of Derek smiling, which it might not hurt each of us to consider when pondering the impact of a life. How might we be remembered by our own former students: wearing a smile, a serious glare, a scowl? Although I took only one or two classes with him and had not concentrated in his field or attended medievalist meet-ups at the Dolphin, Derek's passing in October 2021 impacted me more than I might have anticipated before it happened. What was it about the man, about this teacher, that still resonated for me after some thirty years' distance?

While COVID-19 is but a backdrop here (Derek died of cancer), the sudden nearness of death and profound social disruption that defined the plague years prompted many of us to consider, with heightened urgency, what matters most about our life and work. For many teachers, the pandemic has led to serious re-evaluation of their investment in the profession and a greater need to believe in the value of their efforts. I recall undergoing a similar crisis of faith in the late 1990s, not long before switching professional gears, when I caught myself asking in every class I taught, "What relevance does *[fill in the blank]* have to our everyday life today?" This is clearly an important question to ask and answer if we want our teaching to resonate with our students. Pedagogical considerations aside, it is also profoundly personal: to question the relevance of one's field of study is also to interrogate the value of a life devoted to its pursuit. We need to believe that the hours and worries we invest in our teaching are worth the effort, yet it can be frustratingly difficult to quantify the impression we make. Pondering Derek's meaning to me seems somehow inseparable from assessing the value of my own professional dedication to teaching and learning, and such considerations feel especially pressing in the wake of a pandemic that forced us to confront our own mortality and attendant questions of our lasting value.

One way to approach the question of our teaching's value, I'd suggest, is to take ourselves as objects of study not in our role as instructors but as students. What do I remember of Derek Pearsall as a teacher, and why are those things important enough for me to remember? Let me entice you to continue reading by saying that the answer I've come to is not exactly what I expected. His importance to me, as a student, has only an indirect relation to the reason for his importance to the profession and discipline, and this gap between Derek as a highly published scholar and Derek as an influential teacher may tell us something important about the value of our work to the vast majority of our students, who like me will not go on to become medievalists themselves.

To jostle my memory of Derek's teaching, my first impulse was to locate the papers I'd written for his *Canterbury Tales* course. The challenge was where to find them: I'd recently downsized from the house where I'd lived for two decades, a monthslong process of packing up room after room, sifting through piles of documents with the knowledge that my new digs would hold just a fraction of the stuff I'd accumulated over the years. There was one paper in particular I was looking for: a reading of *The*

[1] I would like to thank Gina Marie Hurley, my valued colleague in the Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, for her insightful feedback on a draft of this memoir.

Miller's Tale that was an important and risky one for me to write as a young graduate student, and I remembered that Derek had been exceptionally generous in his engagement with it despite my critical perspective being far afield from his own.

Alas, I have not found that paper. I'm left to wonder what remains when the materiality of our work, documenting who we were as thinkers in the past (and in a case like this, the wisdom of those who taught us), is lost. Writing this memoir without access to a physical archive forces me to engage even more fundamentally with the question of value and impact: the process is akin to assessing students' learning and retention when they're barred from referencing their notes, or to providing a teaching evaluation some thirty years after a course concluded. Without other documentation of the past, the living archive of Derek's teaching is whatever memory remains in me, the learner, these many years later.

I recall that my essay on *The Miller's Tale* focused on the ways that the nobility of male friendship in *The Knight's Tale* is challenged both generically and narratively by the Miller's bawdy and violent story of fraternal competition. I was particularly interested in the social, sexual, and linguistic dynamics of "quiting" in the Miller's tale, and my reading took issue with the then prevailing critical perspective which dismissed the sexualized dynamics of the tale's denouement as meaningless ribaldry. Instead, I brought in perspectives from Freud and Eve Sedgwick to argue that Chaucer's interrogation of the ambiguous line dividing the homosocial from the homosexual was critical to understanding the tales' definition (and deflation) of male identity and the social politics among men, not only in terms of Oedipal contestation of the father's privilege (through the Nicholas-Alisoun-John story) but also through less hierarchical relationships like those between Palamon and Arcite or Nicholas and Absolon.

Whether it is a projection onto my past or the discovery of dynamics I was unaware of at the time, that paper I wrote about quiting in *The Canterbury Tales* may have been in part an effort to understand where my own voice as a storyteller/scholar would or should emanate from. I remember some of the anxiety I felt as a novice trying to grapple with an unfamiliar text, genre, and literary field. I was fully conscious that medieval literary studies circa 1990 were among the least welcoming areas within the discipline to the type of psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, queer analysis I wanted to do. Yet it was all the more important to test out my voice in that milieu, for it was a place where I felt I could (way back when) add something new to the existing conversation and also test the mettle of my analytical and persuasive capabilities.

Derek didn't merely invite me to pursue this sort of engagement with Chaucer, which was very different from his own critical approach: he relished the idea of "going there" with a spirited attitude of adventure, and actively dared me to see how far I could take such an analysis without losing the spirit and substance of the text itself. Susie Phillips has shared a similar memory of Derek's pedagogical sensibility:

> He did not encourage his students to parrot his views, and he definitely did not want us to be clones of him. That for him would have been boring, and Derek did not like to be bored. Rather he encouraged us to pursue our own questions and ideas, no matter how farfetched. Derek liked it when we argued with him, and loved it when we could change his mind. (Phillips 2021)

This encouragement of a student's independent exploration, which may take the student far from one's own point of view if not even to an opposing perspective, revealed to me a mode of professionalism radically different from either the social dynamics of discipleship or its alternative, competitive quiting.

Among the key things I had to learn in graduate school was the repertoire of ways that scholars engage with one another in the authorization of their own critical voice. When I was an undergraduate, I had believed that the main reason to read previous critics' work was to find someone else, with greater authority than me, who took a position that supported the one I wanted to propose. We might consider this a conservative mode of critical engagement, where a disciple's agreement with pre-existing, authorized perspectives is the primary mode of constructing a new yet still traditional tale or interpretation. At the risk of oversimplifying, I'll compare this in shorthand to the generic mode of *The Knight's Tale*, in which tale tellers not only conserve the values and narrative conventions of their forebears but become respected subjects themselves by adopting those pre-authorized perspectives.

In contrast, as a graduate student I tended to adopt a more Oedipal manner of establishing my voice by challenging, with the intent of intellectually defeating, a critical forebear. We might call this the combative mode of engagement, where a new perspective derives from an overthrow of what came before, much as the Miller's tale riffs upon and undermines the ideals put forth by the Knight before him, or the Reeve's subsequent attack on the miller in his own tale illustrates more viciously. Combative storytelling of this sort can be viewed as a form of professional quiting, where you establish your position by revealing an opponent's stupidity.

Derek's mode of teaching and scholarship revealed to me a third mode of engagement, opposed in spirit and effect from both conservative and combative approaches. I'll call this a conversational ethos, again agreeing with Susie Phillips:

> I suspect that more than a few of us marveled at—and benefitted from—Derek's particular conversational genius, …the way he always seemed genuinely interested in, and never threatened by, the new perspective they offered. Scholarship for Derek, it always seemed to me, was a spirited conversation rather than a tactical skirmish. (Phillips 2021)

His openness as a teacher to perspectives radically different from his own went far beyond an attitude of mentorly tolerance. He enjoyed the encounter of diverse voices and perspectives with the same relish that Chaucer obviously does within the *Tales*, and welcomed such conversation with the curiosity of a perennial student, rather than the inflexibility or defensiveness of a pedant with a settled view.

I recall, in particular, Derek's comment on my citation of a scholar whose critical approach to medieval literature was fundamentally opposed to his own. I had no prior awareness of his aversion to this scholar's perspective; had I known, I might have been too frightened and insecure to reference it approvingly in my paper. Yet far from discrediting my argument due to the company I was keeping, Derek thanked me for giving him occasion to reconsider his previous dismissal of the work of this scholar, whom he went so far as to label his "*bête noire*." The scholar's name and critical approach escape me all these years later and are ultimately not important here. What matters most is the curiosity, the openness to revision, and genuine enjoyment of scholarly exchange that marked Derek's embrace of conversation as the ideal, dialogical mode of professional narrative and engagement. This

conversational ethos is in fact *a way of living together* (to reference a mid-fourteenth-century sense of the term) that invokes a mutual turning or bending with the other (*con* + *versare*) without the aim of negating difference. It is defined by an inclusive relation of subjects who retain their unique perspectives, rather than a power dynamic through which one subject is absorbed by or conquers the other.

To take this even further, Derek's expression of gratitude to me, his student, for opening him to a new way of understanding Chaucer empowered me with a sense that my narrative voice, and the tale I had to tell, held real value. The importance of teachers' development of students' self-confidence cannot be overstated, and Derek's interpellation of me as his teacher was profoundly significant to my still-nascent sense of identity as a scholar. This mode of engaging me and my writing taught me that being a teacher, like being a scholar, is not oppositional to but just a different mode of being a student. Without disregarding the great imbalance in our knowledge and experience, Derek's enthusiasm and humility rendered him almost an advanced peer and colleague in an ongoing, mutually beneficial learning adventure.[2]

Speaking somewhat selfishly, Derek's most generous act as a teacher was his encouragement of my own subjectivity as a student, scholar, and (future) teacher. He saw his primary role less as a transmitter of information than as an agent in his students' self-formation. And whereas scholarly publication may be the most apt venue for establishing one's own disciplinary perspective, I believe Derek understood the central purpose of the classroom as the evocation of his students' perspectives, through the asking of what Gert Biesta has called the "fundamental educational question: 'What do you think about it?'" (Biesta 2006, 150).[3] He asked this not in the form of a Socratic question (Socrates always seems to be leading his student to a foregone conclusion when asking such a question) but as part of a genuine, dialogical relation without a fully predestined outcome.

I reflect on these aspects of Derek's teaching both because they are what I remember best and because this memoir will appear in a special issue of this journal inspired by Buurma and Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive*. I share that work's view that, were it possible "to assemble the true, impossible teaching archive…it would constitute a much larger and more interesting record than the famous monographs and seminal articles that usually represent the history of literary study," and that new

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[2] What I'm defining as a conversational ethos bears some resemblance to Martin Buber's dialogical relation of I and Thou, although one significant difference is Buber's insistence that the relationship between teacher and student always remain hierarchical and non-mutual. As Brian Hendley points out, Buber's perspective is rather different when he speaks about teaching adult students who are themselves teachers: in that situation the ideal connection takes the form of "a truly reciprocal conversation in which both sides are full partners" (Buber 1950, 117). This reciprocity marks the blurring of distinctions between the relationship of teacher-student and friendship, two of the chief forms of dialogical relation that Buber defines in his speech on "Education" (Buber 2002, 117-19). I concur with Hendley's perspective that, "Certainly at the higher stages of formal education, teacher and students are in some sense partners in a common activity…. Dewey, for one, would describe educating as a shared activity in which 'the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher'" (Hendley 1978, 143).

[3] "This is a difficult question…with the potential to call someone into being as a unique, singular individual…. It can also be asked in nonverbal ways, for example by approaching the curriculum not as a set of knowledge and skills that has to be transferred into the minds and bodies of our students, but as a collection of practices and traditions that ask students for a response and that provide different ways for newcomers to respond and come into the world" (Biesta 2006, 150).

attention to what happens in our classrooms may provide "both a truer and a more usable account of what literary study is and does, and of what its value is today" (Buurma and Heffernan 2020, 2 and 6). I depart from the authors' perspective, however, by suggesting that a more nuanced history of literary study or a strong defense of the discipline may not be the most valuable takeaway from such an archive. Indeed, it strikes me as odd that students are for the most part absent from *The Teaching Archive,* except when their engagement impacts understanding of the scholarly work of their teacher. Teaching (let alone learning) gets short shrift in *The Teaching Archive*, except in how it might inform or challenge research. Rather than continue to privilege conversations that scholars have with one another about their discipline and its history, I'd propose that the core value of a teaching archive, like the value of teaching itself, lies less in its revelation of teachers' views on the profession than in the impact this teaching has upon students.

A teaching archive that focuses primarily on the mind of a great teacher serves basically the same function as that person's published works: the concern with the teacher's perspective and its value to other teachers' sense of the discipline. But if we're interested in the value of our teaching itself, rather than that teaching's value to the discipline, then archived syllabi and teaching notes may not tell us very much: a teacher's intentions, even when projected in clear learning objectives, may in fact be very different from students' primary learning outcomes, especially those outcomes that continue to have an impact decades after the course is over. What students find most memorable may not be the same things that their teachers intentionally privilege. For instance, although we often act as if our primary responsibility as instructors is to impart a certain body of knowledge specific to our discipline, we also fully understand (if mostly subconsciously) that the content of our courses may ultimately be less important to students than less easily defined or measured things that they learn from us through our modeling of ways to engage with texts and other scholars.

I'll make a confession: I do not remember, thirty years later, the stories that Derek told us in his classroom. Does that mean his teaching was not effective? No, I don't believe so, because good teaching is about so much more than presenting a series of dazzling interpretations that illuminate listeners' faces brightly, if evanescently, like fireworks in the night. Even when we structure our syllabi with repetition and review, many of our students will forget what we lectured on in week 4 by the time week 9 comes along—at least I did as a student. By the time two years have passed, let alone thirty-two, whatever lasting impact we have on our students may have little or nothing to do with the disciplinary arcana that concern us as scholars. In short, the lasting value of our teaching (the conversations we have with students) may be fundamentally different from the lasting value of our research (the conversations we have with one another).

What remains, and what I suppose (and hope) my own students might remember about me and my teaching, is much more intangible than content in the common sense of the word. I remember from my college days an art historian who frequently told us in lectures that such-and-such aspect of the history of art was something we should all ponder "on our deathbeds." There was something magnificent in such a statement, but something ridiculous too, at least to the ears of a nineteen-year-old. As a sixty-year-old I continue to doubt that I will consider the philosophical significance of the contrapposto pose on my deathbed, no matter the profundity of my professor's lectures on the topic: that's simply not what I expect to be contemplating with my last breath. But I do still remember the utterly serious, even reverent attitude that my professor Norris K. Smith held toward the art and

architecture he had studied all his life and shared with us in that dark lecture hall forty years ago. What impressed and remains with me to this day is not the content of his lectures but his perspective and mode of engagement with the world, with texts, and with fellow learners.

I am not proposing that our disciplines don't really matter. Of course they do, although perhaps they matter in different ways to our students than they matter to us as professional specialists (and to the authors of *The Teaching Archive*[4]). What I'm suggesting is that our *way* of engaging with our discipline and profession, rather than the material we engage with, might ultimately be what matters most to the majority of our students. Furthermore, it's our way of engaging with *them*—of seeing, hearing, eliciting their perspectives rather than our own through discipline-based conversation—that will ultimately change the world in ways quite difficult to document but which are surely more significant at the end of the day than disciplinary coverage or retention.

To return to my most lasting impression of Derek and where I began this meditation: his smile. To be remembered for such a smile must be one of the greatest accomplishments of a life. As a teacher, Derek's joy was an invitation: "Come along, this is going to be fun." His smile was an expression of a pure pleasure in reading literature and engaging humanely and critically with the world. And when we teachers are truly enjoying ourselves, our enthusiasm can communicate across a distance to excite and inspire students' own spirit and curiosity. This simple fact is important to consider during a time of what's been called "The Great Faculty Disengagement" (McClure and Fryar 2022).[5] What happens when we forget the joy that drew most of us to literary studies in the first place? When our work becomes solely work, when our engagement becomes so serious that we stop having fun, we risk losing our capacity to sustain the effort and losing our students' engagement in the process. Perhaps this is one reason why Derek was so well-equipped to spend his life with Chaucer: they shared an awareness that there's a point where we can become so serious and self-important in our work and our opinions, in the very stories we tell, that those stories lose their interest and their truth. Derek's smile was a reminder to guard against making "ernest of game" and in the process becoming detached from crucial parts of ourselves, from one another, and from our students.

Derek's smiling engagement with students and peers was intimately tied up with his view of the world and our place within it. His ability to find and to revel in amusement was infectious in a democratizing manner: it leveled and united in a similar way to Chaucer's humor, with a winking acknowledgment that we are all nakedly human, and sometimes ridiculous, and should find some comfort in such recognition. The same sense of fellowship that marked Derek's conversational ethos was evident in the generosity of his humor, which engaged with a type of loving critique that called

[4] It becomes clear in the final chapter of *The Teaching Archive* that the study's *raison d'être* has little to do with the inherent value of teaching, and even less to do with learning, but is mostly about defending the value of literary study, humanities research, and disciplinarity more generally. The harsh, even condescending disdain with which the authors refer to the labor of educational technologists and teaching and learning professionals like me—who endeavor to amplify the voices and impact of faculty partners rather than oppose them, and who have limited involvement in debates over disciplinarity or the merits of humanities research—seems both unnecessary and misplaced in their effort to defend the value of literary studies (see Buurma and Heffernan 2020, 210-11). A more effective defense might seek to engage with those outside the academy who care less about the critical history of a discipline than the definition, assessment, and importance of effective teaching. We might even argue that the importance of research rests upon its beneficial impact on teaching, rather than take *The Teaching Archive*'s approach of valuing teaching primarily for its impact on research.

[5] See also McClure (2022) and Diede, Dewey and Pautz (2022).

others in, with humility, rather than calling them out as objects of scorn or ridicule. He could have been speaking about himself when he wrote that, "Chaucer, as often, seems to prefer complicity with the world of his creatures to moral criticism" (Pearsall 2003, 176). There is an entire mindset here of being in the world as evident in Derek's engagement with colleagues as it was in his interaction with students like me. I have read that his peers always knew when Derek was in attendance at a crowded conference venue once they heard his laughter from a far corner of the room. That uninhibited laugh, like his smile, was at the heart of a professional conversation. With the passage of time, we may forget the immediate object of his laughter and even its resonant tone; but what remains is an appreciation of the place and spirit from which it emanated, and the relational values it expressed.

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