

*“This book has been helpful to my teaching because of its emphasis on reflection—knowing myself as a person and as a teacher. And this is not limited to our virtues but also our brokenness. “We teach who we are,” Palmer says. “Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of a teacher...I do not mean only our noble features, or the good deeds we do, or the brave faces we wear to conceal our confusions and complexities. Identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials.” (13) This reminds me of the father in Mark 9 who had a son tormented by an evil spirit. He asks Jesus if he could help, and Jesus replies that anything is possible for those who believe. The man exclaims, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”*

*What I like about the honesty of both these quotes is that I am challenged to see myself as a whole person and my students as whole people, good and bad. Seeing a spectrum of belief in my classroom is not threatening. I, too, am on a spectrum. I want to walk alongside my students as we all overcome our unbelief. I want to honor the messiness of our lives and help my students embody life in service to God as I do the same. Without some mutual vulnerability, we are simply talking about a subject and implementing a technique. Connecting with our students, and connecting our subjects to life is risky, but for our students, this is what they remember about their learning.” – David Grills*

**Parker Palmer. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley, 2007.**

**Excerpt from Chapter 5, “Teaching in Community: A Subject-Centered Education”**

“Our knowledge of the world comes from gathering around great things in a complex and interactive community of truth... Community, or connectedness, is the principle behind good teaching, but different teachers with different gifts create community in surprisingly diverse ways, using widely divergent methods. Engaging students in the community of truth does not require that we put the chairs in a circle and have a conversation. A sense of connectedness can also be generated—in classes large and small—through lectures, lab exercises, fieldwork, service learning, electronic media, and many other pedagogies, traditional and experimental. Like teaching itself, creating educational community can never be reduced to technique. It emerges from a principle that can express itself in endless varieties, depending on the identity and integrity of the teacher.

But our conventional pedagogy emerges from a principle that is hardly communal. It centers on a teacher who does little more than deliver conclusions to students. It assumes that the teacher has all the knowledge and the students have little or none, that the teacher must give and the students must take, that the teacher sets all the standards and the students must measure up. Teacher and students gather in the same room at the same time not to experience community but simply to keep the teacher from having to say things more than once.

In reaction to this scenario, a pedagogy based on an antithetical principle has arisen: students and the act of learning are more important than teachers and the act of teaching. The student is regarded as a reservoir of knowledge to be tapped, students are encouraged to teach each other, the standards of accountability emerge from the group itself, and the teacher’s role varies from facilitator to co-learner to necessary evil. It may sound like community, but as I will argue in a moment, it can too

easily degenerate into something less than the community of truth... It is difficult to confront ignorance and bias in individuals or the group when students themselves comprise the plumb line.

As the debate swings between the teacher-centered model, with its concern for rigor, and the student-centered model, with its concern for active learning, some of us are torn between the poles. We find insights and excesses in both approaches, and neither seems adequate to the task. The problem, of course, is that we are caught in yet another *either-or*...

Perhaps the classroom should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered but subject-centered. Modeled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a **great thing**. ...In a subject-centered classroom, the teacher's central task is to give the great thing an independent voice—a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand. When the great thing speaks for itself, teachers and students are more likely to come into a genuine learning community, a community that does not collapse into the egos of students or teacher but knows itself accountable to the subject at its core...The great thing has such a vivid presence among us that any student who pays attention to it can check and correct me. In this moment, the great thing is no longer confined to what I say about it: students have direct, unmediated access to the subject, and they can use their knowledge to challenge my claims. It is a moment not for embarrassment but for celebrating good teaching, teaching that gives the subject—and the students—lives of their own.

... When I remind myself that to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced—that I need to spend less time filling the space with data and my own thoughts and more time opening a space where students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other—I often hear an inner voice of dissent: “But my field is full of factual information that students must possess before they can continue in the field.” This voice urges me to do what I was trained to do: fully occupy the space with my knowledge, even if doing so squeezes my students out. As I listen to this voice, the model of a subject-centered classroom becomes appealing for the wrong reason: I could misuse it as an excuse to fill all the space with the informational demands of the subject itself. When I succumb to that temptation, it is not merely because of my training or because I have an ego that wants to be at center stage. Like many other teachers I know, I fill the space because I have a professional ethic, one that holds me responsible both for my subject's integrity and for my students' need to be prepared for further education or the job market. To quote many faculty who feel driven by it, it is an ethic that requires us to “cover the field.”

This sense of responsibility cannot be faulted. But the conclusion that we draw from it—that we must sacrifice space in order to cover the field—is based on the false premise that space and stuff are mutually exclusive. To teach in the community of truth, we must find some way to transform this apparent contradiction into a paradox, one that honors both the stuff that must be learned and the space that learning requires. We can begin with a simple pedagogical fact: if the aim of a course is to deliver a great deal of information, the worst way to do it is by nonstop lecturing (although lecturing can serve other purposes quite well, in ways I will describe later). The human brain is simply not good at retaining armies of facts as they march single-file through a lecture laden with information. Facts are far better delivered via texts or electronic formats, where students can do with them what the brain requires: look at them once, look at them again, and check them once more, then massage them, correlate them, and apply them—in brief but frequent installments. When facts about the subject are

dumped en masse, students are overwhelmed, and their grasp of the facts is fleeting... Students in fact-laden courses... fail to understand the subject, retaining the information just long enough to pass the test, and they never want to pick up a book on that subject again.

How can we reconcile the demands of space and stuff? Some approaches began to emerge for me when I asked myself, "What is the optimum use of the brief time my students and I share in the space called the classroom?" Rather than use that space to tell my students everything practitioners know about the subject—information they will neither retain nor know how to use—I need to bring them into the circle of practice in that field... I can present small but critical samples of the data of the field to help students understand how a practitioner in this field generates data, checks and corrects data, thinks about data, uses and applies data, and shares data with others. That is, I can teach more with less, simultaneously creating space and honoring the stuff in question.

Yet how can a small but critical sample of data adequately represent the vastness of any field, of the great things we are trying to understand? The answer comes as we remember that every discipline has a gestalt, an internal logic, a patterned way of relating to the great things at its core... Every academic discipline has such "grains of sand" through which its world can be seen. So why do we keep dumping truckloads of sand on our students, blinding them to the whole, instead of lifting up a grain so they can learn to see for themselves? Why do we keep trying to cover the field when we can honor the stuff of the discipline more profoundly by teaching less of it at a deeper level? Each discipline has an inner logic so profound that every critical piece of it contains the information necessary to reconstruct the whole—if it is illuminated by a laser, a highly organized beam of light.

...Consider the science lab. Here are thirty botany students peering through thirty microscopes at stem sections from the same plant. Alone and together, guided by a teacher, they examine this grain of sand, and in the process, they learn the logic of the discipline, its rules of observation and interpretation, as well as some substantive facts. What they discover by examining this **microcosm**—then another, and another, and another—can eventually translate into literacy in the discipline at large. By diving deep into particularity, these students are developing an understanding of the whole. No matter what great thing we are studying, there is always an equivalent to the stem section under the microscope.

In every great novel, there is a passage that when deeply understood, reveals how the author develops character, establishes tension, creates dramatic movement. With that understanding, the student can read the rest of the novel more insightfully. In every period of history, there is an event that when deeply understood, reveals not only how historians do their work but also illumines the general dynamics of that epoch. In the work of every philosopher, there is a pivotal idea that when deeply understood, reveals the foundations of his or her system or non-system of thought. By teaching this way, we do not abandon the ethic that drives us to cover the field—we honor it more deeply. Teaching from the microcosm, we exercise responsibility toward both the subject and our students by refusing merely to send data "bites" down the intellectual food chain but by helping our students understand where the information comes from and what it means. We honor both the discipline and our students by teaching them how to think like historians or biologists or literary critics rather than merely how to lip-sync the conclusions others have reached."

**Parker Palmer. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley, 2007. Chapter 5 excerpt.**