

June, 1998 – Peter P. Cvek, Philosophy

In recent philosophical discussions of ethics and morality, there has been a significant revival of interest in the classical moralities of virtue, as opposed to the rule-based moralities characteristic of modernity. The general difference between these two approaches to the understanding of the moral domain is well established. Moralities of virtue focus on standards of excellence, conceived in terms of those qualities of mind or dispositions of character which contribute to the realization of the common good or the good of the community. Rule-based moralities, in contrast, focus on the justification of universal rules of conduct which specify the minimal requirements of social order, typically in the absence of a shared conception of the Good. Put simply, the modern philosopher asks the question: what moral rules ought I follow? Alternatively, the traditional philosopher was more apt to ask: what kind of person ought I be? In terms of the latter question, becoming the person that I ought to be required the acquisition of virtue, *virtus* in the Latin, being a translation of the Greek *arete*, which could be rendered as excellence of character and can be understood as an acquired skill possessed by an individual. Hence, a person might possess the *arete* of a physician, a shoemaker, or that of a good human being. In seeking to promote the acquisition of this skillfulness, the philosopher of virtue often relied on the appropriation of certain ideal models of excellent character that were to serve as subjects worthy of emulation. Accordingly, Homer had his Achilles, Aristotle had his magnanimous individual (*megalopsychia*) and Confucius, his ideal sage, the *chuntzu*. The underlying assumption was that one learned to be virtuous by imitating the acts of one fully possessed of human excellence.

At this point, you are no doubt wondering what any of this has to do with a teaching tip. I confess that I do not intend to pass along a specific teaching technique that might be incorporated into your classroom regime. Instead, I offer an idea, based on my own experience of trying to acquire the *arete* of teaching. Throughout my student and professional life, I have been fortunate enough to be associated with what I still consider to be exemplary models of teaching and scholarship. Such persons I shamelessly sought, in my own way, to emulate. Whatever can be said about that, for better or for worse, I do know that I still learn most about teaching from observing others teach. With this in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to remind you of an idea in concrete form: The Partners in Learning Program.

The Partners in Learning Program, formerly known as the Master Faculty Program, is a faculty-centered method of encouraging members to reflect on the art of teaching by collaborating with one another in a spirit of collegiality and mutual respect. The program has three main elements. First, participants, typically from different disciplines, work in pairs, and take turns observing each other's teaching. The frequency of these observations will vary, although three times in a semester may be sufficient. The suggestion of different disciplines is meant to place the emphasis on the form, rather than the content, of the

instruction. Second, the observer spends some time engaging in informal discussions with students before or after class. Scheduled interviews with selected students may also be employed in order to expand the experience of the observer. Third, the two faculty participants meet together to discuss the classroom experience and the student interviews. Most importantly, they meet as two colleagues with a common goal. Together, they share what they have learned about the teacher-student dynamics within their partner's classroom.

In past years, a significant number of faculty have enthusiastically participated in this program with considerable success and personal satisfaction. Many of the participants, myself included, have found this to be an effective method of promoting serious reflection on the art of teaching. However, for the last two years, the program has been inactive. Saint Peter's College is certainly well populated with dedicated and innovative teachers from whom all may learn. Perhaps the time has come for our own revival of this rather simple and elegant idea. Interested parties may inquire at the Office of Faculty Research and Sponsored Programs for further information.