

Reflections on Teaching a First-Year Seminar

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The Weinberg College First-Year Advising program pairs new students, in groups of fifteen, with a faculty member. The faculty member provides academic advising, but the principle contact between the students and the advisor is through the First-Year Seminar, a guided course of reading, writing, and discussion. Besides introducing and improving the mechanics of scholarly writing, the main point of such a seminar is to contemplate a complex body of ideas and thereby face questions with no easy solutions. In this way, the students learn to grapple with and discuss issues on which reasonable people can disagree. Then, through a directed sequence of writings, they are called upon to formulate and defend their answers.

Northwestern is a medium-size private research university, with an undergraduate body of about 8,000 students. In groups of fifteen, this immediately implies that there must be many First-Year Seminars. All departments in the college are called upon to offer a certain number each year. I'm a professor of mathematics, an ancient and beautiful intellectual endeavor, with an unbroken written record going back to the pre-Socratic Greeks. It's also different from all other modes of scholarly thought: the language of modern mathematics is the proof, a prose form which argues by logical steps from established principles to a precise final statement. A First-Year Seminar is a Procrustean bed for math for various reasons. First, by its very definition proof isn't ambiguous. While we can discuss the validity of an argument, this is a very narrow discussion with an exact answer. Second, writing proofs is a skill taught only to advanced undergraduates specializing in math and it can only be mastered with years of practice. Third, the mainstream questions of modern mathematics aren't accessible to most beginning graduate students. Fourth, the linear nature of the development of thought in mathematics doesn't lend itself to freewheeling discussion. Finally, it's nearly impossible to sustain a quarter-long narrative on a basic math topic.

As an undergraduate, I took quite a number of history classes and all my advanced courses in that topic were in the seminar format. One extremely fine course was on medieval heresy, led by Charles T. Davis. Professor Davis taught how to read, write, and think about some of the messier aspects of the human condition. It may have been my single best student experience—only a writing class with Frank Conroy comes close. This format could be adapted to the First-Year Seminar quite easily, albeit with less reading and a wider range of writing exercises. From contemplating the origins and effects of heresy I had found a lifelong interest in cultures and civilizations under stress: Europe of the Reformation, France of the 1780s, England of the Industrial Revolution, and the United States of the 1850s are particularly rich examples. They are also somewhat removed from current culture. Even the United States of the 1850s was largely preindustrial and heavily agrarian: much of that country was linked by horse and lit by fire. By contrast, Germany of the 1920s is very close and very modern; for this reason, I chose the

Weimar Republic as the seminar topic. How was it that a great country, an economic and intellectual powerhouse, could descend into the abyss of totalitarianism?

A further attraction of this topic was the rich and accessible literature. We used *The Coming of the Third Reich* by Richard Evans as the main historical source, but we also had a documentary reader and Sebastian Haffner's *Defying Hitler* as a personal memoir. Many alternative sources would have worked as well. The students found all these texts accessible and intriguing. The Haffner book had particular resonance with this audience. This is not particularly surprising, as Haffner (a pseudonym for Raimund Pretzel) gracefully records the memories and impressions of himself as a young man trying to find his way in life, love, and career as the Nazi night began to fall. You can see why that might have immediacy to an entering college student, although I have to admit I hadn't really thought that through in advance.

The overall topic and the sources met my primary goal: there was plenty to discuss and think about here. The story of Germany from the collapse of 1918 to the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 is a narrative with drive and direction, full of great and evil characters, signature events, missed chances, high and low culture, and economic history. Even art and religion get called out for examination. There were no dead stretches and quite a few surprises. (It turns out that the Otto Dix painting *The Skat Players* can still shock.) This is not to say that every class was completely engaging; while most went well, some dragged. If I were to do this again I would reorder some of the topics, vary the class work more, and add more presentations with visual impact. I would also add more student-led discussion. We did experiment with this, but I relied on the students to work off the readings and it would have been better for students to have come in with working papers. These could replace other assignments.

There were themes that ran through the quarter. One was Nazism itself, of course. The word "Nazi" is used now as a very strong general purpose political insult, signifying that the person employing the word is no longer available for rational dialog. But the National Socialist German Workers Party was the product of a particular time and place and had a very specific core set of beliefs: they were ultra-nationalist, ultra-militaristic, antidemocratic, anti-Communist, virulently racist, murderously anti-Semitic, and messianic. Hatred and demonization of an enemy they defined were key elements of their rhetoric. They refused to recognize the legitimacy of the existing government and its laws. They employed widespread paramilitary violence as a political tool. They defined and refined the Leadership Principle, wherein all power emanates from one man, and implemented the quintessential modern totalitarian dictatorship. It takes maturity and strength to contemplate, understand, and discuss these facets of a modern political movement. While firmly asserting that the end result was evil, some of what was vile was an extreme variant of a potential virtue. What's the difference between patriotism and nationalism and when does the latter turn toxic? What is racism and how does it differ from recognizing diversity? When does the advocacy for a strong military become the worship of a cult of violence? What are the limits on strong leadership in a democracy? These are not questions you ask in a math class, or any science class for that matter.

Another quarter-long theme was the failure of democracy. When the Great Depression hollowed out the political center, Germans more and more cast protest votes for the ultra-left, the Communists, and the ultra-right, the Nazis, making democracy unworkable. The German Communists also advocated the overthrow of the existing government, but for a rule by the proletariat. They were anti-religious in a country where religion was deeply felt, and they also had a violent wing. Once the Reichstag became polarized between these two extremes, neither of which regarded the Republic as legitimate, revolution was very hard to avoid. Contemplating this failure leads to basic questions. To what extent does the minority have a duty to work with the majority? What's the difference between principled rejection and obstructionism? Recognizing that no human institution is perfect, when is it acceptable for a citizen of a democracy to declare the government illegitimate? Is violence by private citizens ever acceptable in a functioning democracy?

There was also no end of rich and nuanced subjects to write about. Many of the students were taken with the economics of the period. This surely reflects current fashions in career choices, but even so they produced a great variety of papers. Some wrote about economic theory and applications—war debt, reparations, the gold standard, international loans and trade, and so on—while others focussed on the social and political impact of the Great Inflation and the Great Depression. Other students took on other subjects: one student found inspiration in the German cinema of the period and wrote a very fine essay around Fritz Lang's *M*. Weekly writing assignments were in response to prompts, or from a choice of topics. Some weeks were outlines, others first drafts, but the best writing came from shorter pieces. Twice they were asked to write an OpEd-style piece on a contentious topic and twice they were given free reign, with the only requirement that it be about the Weimar Republic, collegial, and short. I received fiction, character sketches, diary entries, pieces dressed up as newspaper articles (“Reichstag Burns!”), even a comparison of three Nazi propaganda posters. A side bonus was a few hard lessons on the value of the internet. Anything Nazi attracts all manner of cranks and charlatans, some of them very nasty.

There were eleven men and four women in this class; given that the student select the seminar, this may reflect the topic. It may also reflect the fact that it was listed as a math class, and math is historically, even notoriously, male dominated. There were twelve Americans and three foreign nationals: one from Germany, one from India, and one from Bosnia and Herzegovina. All the foreign nationals could write well in English and made important contributions to the discussion. Most, but not all, of the Americans were from elite suburban high schools. The course evaluations were very positive, although there were some criticisms. If there was any theme to these, it was that the classes could have been less static and that, at least by the end, a number of students had fallen behind on the reading, taking themselves out of the discussion pool. Both points are valid. The second remark partly reflects the hybrid nature of this First-Year Seminar as both a writing class and a history class. If this has been only a history class I could've used the traditional methods of enforcing discipline and diligence; for example, I could have given exams. Another mild disappointment in the student remarks was that none

mentioned the dilemmas of ethics and conscience I'd hoped they would confront. Since they did address these questions in their writing, it's hard to know what to make of this absence.

Contrary to the sky-is-falling warnings of some of my colleagues, the students were decent writers. In fact, once we stipulate that writing is a craft that takes many hours over many years to master, we can only expect so much from eighteen year-olds and by that standard I would say they did fairly well. They could formulate a thesis, defend it clearly, in complete sentences grouped into reasonable paragraphs. I wouldn't say that the general prose style was lyrical, nor will I assert a uniform talent for proofreading and attribution. Longer papers were a challenge to these students: sustaining a coherent, consistent argument over eight to ten pages requires focus, attention, and repeated rewrites. The failures were mostly of this type, and of time management. All of these can be addressed in this seminar format. There were also some fine moments: I would save one student's papers for last as I came to expect that she would tell me something I didn't know, or present a point of view that hadn't occurred to me, all in an offbeat and very personal voice. The word choice was often idiosyncratic, and one more rewrite wouldn't have hurt, but I would sit back with my feet up and read these pieces straight through.

I've gained a greater appreciation for what it means to teach in the humanities. To be honest, preparing and giving an undergraduate math class doesn't take a great deal of effort—care and attention to detail are needed, of course, but it's not hard. This is partly because I've been doing it for a long time, but there's more than that. In any given hour of a math class there's one big idea, and the professor stands lecturing at the front of the room explaining that idea to the students through theory and example. This can be a real mind-stretcher for the students, but the professor has (one hopes) mastered the idea long ago. By contrast, an interactive seminar-style history class takes much longer to prepare and much more energy to give. First, there's all those facts to get straight. Julius Streicher, Gregor Strasser, Otto Strasser, and Gustav Stresemann are all very different important figures in the Weimar period. Second, all those facts are running in all different directions and must be called to order. Third, the class must be organized as a directed and interactive dialog. This means developing appropriate questions, thought exercises, and small group work to move discussion along. Finally, once you're in the classroom, you have to orchestrate the conversation and the interaction; you're the leader and perhaps the dominant voice, but the point is to get the students engaged and going. This can be very rewarding, but it can also be exhausting. I used to vaguely wonder why humanities professors would ask for a course reduction when teaching a new class, but now I completely understand. These classes are twice as difficult to run, at least the first time through.

The class was held Tuesday and Thursday in the late afternoon in a seminar room off the stacks in the main library. I chose the time based on my undergraduate experience. Late afternoons are a contemplative period in the daily cycle of a university. In the late fall, when twilight comes early, campus gets especially quiet then, and there is an atmosphere conducive to leisurely and free-ranging discussion. I was worried about the room, but that turned out well. It was the right size and had a large table we could gather about, and having all those books outside the door may have added a certain tone to the proceedings. We can debate the future of the

printed word, but a giant modern university library, filled with millions of books, the product of centuries of scholarly thought, remains an impressive and daunting monument to one of the finer sides of the total human project.

I hope we can say the same about universities in general. There is a metaphor of the university as a city on a hill, a special place where young men and women can go up for a few years, to live and work among the very best and brightest, exploring a broad range of ideas and disciplines, and from thence go back down into the world bringing the knowledge, skill, and friendships they've earned. In this visit to the academy, we hope, they've not only acquired the tools for success, but with any luck they've also acquired a broad concept of what success can mean and learned what to expect from a full life. In short, we strive for intellectual maturity. A very lucky few, blessed with the right talent and temperament, remain on the hill to carry on the profession and to live a life of scholarship. As with all such metaphors, it captures only a piece of reality. Universities are complicated and diverse places—they are social and political constructs full of people from a particular culture and era. Nonetheless, we can still ask whether this metaphor captures a worthwhile and important facet of what it means to be a university and then ask to what extent we have developed this aspect of our institution.

If you've read this far and caught the tone I've been trying to use, you've probably understood that I feel this is the vital and indispensable core of university life. Without it, what are we? A trade school for the more lucrative professions? A very large, very well organized, very expensive social club for men and women in their late teens and early twenties? A lab and idea incubator for corporations which can't or won't invest in research with long time lines? A letterhead for consultants? A backdoor way to support worthy actors, artists, writers, and mathematicians who can't make a middle-class living in the outer market place? An unfunded farm system for professional sports? A lifelong community for alumni and alumnae? A beautiful park? We're all that and more and you can argue what of that is good and what of that is bad, but none of that is my point. If we are not a community of scholars trying with all our talent, all our training, and all our heart to discern what is true, then we're simply another business with an overpriced product. If we don't understand that this process of discernment is an ever-changing never-ending task to be undertaken with all humility, then we are simply enablers of an exploitive and elitist system. If we don't hold ourselves to the highest possible standard of honesty, ethics, and integrity in this pursuit, then we are selling snake oil. And if we don't do everything in our power to communicate our findings and skills to students and colleagues—that is, to teach—then we are self-absorbed.

All universities commit to this ideal of scholarship, at least as a high-level philosophy. For example, the very first sentence in Northwestern University's 2013 strategic plan reads, "We will work together through research and innovation to create solutions to problems that will improve lives, communities, and the world."¹ Not much further down, you can read, "Great universities are known for their intellectual depth." But there are many aspects of the modern corporate

¹ There is curious grammar here. Is it the solutions or the problems that will improve lives?

university that pull in different directions. This centrifugal force is nothing new. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) had to deal with a variant in Paris. It is so much a part of university life that even lyric fictional romantic odes to Oxford, such as Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, dramatize it to add realism. You surely know some of the current sources of pressure: the rapid and distorting accrual of resources to science, medicine, and finance; an expanding and expensive management cadre only tangentially concerned with academics; a stratified professoriate marked by an aloof overclass arrogating privilege to itself; the unthinking application of ill-suited business, management, and marketing models to many aspects of the university; mistaking applications of the latest e-fad for scholarship; systemic funding problems at all but the very elite universities. You could probably add your own examples, especially if you apply a left- or right-leaning political model to the analysis. Such lists are real and constitute a call for action, but I emphasize that there is always a list, even if the items on it change. The vital core of the university will remain intact if, and only if, the men and women at the center of the project focus collectively on becoming that community of scholars. Is this happening? Hard for me to say, embedded as I am, but most days I'm not sanguine. My excursion into the Weimar Republic was a small gesture in the direction of my metaphor of the city on the hill, but I'll admit that it was little more than a fashion statement.

All of us should wonder how so many people could choose to support National Socialism. We cannot easily answer this question. We recognize now that Hitler and his party were a great and unmitigated evil and that to follow them was wrong, but we should not succumb to the intellectual fallacy of hindsight. For the people of Germany the choices and their implications were masked in the noise and dust of everyday living in a tumultuous time. They arrived at 1933 one very stressful day at a time. In Germany, the period before 1929 was marked by a severe and unprecedented crisis of modernity; the old dispensation would not do, and the new was not yet well-formed. The Great Depression choked what was good in the new and added frightening economic and political uncertainty, even jeopardy. The Nazis were offering a way up for most, with the bargain that you help jettison the rest—and, perhaps less obviously, at the cost of surrendering your soul and mind to the totalitarian state, step by lonely step. It was also a time saturated with an ingrained, cultural, mostly nonviolent anti-Semitism that made it easy to avert your eyes from the Nazi intent—and not just in Germany. Nations all over the world closed their borders to Jewish immigration. Many people did not understand early what was happening and later they did not want to know. Do you ever wonder if there are evil aspects of our culture that we're missing? What unquestioned assumptions hold up our world? What are others doing in our name, with our tacit approval? Is our normal ethical? Every step in our lives may have made sense, but have we actively examined the result and found it to be good? Or have we, like many people in 1930s Germany, found a host of plausible reasons to avoid the truth? If it's not good, are we prepared to leap over the cliff of radical change?

For us in the academy there is a perfect cautionary example. Paul Althaus (1888-1966) was a very highly regarded professor of theology at the university in Erlangen, in Bavaria. He had been a Lutheran pastor early in his career. By all accounts he was an exemplary human being. He exhibited "to the world a warm and human personality. He was the perfect gentlemen, friend, and

teacher.”² His theology was not radical in any sense. Yet until 1937 Althaus was an active supporter of the Nazi revolution in particular and the *völkische* and nationalist position in general—even going so far as to coauthor a defense of the infamous Aryan paragraph and its application to the Protestant Church. By 1937 no rational observer could mistake the Nazi program, and Althaus fell silent. After the war, he was subjected to the American denazification program, losing his professorship for some time, but he was reinstated and only retired in 1956. Thus, he was granted ample opportunity and time for reflection, and he had a superior and safe platform to publicize any reconsideration; however, he neither repudiated his earlier stance nor publicly denounced Nazi totalitarianism. The denazification proceedings were surely personally humiliating, but humility and defeat are also an occasion to reflect and learn. How could this man, considered good and wise in his own era, miss the very call his entire life’s work had trained him to listen for? To paraphrase Robert Ericksen, Althaus was so embedded in his cultural milieu, so sure that modernity was a threat, that he was able to see the Nazis as a source of hope and renewal for his country and his church, and he was able to downplay and excuse the cancerous evil that would murder millions and destroy Germany, along with much of the rest of Europe as well.³

There were only hints of these questions in the First-Year Seminars. But there were hints, and I hope the students picked up on them, if not at the time then on some later day, perhaps in a quiet moment, when a memory of that Fall term came to mind. Who knows? I do know they never come up in a math class.

² Ericksen, Robert P., *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985. See Chapter III.A, p. 79.

³ See Ericksen, pp. 117-9.