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"Chance May Crown Me":
Inviting the Random into the Classroom

(an outline)

Connecting my classes to the world outside the classroom is central to my teaching strategies, and one way I do that is to include, wherever possible, events outside – especially when they are unforeseen.

There are a number of reasons I like to do this.

> The more planned an environment is seen to be by students, the less they imagine it might be connected with the world outside the sealed terrarium of the classroom.

> The more the problems we solve are seen to be anticipated by me, the less they seem like problems to be solved, and the more like already known, prepackaged solutions to puzzles, to be unveiled.

> The more I'm effortlessly successful at interpreting the text, connecting the unrelated events, finding and knowing about the relevant context, the less students are likely to think those are things they can do; on the other hand, if I'm genuinely challenged, and occasionally fail, it seems more like a human endeavour (and I don't seem able to convincingly fake being challenged and failing)

> It's more fun. It's more challenging. I like the feeling of dealing with unexpected incomings (if they're not actually threatening)

There are, of course, lots of reasons not to do this.

> We need to be planful. Consistently, we're told that establishing clear goals and clear paths to them is the hallmark of good teaching.

> Students don't like it. They're uncomfortable when everything isn't laid out in advance (how much will the midterm exam count? How much will I be penalized for lateness? Do you take off for grammar?)

> Control is important to us as teachers. Not so much in university, perhaps, but even there, the fear that things might get "out of control" is always giggling at our elbow, plucking at our sleeve.

> We have content to cover. In order to get through the material our students are going to have to know next year, or next week, we have to have things in order, with the amount of time devoted to each carefully laid out.

But I do it anyway.

> In our interdisciplinary Aquinas section, Truth in Society, we regularly include campus events like plays, lectures, seminars, etc., as central elements in the process (for example, we included reading and discussing a TNB production of *Doubt*).

In my "Page and the Stage" course we consider only plays actually being produced in the area, and I can't know what most will be until the semester's starting.

In my literary journalism courses students choose the readings from published work, on the basis of reading in various anthologies and books and articles which they find online and in the library.

In my Restoration and eighteenth century literature courses, students explore a range of textbook anthologies and literary histories and construct a curriculum which they can defend on the basis of a broad look at that scholarly work.

All this relinquishing control over the detail has meant that my courses need to be organized and conducted not around "material to be covered" but around what specific kinds of learning I want to promote.

I think of this as improvising within a structure: I know what song we're playing, what key we're in and what the chorus we end with will be: between now and then, we improvise.

Now I'm going to ask you to think – and to write – about what kinds of external events might be included (or, perhaps, are already included) in a class of yours, what advantages you anticipate, if any, and what institutional and practical constraints you would encounter in order to include it.

Discussion will proceed by means of another strategy for introducing the recalcitrant random into the process: participants will each have put their name on a card at the outset, and discussion will be organized by turning over a card to give each person a chance to contribute or to pass.

The continuation of this session on line can be found here:

http://www.stu.ca/stuforum2/get/aau2010.html

The article on supporting talk with text, which explains the theory behind the structure of the session, which I also distributed at the meeting, can be found here:

http://www.stu.ca/~hunt/texttalk.htm