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Editor's Notebook

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In May 1894, Bridgewater Normal School student and Acadia College graduate Frederick Monod Shaw opened a heated debate by publishing a letter in his alma mater's alumni journal, *The Acadia Athenaeum*. His six-page note at once praised the methods of teaching at his new, American school and indicted those of his old, Canadian one. At the center of pedagogy at BNS, he gushed, was object study, a practical method of teaching in all branches of learning, a system first articulated by Normal's renowned principal, Albert Gardner Boyden (1827-1915). "Object study is everywhere applied ... Geology and Botany are taught almost exclusively from the student's own study of specimens ... History is pursued along the same lines of investigation ... pictures of architecture, maps and actual relics are the objects of study for facts ... In chemistry ... every student has his 'chem. kit.'" The goal was to have students arrive at the laws governing the physical and human worlds by their own "original thinking." For Shaw, this hands-on approach surpassed Acadia professors' preferences for the theoretical and the rote: "high literary culture, higher philosophy, and beautiful thoughts."

Shaw's declaration might have been easily dismissed as youthful exuberance but for its auspicious timing. Teaching methods in higher education were everywhere in the midst of hot debate in the 1890s. At issue was whether the traditional fixed curriculum of classical subjects was still the best way to achieve the main goal of higher education: mental discipline, specifically the powers of observation, memory and reason. The question stood at the center of the National Education Association Committee of Ten's deliberations in 1893. Traditional college teaching

contained too much theorizing, some, like Johns Hopkins philosopher Josiah Royce, argued, and not enough objective experimentation. In this new age of science, one New York University professor noted, we need the college today to be less "a cloister" and more "a workshop." There is a real weakness at Acadia in this way, Shaw stated, but not to worry: "sweeping reforms are passing over this country, and the same spirit of reform, in a very few years, will sweep over Acadia ... Wake up, Oh ye teachers, to your privileges!"

Fred Shaw's admonishments were hardly well received among his colleagues and former teachers in Nova Scotia, and they prompted several responses. Acadia geology students wrote a tart rejoinder in the *Athenaeum's* June issue, claiming that a combination of object study and theoretical learning was the proper method in their field. An editorialist wondered, wryly, how it could be that Mr. Shaw had gotten on so well at Bridgewater given that his Acadia preparation had allegedly been so poor. And Shaw's charges resonated so loudly that much of Acadia professor D.H. Higgins' October 1894 convocation speech was given over to defending traditional pedagogy: "We should understand the nature of the tools we use and the consequences that may result from any modification of the methods of our work ... [Our aim remains] to acquaint students with the ... great thought of the greatest thinkers ... in every department of study."

It's tempting to look back at the "Shaw Affair" as nothing more than a mildly humorous intercampus spat. All of these combatants have gone on to their reward and six score years have passed. But if we don't give in to the condescension of posterity (to borrow Edward Thompson's phrase), it's possible to see in it something of our own day and our current challenge.

University teaching is not less fraught today; it is more. Never before have the ways we teach been so often and publicly discussed and debated. We have become preoccupied with pedagogical innovation; the pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *University Affairs*, and editorial writing in the nation's largest dailies confirm it. In the past twenty years we have been run over by a train of novelties, a vaudeville of pedagogical improvements – laptop requirements, learning communities, clicker technology, dynamic assessment, MOOCs, mindful teaching, the flipped classroom, and others. And more will come, driven in

The Acadia Athenaeum.

"Prodesse Quam Conspici."

Vol. XX. No. 7. ACADIA UNIVERSITY, WOLFVILLE, N. S. May, 1894.

THE BRIDGEWATER, MASSACHUSETTS, STATE MANUAL SCHOOL.

Since coming to Bridgewater, my preconceived ideas of a Normal School have radically changed for the better. It might be interesting to prospective teachers, at Acadia, to learn something about this School. It is a good type of the best Normal Schools, and is considered equal to the best, if not, to be the best in America.

I. A few facts, in general, regarding the school and its history. This school, one of the first three in America, was opened in 1840. Its first years were years of experiment by a doubtful public, but the school soon gained the State's confidence and has since steadily prospered. The buildings have constantly improved, the teaching staff has grown, the curriculum has been constantly improving in the school's splendid and growing

part, disconcertingly, by an industry of experts and accreditationists who benefit professionally and financially from cultivating a belief that what we do now in the classroom is not really good enough. We welcome what's new, we denigrate the old. Sage on the stage? Dead, we're told, and worse — the university lecture, one curious *New York Times* editorial (12 September 2015) declared, is biased against female, minority, low-income and first-generation students. That's a very heavy charge.

Professors who have lived through this whirlwind might be forgiven for exhibiting symptoms of what industry and educational organization analysts

call "innovation fatigue." These are the words of a university teacher who has been at it now for a quarter of a century, most of that at BSU, and has seen enough merit in at least some of the pedagogical innovations in that time to have picked the flowers of those that appealed most. I still lecture and I still make my students read lots and write properly. But I spend as much time using small-group work and student presentations, electronic means of expression and encounter, peer evaluation and digital research. All of that seems trifling and the actions of someone who has consistently been well behind the vanguard of progressive change.

The rhetoric of today's pedagogical innovation, like Shaw's, has an unfortunate underlying tone. University teachers today who are aware of what is going on in their profession are told, repeatedly and in myriad ways, that though they may work from "sun 'til sun," their work is never done. To be a good university teacher is to be constantly dissatisfied with his results, to want more and to be open to try all new things. The imperative for change demands it. And yet many of the best professors that I know, at BSU and at other schools, are the best because they have mastered of the old, timeless tenets of good university teaching: sound command of and engagement with subject material, clarity and felicity of expression, genuine commitment to students' interests and grasp, pride in their craft and a willingness to work hard at it.

After a brilliant start to a promising career as a school principal, first in Paterson, New Jersey and later in Denver, Colorado, BNS graduate Fred Shaw died a lamentably early death from tuberculosis in 1900. Had he lived longer, he might have seen the folly of his hope that "sweeping reforms" would one day brush away the old teaching methods and replace them with the pedagogically new. That didn't happen, and the university teaching today remains an effective amalgam, *both* cloister and workshop. Would that it stays that way.

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Andy Holman