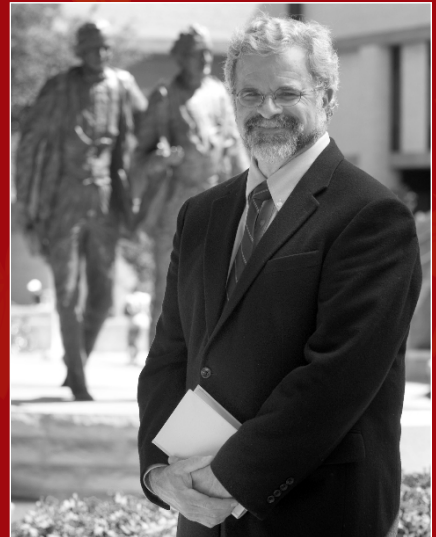


The Professorial Art of Indirection: A Study of Relevant Rhetoric



*Richard Leo Enos
Texas Christian University*

Several decades ago, when I was about 12 years old, I was watching an episode of “The Twilight Zone.” The story was called “Changing of the Guard” and it was about an old professor who had just learned he was being forced into retirement and had, in fact, just taught his last class. All the students had left for Christmas holiday, and he was alone in the seminar room. Looking out at the empty chairs of the classroom, he asked himself if, after fifty-one years as a professor, he had really made any difference, if he had done anything that mattered, or if he had spent his life merely pontificating to a group of disinterested young people whose only reason for being in the room with him was to fulfill an academic requirement.

Just when the old professor had convinced himself that he was accurate in his self-evaluation, that he had done little more than fill the air with his verbal meanderings, a most magical thing happened. While gazing at the empty chairs, students from the past began to materialize. There were students from every decade and generation that he had taught. They came into existence for that moment to tell him that he had indeed made a difference in their lives. They may not have expressed their appreciation at the time (they may have even devalued what he did at the moment) but what he had taught them about the love of knowing, about integrity, about courage, about morality and decency had hit the mark. Their ethereal visit with the old professor was short, only a few minutes, but it made him realize that his life’s vocation had not been a wasted effort of naïve idealism. He had done some good.

I had no idea at the time why that thirty-minute show made an impression on me, but I’ll never forget it. I had grown up in an Italian community; I had never even met a professor. However, that was the first moment I realized that I might want to be a teacher. Now, more than fifty years later, I know why that show by Rod Serling made such an impression on me: that old professor had not only taught his students English literature and poetry, he had taught them the values of life, but he had done so indirectly. That is the theme of this essay: how professors teach their students—for better or for worse—through the art of indirection. Perhaps when we understand indirection, we can better understand those ten wonderful words of relevant rhetoric that many successful people express, “Well, there was once this teacher . . . who believed in me!”

Thousands of professors explain that they chose their discipline, their calling, because of a clear, direct love of their subject. They wanted to study it. They wanted to teach it. They wanted to do research in it. They wanted to be in a community of scholars who encouraged it. Two words in the last five sentences are intentionally vague: “it” and “direct.” What is that “it” that we so love that we have given large chunks of our lives? For some it is a body of material to be analyzed, for others it is an activity to be refined, for others it is a problem awaiting a solution. What about “direct”? At the nascent point of our careers we see our subject clearly and wish to pursue that subject by the most straightforward path. As we age, as our hair grays, as we no longer take the stairs to our office two at a time, something happens. That “something” does not occur suddenly, but rather it evolves. We learn that our vocation is neither clear nor direct, and we also learn the art of professorial indirection.

What is the art of indirection? For that we have Professor Maurice Natanson to thank. In his revealing essay, “The Arts of Indirection,” he explains (albeit indirectly) that there are many vectors to indirection.¹ One of the forms of the art of indirection is mundane. When I pass a student in Reed Hall, I may hear, “Hi, Professor Enos, how are you?” Of course, the student is not really asking about my health. In fact, the student would be shocked if I proceeded to describe a litany of my daily aches and pains! Asking how I am is a sincere but indirect expression of civility and respect, one that both parties clearly understand.

There are many other types of indirection. Some are pedagogical and are particularly important to professors. Robert Gray Gunderson was the best teacher of academic writing I ever had, but he never taught writing—at least directly. To be sure, when you took his classes you wrote, and you wrote, and you wrote. He would gladly critique drafts, and did so with such insight and gusto that he even had undergraduates who published. Some students took a course from Gunderson not to learn about American studies, history or the power of public address, but to learn about academic writing from one of the very best teachers of writing. He taught writing as a by-product of his courses.

Professor Gunderson was a great practitioner of the professorial art of indirection. Many years after I finished graduate school at Indiana University, I attended a conference with Professor Gunderson and, as luck would have it, we shared the same plane. I was heading home, he to another conference. On the plane, Gunderson sat next to me and asked me to critique the paper that he would present at the next conference. I hesitated, of course, because I could not imagine anything that I could suggest that would improve his prose or his argument. I was right. His essay was all that I could expect in a scholarly study, and I started to return his paper. Clearly displeased, Gunderson insisted that I be candid—as candid as he had been with his students. Anxious to placate my mentor, I muttered some minor points of clarity, which he appreciated and accepted. Gunderson, my greatest “non-writing” professor had indirectly taught me how much he really cared for detailed, meticulous prose. I never forgot that beautiful, celestial lesson that he taught me in the skies.

There are other vectors to the professorial art of indirection. Once, as an untenured, young assistant professor at The University of Michigan, I experienced a striking, amazing act of indirection. A student from one of my classes came to my office and asked to see me. Of course, I was terribly busy with my earth-altering research and, in the fraction of a second that I had to respond, was tempted to dismiss him by saying, “Sorry, I’m busy. How about another time?” Thank God I heard myself say, “Sure, what can I do for you?” I will never forget the moment when he said, “Well, I wanted to talk with you because I was thinking of committing suicide.” Over the years I have thought about what might have happened if I had waived that student away, dismissing him in an abrupt manner that made him think that he was of no importance to me. As professors, we learn that we

teach many things, only one of which is our chosen discipline. If we return papers promptly, our students learn that we care. If our classes are organized they learn that our preparation means that we regard them as a serious audience.

In some ways indirection can be a teaching constraint, both in and out of the classroom. As parents, we often find it difficult to explain to our children all that we know. For example, many teenagers cannot imagine why our Saturday night curfews are so unreasonable! We can explain endlessly all the dangers that exist and mount as the night progresses, but these illustrations are always countered, often before our examples are complete. Unable to explain all that we know from years of experience, we finally end the less-than-Platonic dialogues by saying, “I know best because I am your father!” As Maurice Natanson recounts, the preeminent scholar Bertrand Russell once tried to explain to his students a philosophical problem that he had been working on for years. The problem had many subtle nuances which simply could not be easily explained to students who demanded that information be given to them in immediate sound bytes at power-point speed of bullet-point simplicity. Frustrated at his students’ impatience and simply unable to package all his thoughts verbally into some form of “executive summary,” he could have uttered the father’s standard dictum: “Believe what I say for now . . . because I’m your Russell!”

Often, in academia, there are lessons so intricate and subtle that they cannot be easily transferred into words. I often employ a technique that helps in this regard. I know that I really understand what I am talking about when I can explain it to children. That is why I will ask permission to speak to a high school class or to a group of elementary school children. As I explain my work I watch their faces—there is always at least one student who unwittingly gives me all the nonverbal messages I need to let me know if my point is coming across. When I see understanding I realize that indirection has been transcended.

We profess our subjects directly, but we teach indirectly in multiple ways. Being sensitive to these indirect but most relevant acts of rhetoric that we use to influence students will make us artists of the best sort—artists whose subjects realize that they learn much more about the life of the mind than just the subject that they study. Former professional basketball player Charles Barkley once said that NBA players should not be thought of as role models. Given the PR nightmare that is the NBA his view is right but (unfortunately) that is not his call and these athletes influence the young nonetheless. As with the “The Twilight Zone” professor, we too influence our students, and our hope is that recognizing the rhetorical power of indirection will make us more sensitive to all the means we practice when we teach our subjects.

(Endnotes)

¹ Maurice Natanson, "The Arts of Indirection," *Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration*. Ed. Don Burks, Purdue University Press, 1978, pp. 35-47. 113.