

Craig Saslow
Professor Peter Gibbon
NEH Seminar – Philosophers of Education
1 August 2014

Make them Human and Make it Matter Now
Lessons for the Classroom from Alain de Botton

Despite myriad differences of opinion, many of the foremost thinkers on education seem to agree on a few fundamental points: curiosity is good and content must be made relevant. Locke, Rousseau, James and Dewey all devote many pages to the importance of nurturing and stimulating curiosity. These thinkers likewise assert that whatever is being learned must connect to something in the real world. They insist that learning be made useful, joyful or both. And, of course, who would mount a defense of the opposite? It is hard to imagine an insistence on irrelevant lessons or a push to curtail student curiosity and natural interest. Wide-ranging thinkers (who disagree on many of the finer points) mostly agree on these matters precisely because they are so common-sensical and self-evident. In practice, however, educators and textbooks too often fail to create curious children and to connect seemingly obscure content to everyday living and universal human problems.

Alain de Botton, a wide-ranging writer and thinker, offers a corrective for educators who hope both to engage students and to demystify seemingly “difficult” and potentially intimidating content knowledge. De Botton manages to be both a somewhat elitist intellectual and a populist. He has the rarefied credentials of a world-class education – boarding at the Harrow School, reading History at Cambridge, moving to an MPhil at King’s College, and then beginning work on a PhD in French philosophy at Harvard. Somewhere along the way, however, de Botton soured on the hermetic nature of academia and chose instead to write books meant for the general public. He has since published books on a huge variety of topics including sex, architecture, the role of the news, philosophy, art, workplace culture, travel and more. His books, while varied in subject matter, are unified by a goal to make learning relevant to everyday questions and to get “ideas to make an impact

on how we actually live” (Alain de Botton homepage). In 2008, de Botton helped to found the “School of Life.” This London-based school offers courses with titles very different from those one might encounter in a typical college syllabus. Current offerings include “How to stay calm,” “How to balance work with life,” “How to make up your mind,” and “How to face death.” These courses, like Ted Talks, are geared towards wealthy, well-educated adults with both ample leisure time and disposable income. Critics could quite easily call these courses effete or self-indulgent, but that would miss the much more universal and humanistic aims that are clear in De Botton’s work.

In his books, de Botton reveals his own deep fascination with the essential question of how exactly one should live. In writing on an eclectic mix of profound thinkers, de Botton offers marvelous lessons for teachers and classrooms. To begin with, de Botton understands and utilizes the natural tendency of people to be fundamentally curious about other people. As any teacher can attest, students are fundamentally curious about the other bodies in the room. In classrooms all across the world, many students are right now fascinated by the same question - *Who is this person in front of me? What is his inner life like? What does she think about over dinner? How often does he fight with his wife?*

A teacher becomes an intense object of study right alongside the curriculum. Daily routines, idiosyncratic gestures, haircuts, mildly stained dress shirts – all are scrutinized. This same curiosity, however, does not often transfer to the content. Why? At the front of the room, a teacher appears as flesh and blood, a real individual. As encountered in traditional textbooks, few people are presented with the nuances and foibles that arouse basic curiosity. Students do not get to see John Adams trip over the wires of a laptop. Many a teacher, looking to enliven a dull lesson, has indulged in a long and perhaps entertaining anecdote about his own life. The direct connection to the content may be scant or non-existent, but the students are listening and alert. This approach, while often engaging, has clear drawbacks. For one, the classroom teacher risks becoming the star of the classroom, sometimes directing attention away from the curriculum in the process. Moreover, not all teachers want or desire to run their classrooms by using their own personality and

life as a primary tool for engagement and instruction. Teachers should not need to be charming extroverts in order to be effective.

Rather than tell a personal anecdote, de Botton would counsel a teacher to find an equally engaging anecdote that connects to the content. De Botton makes his subjects, be they Arthur Schopenhauer or Vincent Van Gogh, come alive as three-dimensional people. De Botton's best-selling book *How Proust Can Change Your Life* provides a wonderful example of how to demystify a writer who intimidates most adults, much less students. The book brings together biographical details from Proust's life with close reading of passages from *In Search of Lost Time*, all structured in "How to..." chapter titles reminiscent of a self-help book. (Examples include "How to Suffer Successfully" and "How to Take your Time"). Part of what makes the book effective and entertaining is the wonderful level of detail that de Botton provides the reader about Proust as an eccentric human being. Proust is:

...a man who had spent the last fourteen years lying in a narrow bed under a pile of thinly woven woolen blankets writing an unusually long novel without a bedside lamp (de Botton 2, 5).

Even from this short description, Proust becomes a real person. A reader can picture him holed up on that narrow bed, straining to see in fading light. Other such lifelike details about Proust the human being abound on nearly every page of the book. Compare de Botton's brief description of his author with what a middle school student might read about Jack London in the Norton Anthology before reading "To Build a Fire":

Born in San Francisco, London grew up in poverty and worked variously in a cannery, as a seaman, as a jute-mill worker, and as a coal-shoveler in a power plant. He was once arrested in New York for vagrancy and spent thirty days in jail (Baym, Norton Anthology).

Those few sentences, condensed as they are, hint at a fascinating life. What great stories lurk beneath that summary. And yet the dull, general prose wastes an opportunity to further draw in students to the London fiction they will read on the ensuing pages. The rest of the short introduction goes on to list his major works,

shedding no more detail on the man who shoveled coal and spent time in jail for being homeless.

Despite wide consensus about the power of intrinsic interest, teachers and textbooks alike often fail to harness the power of students' natural curiosity about people. Traditional History textbooks through publishers such as Glencoe and McDougall Littell often reduce highly complex people to two-dimensional cutouts. For the sake of efficiency, in order to march through huge amounts content, major historical actors may get only a few lines of the kind of biographical detail that could further humanize them and awaken student curiosity regarding the inner lives of these world changing actors. The same occurs with other content areas. In math and science textbooks, the people behind major theorems and breakthroughs may get a few token sentences, but their formulas and numbers quickly resume center stage. In his books, de Botton consistently places a fully formed person at the center. There is a reason that biographies of famous figures are read for pleasure whereas textbooks almost never are. Adults, like children, generally require a narrative hook and an investment in a relatable human being to latch on to a story. From there the learning comes easily, flowing as it does from the idiosyncratic details of a three-dimensional human being and not merely as a procession of untethered facts.

For de Botton, however, bringing these people to life on the page is only the first step. His greater mission, as evidenced by "The School of Life" project and its courses "designed to give useful insights around the big themes in life," (School of Life homepage) is to make the learning directly relevant to the business of everyday living. A mere glance at his book titles betrays his mission - *The Consolations of Philosophy*, *Art as Therapy*, *The Art of Travel*, *The News: A User's Manual*. De Botton provides a marvelous example for teachers aspiring to get students to care deeply about complex and world-changing ideas. Hook them first with the human stories, then show the ideas that drove and motivated those people.

In *The Consolations of Philosophy*, de Botton divides the book into chapters with immediately alluring titles - "Consolation for Unpopularity," "Not Having Enough Money," "Frustration," "Inadequacy," "A Broken Heart." As with *How Proust*

Can Change Your Life, each chapter provides rich biographical details of a different philosopher along with a reading of his work as it pertains to the universal issues of the chapter titles. Epicurus, de Botton asserts, has something tangible to offer modern readers about a crushing mortgage. Socrates presents admirable lessons in how to deal with being disliked. Readers learn of Seneca's Stoic philosophy by reading about his suicide, ordered by the vengeful and bloodthirsty Emperor Nero. Nero wrongly believed that Seneca might have betrayed him and therefore ordered that Seneca take his own life. To the end, Seneca lives and dies true to his own ideas:

He drank the hemlock and it had no effect. After two fruitless attempts, he finally asked to be placed in a vapour bath, where he suffocated to death slowly, in torment but with equanimity, undisturbed by the disturbances of Fortune (de Botton 1, 77).

Students or readers could encounter Stoic philosophy through disembodied quotations. Those quotations would likely include a date from thousands of years ago and an attribution to a name that looked foreign and distant; both the strange name and ancient date serving only to increase the student's distance from the words on the page. De Botton presents an alternative. Here is Seneca. He presents him as a real person whose ideas were a way of coping with actual daily problems. Readers learn, for instance, that Seneca lived next to a gymnasium and was constantly subjected to loud noises coming from the gym. Seneca came to recognize that these noises, annoying as they may have been, were not intended to personally aggravate him and were not in fact about him in any way. He would then go on to collect examples of how often people became frustrated by reading personal intent into the behavior of inanimate objects and natural occurrences. In this way, De Botton provides an infinitely richer introduction to Stoic philosophy than a student might get from reading a few famous quotations from Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

What might this all mean for classrooms and teachers? Perhaps de Botton is merely a skilled writer with an eye for a telling historical detail? It's unrealistic, of course, to ask that all textbooks could live up to such an example. Yet it would be

foolish to discard the entirety of Botton's insights simply because textbooks will always remain imperfect and bound to compress huge amounts of information into one place. In some ways, it seems astonishing that De Botton could write best-selling books about rather arcane subjects such as Proust, Montaigne and Seneca. Yet he succeeds because he understands what Locke, Rousseau, James and Dewey all advocate: stimulate curiosity and make the lessons relevant and meaningful. From de Botton, teachers and expository texts can learn to make better use of human nature. How difficult it becomes for teachers to encourage student curiosity when many textbooks themselves seem so lifeless and decidedly anti-curious. What an uphill battle to make content come alive for students when there are no human characters to feel invested in. And it is certainly hard to make learning relevant when the content comes across as dead, ancient, and emanating from people who wrestled with questions totally separate from the students themselves. These great thinkers, de Botton shows, were not all that different from us after all. And their ideas, which can sometimes seem esoteric and far away, might just influence your thinking and actions right now.

Works Cited

Botton, Alain De. *The Consolations of Philosophy*. New York: Pantheon, 2000. Print.

Botton, Alain De. *How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not a Novel*. New York: Pantheon, 1997. Print.

"Home - Alain De Botton." *Alain De Botton*. Web. 29 July 2014.

"Jack London." Baym, Nina. *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 2007. *Norton Anthology*. Web. 30 July 2014.

"The School of Life - Good Ideas for Everyday Life." *The School of Life - Good Ideas for Everyday Life*. Web. 31 July 2014.