**“The Professional Amateur as Scholarly Teacher” Lars Erik Larson**

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Well it's amateur hour at U of P. ladies and germs. My plan is to mansplain for about 20-25 minutes, have a casual discussion together thereafter, and get you back out into your Friday before the 4pm hour.

This UP Crossroads series aims to explore ideas about teaching and technology. Last year featured the ever antic Eric Anctil…. who offered up a vision of classroom technologies of the future (visions that continue to haunt me months after). Last week featured David Turnbloom – my campus mentee, who over the past three semesters has served far more as a mentor to me. David spoke on technology in the service of classroom diversity, and I was sorry to miss it for a meeting. This week, I’m the designated pointer-outer. My name is Lars Erik Larson, …and I am an amateur.

My argument in a nutshell is this: being a professional amateur is *not* a deficit … but an aspiration, an ambition. Hanging out in the interesting tension between ignorance and expertise in pedagogy, I'll be offering some thoughts on how teaching from the standpoint of an amateur is wildly generative.  Now, to substantiate my claims: on a good day, I would offer peer reviewed data, evidence, and statistical significance. But this is not a good day. My statistics turned out to be insignificant and anyway, my sample size blows… -

In short, my hypothesis about the pedagogical value of amateurism – is really just something I feel in my tummy. (typical humanist!)

The technology I am investigating in this crossroads talk is … the classroom. The classroom is a tool humans have engineered to facilitate – if not maximize – learning. Has anyone here used a classroom before? (good – then you’re familiar with the product. And you know how a classroom can be a dangerous weapon, so you wield one with caution.)

It is tempting to approach the classroom the way we approach many forms of technology. For example, if you put a hammer in your hand: you look around and everything in the world suddenly becomes … a nail. (You suddenly hunger to pound – in a way you would not if you were hammerless). Put a straw in your mouth, and everything becomes…. a milkshake. Put a iphone in your hand, everything around you… disappears. In a similar transformation, for some, when you put yourself at the head of a classroom, everyone else becomes… an idiot! Empty heads to fill! People to *teach*! (ack)

So: given how technology is liable to reduce the world down to that technology’s function, it is deeply important to stay aware and wary of this functional determinism. The *approach* we take matters greatly. And my suggestion today is to approach the technology of the classroom from the perspective of a professional learner – an *amateur* wise person – rather than a teacher who teaches. To address that approach, then, I’ll be talking less about instructors in the classroom itself, and more about a way of being in the world.

I look around at the professional world outside of academia. And I’ve become frankly tired of seeing people bustling about as if they’re imagining themselves as Masters of the Universe. You’ve seen the attitude. And I get it: people have grown up, they’ve gotten degrees, a house, a social circle, a voice, some money. But I think I liked them better when I knew them in high school. At least then, with their pimply faces and dateless Fridays, they were at a stage when they could still own up to being *vulnerable*. Years later, pumped up with age and socially-sanctioned confidence, they’ve lost this skill.

My senior undergraduate year, I remember reading the book *Representations of the Intellectual* by the literary and cultural critic Edward Said, who said that the scholar should always assume the stance … of an amateur. And across half my lifetime, I’ve held on to that definition.

For one, I just like the sound of the word “amateur” – its whiff off French, its vicious invective use (“*amateur* comma, he hisssssed!”). I like how the word sounds like “armature” – the supporting skeleton of a thing, before you flesh it out with expertise. The amateur as Wisdom’s armature.

The amateur outlook is contained in Montaigne’s lifelong motto: “what do I know?”

Montaigne, the Renaissance writer credited with initiating the personal essay form -- he loved how his motto moved in two directions: it’s both a humble shrug (“eh, what do I know?”), as well as a call to inquiry (“hmmm… what DO I know?”). Both directions are energized by intellectual humility.

Ideals like these help push back against academia’s longstanding myth of mastery.

One of the things that spending nine years in grad school taught me is my own sheer ignorance within my field -- my lack of knowledge in my discipline is jaw-dropping. And I also know the impossibility of remedying that within only a single lifespan of time.

It’s an eternal paradox that the more years you spend in school, the more you realize how much you don’t know. You could blame the present era: ever since American universities adopted the Germanic 19th century model of the research university, professors have been assumed to be masters of their fields. But in our epoch of hyper-specialization – of horizons of knowledge hammered as thin as gold leaf -- this idea has become completely outdated. O to turn back the clock to Montaigne’s time, when it was still possible to be a quote unquote Renaissance Man. Mastery today is an option for no one.

I’m sure you’ve all heard Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer” from his 1930s teachings. It’s a poem worth committing to memory, which says

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference.”

In this context, we need the serenity to accept that we cannot be experts in our field.

But also the wisdom to see that what we ARE experts in is learning – we are Expert Learners. How might we teach students to become expert learners too? Maybe… by teaching them to be professional amateurs, a discipline that involves a *process*, a habit of mind, rather than a finish line. It’s true that it’s a risky role – for professional amateurs get easily misunderestimated. But that’s why it takes courage to change the things you can.

Amateurs ask a lot of questions, so that calls for a question-based curriculum -- less expertise from teachers, more modeling of curiosity and modes of inquiry. You also cultivate amateurism by doing a lot of just one thing: listening. Amateurity – of giving in to our common and longstanding fears of being an impostor – is how we put ourselves on the road to excellent and evergreen teaching.

And I think embracing the amateur paradigm plays a vital role in social and emotional dynamics. Academics across America were reminded by the last election cycle how corrosive the image of our profession can be to those who live distanced from it.

Of how easy it is for People Who Know Things to come across -- automatically -- as “elitist.” We know that it’s not what you know that makes you elitist, but how you carry that knowledge around, how you deploy it, that truly differentiates the elitist from the educator. (As John Locke says, “It is one thing to show a man that he is in error, and another to put him in possession of the truth.” … An elitist does the former, without caring about doing the latter.) Perhaps a remedy arrives by cultivating the humility achieved by one’s amateur status – the honest and genuine humility that comes from knowing however much we’ve learned, we still fall far, far short of the fullness of truth.

OK: I’ve been speaking about the virtues of being an amateur. But there’s a white elephant in the room that I should address. A yooge white-and-orange elephant… Mister T.

Here in these Divided States of America, we have suddenly and deliberately elected an amateur to run the nation, on the basis that an outsider, a person inexpert in being a politician, could effect the change needed to bring power and pride back to our working class, and lift a troubled nation toward excellence. Mister T. has seemed proud to know so little about such things as the US Constitution, American history, human psychology, American luminaries like Frederick Douglass, and, above all, the definition and value … of a fact. Likewise, Mister T. has filled his cabinet with persons absurdly lacking in expertise in their field. In just four weeks, amateur political leadership has lead to the destabilization of morale, legislation, data, diplomacy, and simple decency. So, in my advocacy of being an amateur, am I championing such ignorance?

The answer is no. For the difference lies in being a *professional* amateur – not merely an amateur. A professional cultivates a steady awareness of their own ignorance. Trump does not. A professional amateur strives to fill the holes that their rigorous self-awareness brings to light. Trump does not. A professional values questions, listening, nuance, and *other people*. Trump does not.

So, for example, in my thinking about such things as Trump’s apparent ignorance about the Constitution, I came to realize that I too stand guilty: I hadn’t read my nation’s founding document since high school. So I my natural impulse was to pedal down to Powells for it, and ever since, I’ve been working my way through. I also plucked from the shelf the *Federalist Papers* – the written debates that led to the Constitution. (which, if I’m not mistaken, was co-authored by a hip-hop artist by the name of … Alexander Hamilton). …

Now I don’t anticipate Mr. T will join me in my reading endeavors. But then, since he’s not a professional amateur, he doesn’t have to. He’s *only* a president.

I’ll admit there are places where you wouldn’t want even professional amateurs. You don’t want them operating heavy machinery, for example, or doing your taxes, or filling your prescription (though THAT could get interesting). But I would argue it’s good to cultivate amateurs in a great many things involving processes: parenting …. innovating … making things … and ESPECIALLY teaching.

The first step in taking ownership of amateurity is to become conscious of it. So let me shift now to chart a few of the ways I discovered my status a perennial amateur:

Most of my students major in something other than the field of my training in English. It’s a privilege each semester being able to teach two core courses -- English 112 Thinking Through Literature, as well as one upper division course in American literature. And it means over two thirds of my students are specialists in fields I’m ignorant about. In discussion, they use terms like “zone of proximal development” and “self-actualization” that sends me scrambling to the internet to learn for the first time. They remind me how incomplete my education has been – a hole that no Ivy League degree could ever fill.

My rising age also keeps me an amateur. I recently asked students to use their journals to form an answer to this question: “what’s one thing … you wish your UP professors knew about you?” And one student wrote “I wish they understood how different our generation's college experience is from theirs.” …  That response crystalizes why I have so much learning to do: to stop assuming my Generation X is the same as their Generation Z requires so much listening, reading, and experiencing.  With every year as a veteran teacher, we grow more and more distant from the younger generation’s concerns, popular culture, technology, and mindset. Essentially, in relation to our university’s endlessly-youthful *age-18-21 audience*, we instructors are growing dumber by the day. The age gap is not our fault of course, but there’s no remedy for this terminal occupational hazard.

I try to see the positive side of this by thinking of the people to come. Some of our students will make it to the 22nd century. Satchmo sings, “I see babies crying, and I watch them grow. They’ll learn much more than we’ll know… and I say to myself, what a wonderful world.” Whatever accomplishments we achieve, that futurity – and the wonder of discoveries that will soon be made – makes us amateurs in comparison. Our students will soon learn more than us – and that’s wonderful.

I’m also an amateur – *and a dinosaur* -- in my limited use of technology, in increasing contrast with students: I remain a Facebook Refusenik, and a social media illiterate. (as they say, (fingers) uh… pound-sign … blessed”). As campus adopts exciting new learning technology, I remain this campus’s analog control group, being a late adopter, one who still hasn’t gotten on board with that cellular telephone idea. And I’m still not too jazzed about MOOCs, the Massively Optimistic Online Community. So ESPECIALLY in this Crossroads context, in a room full of powerful machines, I’m out of my element.

But I’ve also seen how being an amateur can have advantages.

Living in India for five months taught me about the power of amateurs, and I learned about endless examples. I read about Mother Teresa – now dubbed Saint Teresa of Calcutta – How she left Albania to live the rest of her life in India, an entirely new country, new culture, new language; she was a woman who wanted to lead even though the Catholic power structure usually empowered only male leaders. But through her difference she saw an unmet need AND a solution that many locals – and the local orders -- did not.

I read about B. R. Ambedkar – a man who should be as well known as Gandhi and MLK – for he was instrumental in getting India’s constitution to forbid the caste system that for so many millennia had frozen class mobility. He was born a Dalit – an untouchable – the caste doomed to burn bodies, sweep yards, and clean toilets. And he grew up under a system of rigid segregation. Yet under the British-educational system he eventually mingled with high-born Brahmins, ignored his own inability to fit in, and later convinced his newly-independent nation that a system of affirmative-action was essential to fighting a generations of injustice. I read about the 16th century Mughal Emperor Akbar, who instead of resting content in his Muslim faith, or promoting it exclusively, instead invited a series of dialogues between people of various faiths, fostering the separation of mosque and state as he took on the role of listener rather than ruler.

The most lasting impression I got from living in India, was feeling myself reduced to being a helpless pre-schooler again: I was illiterate in the local language, ignorant of most local customs and ways, and so deeply dependent upon everyone else to show how to do tasks they found simple. But my naivete had its own system of built-in strengths. I re-learned so much about being a learner. And so many locals in Mysore South India seemed delighted to help a person so helpless (just as long as I did not try their patience too much). Grade school kids felt empowered to help guide their neighborhood’s new clueless American professor out of his befuddling ignorance.

Back on campus, I’ve tried to recognize how I’m in a similar situation in American as I was in India. In my American modernism class this semester, I have a student whose first language is American Sign Language and who hails from what she identifies as “Deaf Culture.” Since I’ve never had a deaf student in my 12 years of teaching at UP, this meant making a number of teaching adjustments, and thinking about a language and culture entirely new to me. So I fetched from the library *Sign Language for Dummie*, and began to learn to think through this longstanding culture in America.

Similarly, I try to be conversant in the foreign fields and academic cultures of our campus. Before each semester starts, I try to scan the bookstore’s textbook shelves, to find out what you’re assigning students, in hopes that I can connect my discipline with the writers and subjects they’re thinking through in other classes. Students are deeply gratified when I can validate something they’re learning in another class. But the only way I can do that is to learn about what’s being taught. Based on student recommendations and what I’ve seen on the shelves this semester, I now feel the need to read *Tattoos on the Heart* by the Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle about turning around LA gang members. And Claude Steele’s *Whistling Vivaldi* about stereotypes in an age of intersectionality. In past years I recall drawing from the shelves Chip and Dan Heath on making things memorable, Alfie Kohn’s protest against competition as a motivator, and of course the strange and fascinating novels my fellow English faculty are teaching in their subfields. Amazon is right to continue opening brick-and-mortar bookstores for something Powell’s has always known: of the great wealth gained from the power of physically browsing.

Another strategy of an amateur: on my computer-machine, I’ve kept a 20-year-habit of making lists: collections of quotes, lists of things learned, of favorite things, of books to get, words and phrases crystalized beautifully that I want to remember forever. Ideas for teaching, films to see, music to get. I’ve felt a childish glee as these lists grow across years and decades. A list is an endless structure – there’s no way to complete a list, for there’s always a blank space after the final entry, waiting to be filled in.

And I’ve drawn upon these lists for a series of writings for the Teaching and Learning website. These essays gesture to the accretions of others’ wisdom. On the site you can find such things as a list of teaching quotations; and a tour through four poems about teaching.

Other entries have included a review of a book offering counterintuitive teaching advice, a starter’s tour of our campus writing handbook, and most recently (and most urgently), a piece on moral psychology, using the structures of Jonathan Haidt to help us understand the differing political values of ourselves and others. A great many others have contributed to the teaching and Learning site, so I highly recommend you direct your curiosity to it: sites.up.edu/tl/

My amateur’s habit of listing also includes my ongoing gatherings of questions, in hopes I’ll find the right moment to ask them. Here’s a sheet of them, for use at your next dinner party, date, holiday meal, road trip, or even classroom. (Hand out photocopied list of questions).

Fortunately, we teach in a place full of opportunities for professional amateurs: I recommend this campus’s various eclectic events – of attending workshops and lecturers offered by departments outside your discipline. And I especially give a shout-out to the Faith and Intellectual Life twice-semesterly meetings; as a student of these gatherings for a dozen years under the steadfast leadership of Karen Eifler and Norah Martin, the eclectic texts we’ve read have been an ongoing course in learning what it means to be human.

I also see an emphasis on scholarly humility in the recent publication edited by Shannon Mayer and Jacquie van Hoomissen, *Awaken the Stars* – a series of 25 short essays by UP professors on what we really teach. [Full disclosure, my wife and I both have pieces in the book, but I’m not using this occasion to shamelessly shill for the product ... Although you CAN purchase a copy conveniently located in UP’s bookstore… that’s also where you can find Ivanka Trump’s wonderful line of apparel – really amazing, very tremendous stuff you should go out and buy, right now.]

The book is full of essays not of confident disciplinary assurance, but more often of astonishment: we find Charlie McCoy in wonder at the mathematical and cosmic infinite; Karen Eifler re-learning the feeling of apprehending life from square one; Rich Christen considering education as a horizontal dialogue between equals – student and teacher. He regularly *invites* and unpacks criticism and judgment from students regarding his teaching, just as he does the same for their work. Or Steve Mayer’s focus on how much modern science is not so much built on formulas and established fact, … as it is on uncertainty.

Reading through all these short essays, I learned some of the fine-grained detail of so many fields, and therefore where our Venn Diagrams of Learning overlap – an overlap that provides the richness of connection to tell my students about. For example, I’ve known that fiction is a machine for developing human empathy. But it took Loretta Krautscheid’s essay for me to recognize how useful the English Department’s offerings could be for our award-winning nurses in their coordinations of caring. So I’ll certainly be voicing that connection to my English 112 students.

Well. If as a campus we truly do value the presence of professional amateurs, as opposed to overconfident experts, we might consider that “fit” amid job searches – prioritizing the amateur mindset of curiosity, openness, and good listening. Asking in job interviews not just about their expertise, but about their wider channels of curiosity. For example, to put them on the spot with the question: what have you been reading for pleasure in the past few days?

To close: I hope this mad jumble of ideas and references helps add clarity to this seeming nonsense of valuing professional amateurism in the academy. Certainly, it’s been the greatest part of my teaching and living philosophy, it helps invest each day with a new set of challenges, and I think the habit allows a university to be its best self.

But, … as Montaigne says,… what do I know?