English Department Faculty Development Forum

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So I came up with an idea for a forum called “What Is a Difficult Text?” because we all deal with difficulty in various ways in our scholarship and pedagogy. And I found a collaborator in the department, someone else from whom I also learned a great deal, and we invited the faculty to come together for an afternoon and answer our question.

In case you are wondering what is a difficult text: you are reading one right now, because I am using this genre, the conference poster, in a way you were probably not expecting. I suspect it’s difficult for another reason too. Because of the medium, I, unlike most writers, have some idea what you’re doing with your body as you read. If I were in your position I would probably have unconsciously allowed my knees to lock and the left one would be starting to ache about now. So whatever your discomfort, I appreciate your reading on.

The forum was the same day as a department meeting, at which the department chair, in what I imagined was a desperate attempt to get faculty to stop bringing all their little interpersonal quarrels to him so that he could get some work done, asked us to abide by the Golden Rule. This was well meant and something I probably would have tried myself in his place, but the effects did lead me to theorize that people always respond to a rule (even the Golden one) the same way: by reflexively performing their most conditioned attitudes and behaviors.

So the forum was fairly well attended but not inspiringly well attended. Later that weekend I was at a social event with some other department members and one who hadn’t come to the forum asked me whether I thought that some people had stayed away because they were offended by the department chair’s request. The answer was no, this idea would not have occurred to me in a million years, but of course he was not really asking me something but telling me something.

And this has been a very hard lesson to learn about leadership, and one that I still haven’t fully come to terms with. That not all people are going to communicate with me the way I want them to but because I am in a position of responsibility I can’t just dismiss or avoid them. I have to try to listen around what I don’t like because they all have something to tell me that I need to know, and I am answerable to their needs and desires, even the ones they don’t own.