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Directed Research Tutorial-Our Semester of Learning Curiously

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Directed Research Tutorial: Our Semester of Learning Curiously

As scholars and educators, we treasure the satisfaction of getting lost in the flow of solving an intriguing intellectual puzzle. Asking that first inspired question and then realizing that our research did not lead to an answer, but more questions. Back in the halcyon days of the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and card catalogues the path of investigation was slow and often meandering; offering opportunities for reflection or invitations to explore diverging paths. Today, budding scholars are inundated with so much information from one trip to the search engine that they don't pursue the opportunity for curious learning. I was able to offer such an opportunity to a student.

Heidi van Dyk, Senior Political Science: Pre-Law major, came to me to set up her final semester of her undergraduate education. She is conscientious and intelligent, so she had nearly completed all degree requirements and need another class to reach the 120 hours required for graduation. Knowing of her interest in law and nonprofit organizations, I offered her an alternative to the default 100-level course. Together, we would explore the condition of America's social contract with nonprofits.

Since the purpose of our directed research course was honing her skills in information acquisition and evaluation, we were not limited by the need to produce a specific final artifact for assessment—we were free to explore. We began our journey with this question: What is the state of government oversight of the tax-exempt status of nonprofit organizations? Along the path, she would need to navigate the Congressional Record to elucidate the debate surrounding the legislation that exempted nonprofit organizations from taxation. She would plod through court decisions and judicial proceedings to decipher the court's interpretations of the privileges and limitations of the tax-exempt status. She would trudge through Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax code and Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reports to decode when and of whom violations of tax-exempt status were investigated.

The course structure was simple. We would meet for an hour each week to discuss the information Heidi uncovered. My "lesson plan" included two required questions to start and end our meetings: What did you discover? What do you want to investigate next? Our first Huh, Really? Moment was when she searched the Congressional Record for the debate surrounding the 1954 Johnson Amendment, which denied tax exemption to any organization attempting to influence legislation or any political campaign. What surprised us both is that there was no congressional record. It passed as a floor amendment on a voice vote. This challenge to our assumptions and conventional wisdom severed as the jumping off point to sixteen weeks of rewarding exploration.

Throughout this process, she kept detailed research notes, produced graphs and charts, and presented a summary of her weekly discoveries. A syllabus, which on the surface might appear to lack rigor, produced an extensive annotated research outline and multiple excel graphs. Beyond the work product, it produced a first-year law student, who when asked if she can find information in tax code can say yes,

and back that up with an example of how she already has. It also revitalized my interest in a long languishing research project, which will become a co-authored article.

In conclusion, the modern deluge of easy information can lead students to doubt if there can be any more to find. However, intellectual curiosity beseeches scholars to look a little deeper, scrutinize a source, seek corroboration evidence, and remain open to possibilities. Taking time to learn curiously is a powerful gift for budding scholars, giving them the space to develop knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in the 21st century. By nurturing a love for learning and the ability to critically evaluate information, and ability to persevere, we empower students to become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and informed decision-makers. In a world where information is abundant but not always reliable, these skills are not just desirable—they are essential.