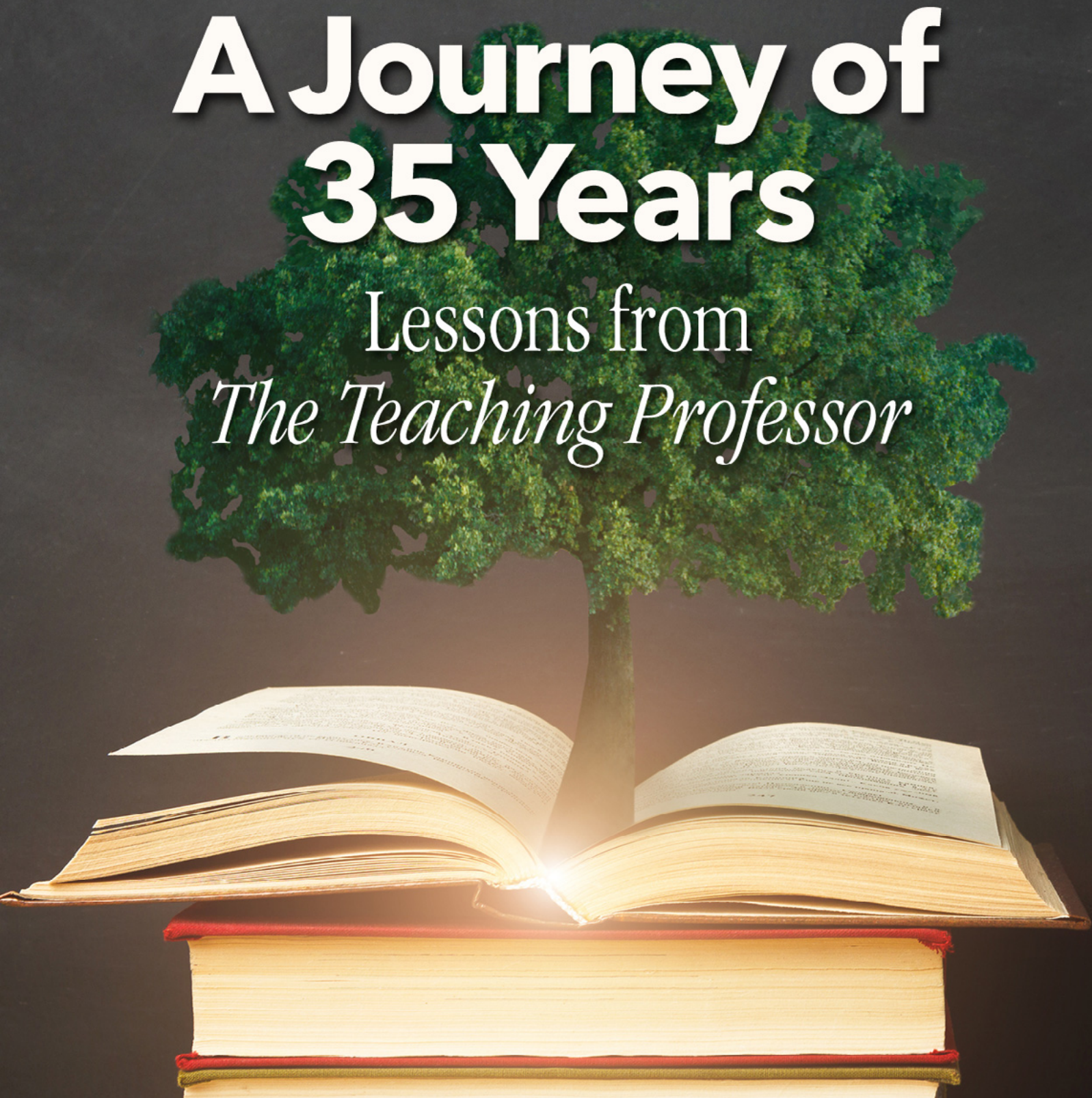




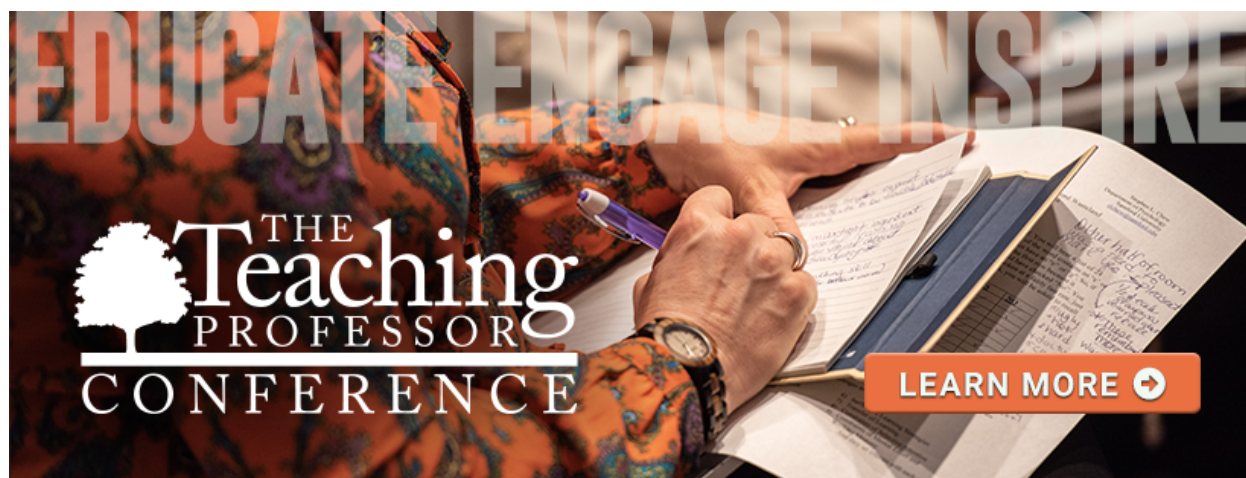
A Journey of 35 Years

Lessons from
The Teaching Professor



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Meet “The Teaching Professor”

Maryellen Weimer
March 1987

With all the enthusiasm of a new beginning, Magna begins publication of a newsletter for college professors about college teaching. We believe the time is right. As a number of national reports confirm, the support and recognition college professors deserve is long overdue.

Our desire to make a constructive contribution to instructional health and well-being does not derive from notions of deficiency. Yes, some faculty teach badly. Most do not. Still, most college faculty have not been trained to teach.

They do what they do because they once had or knew a teacher who did likewise. Many work in climates far more conducive to research than teaching. Ask a colleague to recommend a good, recent book on teaching. Ask a department head to recommend a pedagogical journal. Few can do either.

Valuable, relevant information that could better inform and indeed improve the practice of college teaching exists. It's in a variety of out-of-the-way places, sometimes it's written in convoluted research jargon, but it's there. And a newsletter can bring it to faculty. By design, a newsletter

conveys information succinctly, understandably and conveniently. Articles are short, distilling and condensing material from a variety of sources so it can be used easily and quickly.

Can instruction be improved by reading material about teaching and learning? Yes. Reading about teaching forces reflection. It creates instructional awareness by causing faculty to wonder: Do I do that? Should I do that? Infusing teaching with a steady supply of new ideas keeps it fresh and invigorated.

Whether or not an individual's instruction needs improvement is a false issue. The definition of improvement is to enhance in value or quality. The definition assumes the presence of value. Improvement is the process of enhancing that value.

Teaching, like writing, swimming, painting, and a host of other activities can always be done better, and that ought to be the aim. To improve because one wants to reaffirm the value of the educational enterprise and the ability of individuals to make significant contributions to it. To improve because one has to rob the endeavor of its rich potential for personal satisfaction.

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And so—fundamentally—this newsletter is designed to enhance college teaching skills by providing pragmatic materials aimed at increasing instructional effectiveness. But, we want to do more than provide digests of formal research.

The Teaching Professor is a newsletter, not a newspaper or a journal. We plan to be an open forum on teaching. We welcome your comments and suggestions, especially here at the beginning as we work to refine and focus our vision for this publication. Your reactions, suggestions, criticisms, and comments on relevant topics will be especially useful—please share them.

One final aspiration: We support the college teaching enterprise because we admire what it strives to share with students. Sometimes the lofty aims of education are ignored, overlooked, even

forgotten. Often one happens on them only in mission statements, buried in college catalogues, or in the remarks of presidents at convocations. They no longer burn in the minds or quicken the steps of faculty as they head off to meet the challenges of another day class. Those of us writing this newsletter hope to rekindle those embers that are now burning low. Education is a serious, purposeful endeavor with high stakes. Observations like Packer's are necessary reminders. "Probably the most violent and aggressive act that any person can do to another is to invade their minds with ideas and twists of meaning which disturb the comforting security of things known and faith kept. Yet this is what I, as a teacher, am required to do."





Professors and the Participation Blues

Maryellen Weimer
September 1987

Could this be your classroom?

- It's your favorite lecture. You anticipate class and launch into the material, eager to share. Ideas build on each other and reach a point where important relationships emerge. You ask students if they see, do they understand? Nobody says yes. Nobody says no. In fact, nobody even moves.
- You're presenting new material. It relates to something presented previously—something you saw most students record in their notes, something you know appears in the book. You ask how this new content connects to the old. Silence answers. You ask again, this time encouraging them. More silence, this time uncomfortably long. You search the room, looking, but not finding, even a single pair of eyes. Well, if they don't care, why should you?
- You're making a point. It's more about life than course content. It's something you learned the hard way. You share a bit of personal experience. It leads you to make a point emphatically. You've put yourself on the line. Some of the students respond. You can see mental wheels begin to turn, but they quickly stop when a student asks, "Do we have to know this for the exam?"
- You value student participation, make a point

of regularly reminding students of its role in class—but some days getting them to comment or question takes so much time. It's such hard work. And so, on some other days, with a lot to cover, you don't bother. If somebody asks a question, fine, and if they don't, for this day, that's fine too.

The chances are that situations like these have occurred in your teaching experience. They do in many other classrooms.

Students are passive. They come to class with a strong "do it unto me and make it as pleasant and painless as possible" attitude. You see it in the imaginative ways they recline with listless indolence in desks designed for sitting up straight. After a while, it's hard not to be cynical, hard to keep trying. But the effort to get students involved must be made.

When students participate, they learn more. Student response provides valuable feedback to the instructor: "Oh, they haven't got this yet." They're beginning to understand that." Interaction encourages cooperative learning. Students learn to listen and respect the ideas of others. And on some memorable days, student questions or insights take the professor to a new and deeper understanding of the subject matter. These are the reasons for trying.



“When I Was a Student . . .”

Maryellen Weimer
March 1990

I hear the phrase often. It’s usually inserted somewhere in the middle of a diatribe about “those students in my class,” who do all manner of inconceivable things. They expect three excused absences, and more for unusual circumstances (like three exams in one week). They expect instructors to cover all of the reading in class or do all of the homework problems on the board. They question grading policies and arrogantly assert the validity of their poorly informed opinions. “Why, when I was a student, we’d never think of . . .” doing what students do today.

It’s not the nostalgic reminiscing I object to. It’s the underlying assumptions. Face it, most faculty end up in higher education because they liked what happened to them in college. They made it through the system successfully—unlike other students then or now. But I think many faculty teaching assuming the students in their classes are like them. “I didn’t care about my grades in college. I wanted to learn,” reported a faculty member recently. “I didn’t like classes where all the emphasis was on grades.” He was in my office because his students had petitioned the dean demanding that this faculty member be required to tell

students his grading policy. I laud this faculty member’s concern with learning, but to teach today assuming that students are not interested in grades is to court disaster. So is teaching assuming that students love to read, that they

understand that learning to solve problems is hard work, and that they know and respect our intellectual heroes.

I’m also bothered by the arrogance I hear in faculty assertions about themselves as students. Were they really as respectful and well-rounded as they remember? I have memory flashes every so often that certainly make me wonder

about myself.

We could argue for some time about what faculty were or were not in their student days and still not get at the issue I find troubling. It is the assumption that students in college should be like these possibly idealized students of yesteryear, that students today are something of a lesser breed.

Is that really what we believe? I don’t think so, which is not to imply that all student behaviors are acceptable. Many students we have in class today are less prepared, less motivated, and less convinced that a college education is anything

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changes.*

more than a professional certification. But that certainly does not make them inherently inferior. It just makes them harder to teach.

And that's what I really hear faculty saying when they complain about students. The arrogance is there, but I think it's a cover for the anxiety and frustration many faculty experience in their classrooms.

The tried-and-true instructional methods of yesteryear work much less effectively with these

students. Their success and failure is much more closely tied to what happens to them in the classroom than it used to be. For those of us with long years of teaching behind us, we see our jobs changing, and we see ourselves ill-equipped to handles the changes. Consequently, we complain about students and maintain the problem is with them. Responsibility for solutions, however, falls squarely on our shoulders. It's time we got honest and faced up to the challenges.



A Dozen Responses to Incorrect Answers

Chris Eleser, Debbie Longman, and Pattie Steib

October 1996

“Close, but no cigar.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Not in your lifetime.”

“In your dreams.”

“No.”

Responding to wrong answers is part of every instructor’s daily routing. Often, the response that first springs to mind cannot be stated aloud.

To better respond to incorrect answers, we need to be aware of types of questions and methods of effective feedback.

Richard Paul and Linda Elder (“Three Categories of Questions: Crucial Distinctions,” 1995) have identified three different kinds of questions:

1. Those with the right answer: “What is the chromosomal abnormality in Down’s Syndrome?”
2. Those with better or worse answers: “How would you define puberty?”
3. Those with as many answers as there are human preferences: “Which do you prefer, Bach or Mozart?”

Paul and Elder also indicate in a subsequent resource (“The Role of Questions in Thinking, Teaching and Learning,” 1996) that while such questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate information, answers sometimes indicate a halt in a student’s thinking, particularly if he or she misunderstands the information or question or lacks the knowledge to answer. Faced with this dilemma, students choose to say nothing or to answer incorrectly.

Responding appropriately to wrong answers is just as important as reacting properly to right ones—if not more so. That’s because incorrect answers and reactions to them often provide more information

than do correct replies and communications about them. Inaccurate or inexact answers often reveal something about problems in a student’s understanding and why those difficulties occurred. Thus, our response to them offers the chance to assess student learning, evaluate the impact of the instruction, estimate the amount of learning, and teach beyond that initial content.

Giving corrective feedback involves three

Responding appropriately to wrong answers is just as important as reacting properly to right ones—if not more so...

essential requirements. First, you must believe in the efficacy of incorrect answers. Second, in responding to wrong information, you need to be sensitive about your words and body language. Third, your replies to students who do not answer correctly should contain no personal or derogatory comments.

In his 1993 book *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*, Paul recommends Socratic discussion using appropriate phrasing. Consider these ways of responding to incorrect answers:

- “What do you mean by _____?”
- “Can you give me an example of _____?”
- “How does that relate to the problem or issue?”
- “All of your answer depends on the idea that _____?”

- “Why did you base your answer on this rather than _____?”
- “What are your reasons for saying this?”
- “Can you be more specific?”
- “Let me see if I understood you. Do you mean _____?”
- “Could you explain your answer further?”
- “Can you rephrase your answer?”
- “What I hear you say was _____. Is that what you meant?”
- “Pattie, do you agree with the answer Bruce just gave?”
- “Let me rephrase the question. Now, what do you think?”

An incorrect answer can be turned from a negative experience into positive learning—with a little help from us.



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The Seven Dwarfs and Classroom Discussion: Archetypes Help Identify Student Traits

Terry Favero and Jeff Kerssen-Griep
April 2002

Satisfying discussions prompt increasingly thoughtful student responses and promote their willingness to think out loud together.

When preparing the simple-to-complex questions that lead to ever-improving responses, we've found that simple audience analysis often is the neglected additional key to sparking productive discussions and vibrant learning environments. Recognizing distinctive student participation styles is as vital to effective discussion as learning styles are to learning.

We've found that applying a "seven dwarfs" template to a classroom provides a memorable way to identify diversity among learners, reduce teacher frustration, create starting points for interactive classroom dialogue, and help tailor instructional tactics.


Comparing students to cartoon characters isn't meant to demean either group, nor should seeing

a student resembling a particular dwarf once or twice produce an unchanging stereotype in a teacher's mind. Instead, as Flannery O'Connor

wrote in a different context, "Somewhere is better than anywhere"—marking a few differences among students facilitates better discussions than seeing none. Ignoring any diversity beyond these archetypes or failing to recognize a student's unique character would be like finding \$20 but leaving \$15 of it on the sidewalk. These archetypes are useful cognitive starting points

for teachers when they spark more rather than less attention to individual differences.

- **Happy** has a positive outlook or demeanor, even when doing poorly. Tends to gloss over consequences of actions. Will generally say that "everything is great," even though it may not be.



Ignoring any diversity beyond these archetypes or failing to recognize a student's unique character would be like finding \$20 but leaving \$15 of it on the sidewalk.

- **Dopey** may have a pleasant, supportive demeanor, but often doesn't pay attention or listen well even to basic information. "What was the chapter to read, again?"
- **Grumpy** can show a standoffish and cynical, though often intelligent outlook on life, is difficult to please and seldom responds to humorous coaxing.
- **Sneezy** is fragile about personal energy and health reserves, may worry about holding up group- or class-work due to fear of feeling run-down: "I feel like I'm coming down with something—can we do this tomorrow?"
- **Bashful** is shy and reticent about group projects but often thoughtful in discussions; won't visit office hours to discuss things, though other assignments often show observational insights.
- **Sleepy** frequently looks bored or lethargic regardless of the activity, often is the last to contribute: "Can't we get out a little early today? We were up late last night."
- **Doc** knows lots of information and likes to demonstrate competence, is cool to others, enjoys answering questions correctly, providing opinions, and comparing grades: "I did that when I was in high school," "Well the book says . . ."

We think of these archetypes as situational roles students play, not as immutable personality traits. Effective teachers will constantly revise and refine these rough insights and apply them contextually. An instructor might communicate

differently with a student acting "Bashful," for instance, depending on whether that student is involved in a classroom discussion or an office conversation. Alternatively, a teacher may craft a set of questions in a way that certain archetypes are more willing to respond to.

We have applied these caricatures to enhance our own communication studies and biology class discussions in a variety of ways, including simply aligning students' roles-of-the-moment with discussion needs that emerge: Grumpy can be called upon as a skeptic, for instance, or Doc as an assertive problem-solver when a discussion needs that contribution. Some archetypes highlight important dichotomies (such as Grumpy vs. Happy, or Bashful vs. Doc) that help us "map" students' unique participation styles. We also look for different types of verbal and nonverbal discussion feedback. For example, students playing Dopey, Sneezy, or Sleepy roles might be relied upon as "barometers" of lowest common denominator for understanding, weakest energy level, or engagement in the activity, respectively.

Ongoing audience analysis can help teachers get what they want from the student who won't give it and from the student who wants to give something else. It acknowledges that there often is method to discussant's maddening-ness: students are trying to meet their own myriad needs and save face during what can seem like risky and intimidating interactions. Applying the "seven dwarfs" template can help teachers respond to both the question and the questioner and facilitate rewarding classroom discussion.



Teaching Professor Learns Lessons of Being a Student

Maryellen Weimer

March 2003

A year ago last fall, it was astronomy. I took the course with 60 first-semester students. Last fall, it was chemistry. I took the course with 20 first-semester business majors. Both courses fulfilled general education science requirements; neither were courses for majors. In both cases, the students enrolled in a one-credit first-year seminar that I taught.

For years, I've (sort of) facetiously proclaimed that if we are really serious about improving college teaching, there is a simple way we could accomplish that goal: require college faculty to take a course not in their field once every three years. I will continue to make that claim, but no longer facetiously. Being a student is a powerful motivator and mechanism for change—in one's classroom and in one's thinking about how education works. Here's a brief rundown of some of the most important insights that came to me through this process.

1. Beginning college students connect first and foremost to the instructor—not the content. They don't see the content as relevant, accessible, or particularly interesting. They gravitate to the professor and define their relationship to the course in terms of their feelings about him/her. They characterize

these relationships in highly personal ways that most of us would consider irrelevant: "He's mean." "She's nice." "He doesn't like me." "She intimidates students." Most amazing and frightening to me is how strongly these thoughts about their teachers impact motivation and learning.

2. When you are required to learn something that you don't see as important or relevant, you don't experience the joy of learning. The thick fog of all that is required—assignments, reading, labs, and homework -- obliterates the landscape. The beauty, general shape of and the connections within a knowledge domain, the answers to questions that do matter, none of these are seen by students. I took both these courses because I'm 55 and all but science illiterate. I thrilled to finally understand the difference between global warming and ozone depletion. Students take these courses to get credit, because they're required, something to get out of the way on their way to other courses. Will they be science literate when they're 55? Will they love learning?
3. There is joy when you learn by doing. I loved chem lab; it smelled strange, the drawers held

glassware with funny names and other weird equipment we learned how to use. We wore safety goggles and knew how to operate the emergency shower—it wasn't like a "regular" classroom. We collected data with not a clue as to why we were getting those results, and we wondered why. The questions arose naturally out of what we were doing and sometimes so did the answers. And those were moments of insight, revelation, and understanding. Even class curmudgeons were on occasion captivated.

4. Our own disciplines and fields of study we wear like a pair of glasses—everything passes through and is changed by those lenses. Folks in the sciences don't define theory anything like we do in the humanities do—it took me way longer than it should have to figure that out.
5. Perceived prowess as a lifelong learner can melt like ice under a hot sun once you find yourself in a new and unfamiliar learning territory. In both of these classes, after concerted attempts to understand basic concepts, I seriously wondered if I had what it took to master the material.
6. The gap between the one who knows (the teacher) and those who don't (the students) is much larger than I ever realized. Sometimes you literally cannot figure out what you need to ask. And then when you finally do get a question framed, sometimes the one who knows doesn't understand the question, probably because it's framed in such a convoluted manner. And then when he or she answers, you don't understand the answer, probably because it's framed in a way totally unrelated to what you do know and understand.

7. It is safer and often more productive to first ask questions of fellow students. They don't always know and sometimes give wrong answers but in the process of trying to figure it out together, you work with the content. It does become clearer, and you do learn more than when you are just given the answer straight out.

8. Exams provoke enormous amounts of anxiety. Even if you keep up with the reading, attend all classes, take careful notes, and do the homework (I tried to model productive student behaviors), you still cram the night before—focusing on memorizing details, going over notes, doing problems. Are you learning? Yes. Are you loving it and finding pleasure in this mastering of the material? No. The sense of mastery gets inextricably tied up with the grade only at that point where a sinking feeling tells you that you wouldn't do nearly as well on this exam if you had to take it again right now.
9. I couldn't believe that I, self-proclaimed devotee to learning, bragged shamelessly about earning an A, complained bitterly about getting a C, and that I did both without ever discussing what I learned.

What is the best way I can describe my experiences in these two classes? Exhilarating and humiliating. As a consequence of these experiences, I have resolved never to forget what may be my most important insight: learning takes courage. Teachers must respect that.



Roll the Dice and Students Participate

Kurtis J. Swope
April 2006

I recently ran into a former student at a local restaurant. We talked for a few minutes about how his classes were going this semester and what his plans were following graduation. After we talked, it occurred to me that I had heard him speak more during this short conversation than he had during the entire semester he took my course. I was somewhat appalled being that I'm an instructor who prides himself on engaging (or at least attempting to engage) students in active classroom participation. Here was a student who had done well overall in the course but had evidently made it through my class with only a modicum of vocal participation.


I wonder if your experience is like mine. I find that some students eagerly volunteer answers and often dominate discussions, while others listen, observe, or daydream while their classmates hold forth. I have always been somewhat hesitant to call on inattentive students for fear of embarrassing them or creating an awkward or uncomfortable classroom atmosphere. However, I have also found that those reluctant to volunteer often have

quite worthwhile and interesting things to say when called upon.

I regularly teach a course in statistics, and a few semesters ago I began using index cards with students' names to randomly select them for various tasks, such as working homework problems on the board. I used this approach to reinforce the concepts of probability and sample selection, but I found that when I shuffled the cards prior to randomly drawing names, a wave of interest and excitement rippled through the class. Based on this favorable response, I

started using the cards during classroom discussions and in other courses as well. Previously some students were justifiably confident that I would not call on them if they did not volunteer, but the cards suddenly made everyone "fair game" every time.

It was my wife who suggested that I use dice rolls to simplify and expedite the selection process. She actually found some many-sided dice at a local game store which are perfect for the smaller sized classes at my institution. However,



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dice rolls can also be easily adapted to larger class sizes by breaking the section list into several smaller subsections (for example, groups of ten to twenty) and then using two dice rolls—one to pick the subsection and one to pick the student.

I found that using the dice rolls frequently to elicit student responses in various contexts had several important advantages: (1) it provides a convenient avenue for looking past the overeager student who participates too frequently, (2) it removes the awkwardness associated with intentionally calling on inattentive students, (3) it generates a sense of anticipation and attention because any student can be called upon at any time, (4) it provides a convenient method of calling on somebody when nobody seems willing to volunteer an answer, and (5) it generates greater variety in student responses.

While I do not have any rigorous empirical analysis that frequent use of random selection improves overall learning outcomes, my personal experience has been overwhelmingly positive.

Students seem very receptive and good-humored towards random selection. I am certain that it improves student attention, which is often the greatest challenge. Moreover, most students seem to welcome the dice roll as an alternative to discussions dominated by a few classmates. On the other hand, responses are more frequently wrong or at least not well-formulated. But these types of responses actually stimulate greater and deeper discussion because we, as a class, can stop and analyze the response.

I still use “open” discussion quite often, but the dice rolls are very effective at initiating or changing the pace of a discussion. I roll the dice whenever I need to select or assign students to a task. In fact, I now use the dice rolls so often in class that a student this semester asked, “Sir, do you always carry that thing around in your pocket?” I don’t—but maybe I should. I have a feeling it could come in handy at many unexpected moments, like when I can’t decide which spaghetti sauce to buy.





Lessons Learned from My Students

Candice Dowd Barnes
May 2012

My students have taught me some invaluable lessons during my first two years as a college professor. I'd like to share three of the most important ones here. They aren't new lessons, and I didn't use any particularly unique methods to learn them. I collected data midsemester from students, I talked with them and I looked closely at what was happening in my classroom. The lessons were there for me to learn and taken together they have helped me think more clearly about what I want my students to know and do, and who I want them to become. They are lessons that have made me a better teacher.

Assumptions about students can be dangerous

I have learned from students that new learning can be overwhelming. Many students have great difficulty when challenged by rigorous coursework. This is especially true when the course includes activities and assignments which require students to demonstrate their knowledge. For most of their school years, success in and out of the classroom has been relatively easy for many students. When challenged by rigorous coursework, the fears they experience can be

paralyzing. For some students they become insurmountable obstacles.

I complicated the problem with my assumptions about their skills, knowledge, and dispositions. There was a gap between students' actual knowledge, skills and attitudes, and what I expected of and from them. That ended up frustrating both of us. I learned I couldn't make assumptions about their knowledge, skills and dispositions, and instead had to investigate what they knew and were able to do. Not doing so compromises the learning process, but with support, most of my students find a measure of sustainable success.

Deepen the learning to maximize the learning

It has always been my goal to impart as much knowledge as possible to prepare students for careers in their respective disciplines. That desire to impart knowledge pushed me to rush through content, leaving students with a lot of superficial knowledge and little in depth understanding. From my students I have learned three things about deep learning. One, I needed to focus on fewer topics, but with greater depth. This allowed for more integration of topics and content.

Second, I needed to design more opportunities to engage students in their own learning processes. When I did this we had richer class discussions. My students engaged in more inquiry and research, and their confidence that they could critically reflect on their work increased. Finally, I learned how essential it is that I consistently make modifications to sharpen the content, activities and strategies used for each new group of learners. This lesson reminded me to regularly assess students to determine the best methods and strategies to deliver instruction suited to their diverse learning needs and strengths.

Champion the content

Students are exceedingly concerned with their final grade and miss the value of learning the content. This is the most frustrating lesson learned I have learned. As a generation, these students are often pressured to achieve. Failure is not an option. Many of my students became upset at the idea of earning a B. For them B's are tantamount to failure. This relentless pursuit of A's leads too many students to academic misconduct, dishonesty and plagiarism.

To combat this challenge, it was important for me to find a way to champion what is truly valuable and important. I deliver this message relentlessly, "I am far more interested in you learning the content than I am interested in your final grade!" It has become a strategy to move students' thinking from focusing on their final grade to embracing the importance of learning the content, skills and dispositions they will need to become proficient and productive professionals.

Final thoughts

These lessons learned from my students challenge me to acknowledge the diversity in learning styles, knowledge, skills and dispositions; consistently evaluate my teaching to meet the needs of each new group of learners; teach fewer topics in greater depth; and with fervor continually articulate the value of learning content over getting grades. Although I'm sure there are many more lessons to learn, these lessons continue to transform my thinking about students and the methods I use to teach effectively and help them learn deeply.



A Reflection on Teaching and Social Change

By Kimberly D. Brostrom
October 2012

I recently viewed a professional development video on the STARLINK website (established by the State of Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which offers programming to participating colleges across the country) that begins with a poignant quote: “Teaching is the choicest of professions because everybody who is anybody was taught how to be somebody by a teacher.”

Teaching is devalued in a myriad of ways, including on the paycheck. There is an issue that suggests a reason for the lack of monetary recognition: a cultural attitude embedded in the ideological context of stark American individualism out of which grows an abhorrence of duty to the commons. But what is more important than supporting institutions that cultivate the possibility for social change and societal progress? Social change begins with awareness, and awareness begins with education.


Teaching is often dismissed as a career that people enter when they do not want to “do” work in their field or can’t. A famous quote summarizes this notion: “Those who can’t do,

teach.” As exemplified in the personal accounts I saw on this short film and also evident to anyone who has been forever impacted by an important teacher, if you grant any merit to things such as motivation, encouragement, hope, knowledge,

confidence, self-worth, community, humanitarianism, and social change, then this quote seriously debases a field that develops these very virtues.

I often tell my students, particularly when we spend time on the “social change” segment of our sociology classes, that they do have an impact on the world around

them and that they do impact the people they interact with in their daily lives—and probably much more than they are even aware of (or would like to know). This was the case for “radical” leaders of the past who encountered great and expansive obstacles, perhaps never witnessing the social change they sought but tirelessly fighting for a cause they truly believed in. Susan B. Anthony did not live to see the vindication of the rights of women in regard to the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920;



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of professions because
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she died in 1906. Yet the female students sitting in my classroom can vote because of Anthony's persistence. I am sure that there were points in her efforts where she begrudgingly thought to herself, "I am only one person—what impact can I truly have?" Consciousness raising begins with "just one," and the classroom can serve this function.

The first step toward any societal progress is raising knowledge and awareness. If people don't know about something, they don't do anything. There is no urgency surrounding an issue that people do not know even exists. Teachers bring information to life. Teachers make connections between facts and figures that individually may seem irrelevant as we habitually—and all too often unthinkingly—go about our day-to-day lives. If, for instance, more people knew that there are more people enslaved today (many in sexual slavery) in pure numbers than there were during the transatlantic slave trade, more people might get involved in stopping such a travesty. If people knew that by sending a little girl to school she is less likely to be sold into a life of prostitution, they would want to help. Educating people here could save a little girl across the globe, even if it is "just one."

The notion of societal "perfection" is both illusory and self (culturally)-defeating. Quite often this belief is expressed in the phrase "It is what it is—racism/sexism/classism (fill in your term) has always been around," as if to denunciate any propensity to even try for social change. However, the word "progress" leaves room for movement and growth. There is no "end," per se, but rather a pathway filled with zigzags and perhaps some potholes along the way. It is not that we should strive for perfection but for better. That is attainable and begins with "just one."

Those who reference that cliché quote, "Those who can't do, teach" might want to consider where they would be without the teachers in their lives. On a societal level and on a very personal level, progress and growth begin with knowledge. People would not be "doing" without first being taught. After all, "everybody who is anybody was taught how to be somebody by a teacher." As a society, we should support institutions that help cultivate "somebodies." This fosters the pathway toward social progress.



A University Professor Teaches in the K–12 Classroom

William Jefferson
April 2018

During my recent sabbatical, I had the unique opportunity to teach full-day sessions for 14 weeks in two different K–12 settings. Here’s how that happened. I decided to propose this unique sabbatical project because my students regularly asked me about the clinical experience phase of the university’s library science program. The prospect of taking PRAXIS exams (two are required for library science certification) in a testing center and completing background checks and required Pennsylvania Department of Education paperwork were all student stressors. And although those of us teaching in the program can explain and mentor student teaching experiences in a library setting, our students knew very well that most of us had done our student teaching many years prior. Since then, the overall process has evolved to include complications such as required certification tests, background checks, fingerprints, and such. More to the point, I wanted to actually live the experience as a student might.

I didn’t arrive at my faculty position in this department via the more traditional route. I came to university teaching by way of the military, time in corporate America, and teaching at a community college. At this point, I do have a

couple of master’s degrees, higher education teaching experience, and am a practicing and certified Pennsylvania Professional Public Librarian, but before my sabbatical I was not K–12 certified. Once my sabbatical project was approved I set out to “walk the walk,” doing the same steps required of our teacher candidates. First, there was some additional course work I needed to fill in certain gaps in my higher education-focused master’s degree in library science. Accordingly, to prepare for the sabbatical, I completed four courses outside the library science domain. Next, I obtained the clearances I did not yet possess or were not current enough to satisfy school district requirements, completed the requisite medical exams, and processed the paperwork at the sponsoring school district in order to be voted in and invited as a “student” teacher by the schoolboard.

I first taught in an intermediate school library. To say the least, and especially because of not having children, teaching fourth, fifth, and sixth graders was a unique experience for me, and far more interesting and challenging than I expected. Full days of teaching energetic youngsters proved to be quite exhausting, and there were all sorts of new obligations and responsibilities; hallway

monitoring, escorting sick kids to the nurse, for example. Throughout this experience, I found myself living out my collegiate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) lectures. It's one thing to talk about multiple means of representation and stepping out of one's comfort zone when lecturing undergraduate students. It is quite another experience to actually do so in an unfamiliar classroom setting. Reading fairytale stories to fourth graders, using my best, but still not very good, character voices, was a learning experience way beyond anything I was used to. Nevertheless, my less than stellar storytelling skills notwithstanding, working with the kids was a fantastic experience.

My next seven weeks I spent at a high school. This experience was more like teaching my undergraduates at Kutztown, but at the same time, it had clear differences. It was interesting to work with students about to embark on the next phases of their lives, whether it was the military, college, or the workforce. For those headed to college and the military and uncertain about what to expect, I could fill in a lot of the details. Working with these students was rewarding because it helped me better understand seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, soon to be college students.

I finished up the sabbatical by taking the Library Media Specialist and Fundamental Subjects PRAXIS exams, earned 12 additional graduate credits as a result of the student experience, and was awarded K-12 Library Media Specialist certification by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. More importantly, I gained a needed perspective on the whole experience. Now, when students ask me, "What it is like to take the PRAXIS," I can describe the testing center (potentially stressful, little cubicles, timed exams on computers), and I can offer real suggestions about how to study for and face those stressful exams.

Because of the sabbatical teaching experience, smaller details of the current certification experience are now in my grasp. If a student asks about the PDE 430, or clearances, or the special education course sequence, I can accurately comment on those elements. I can also reassure my students with some degree of authority that they will succeed in the journey, just as I did. Perhaps the most important lesson learned from the whole experience was how it enabled me to see how things look from a student's perspective. After teaching for some time, it's easy to lose that perspective and tremendously beneficial to that once again be able to "walk the walk."



Want to Be a Better Instructor? Teach Something You Don't Know

Melanie Springer Mock
September 2019

A few months after I received my university's undergraduate teaching award in 2009, my classroom anxiety dreams went from merely hairy to absolutely hair-raising. For years, I'd dreamed about my classes erupting in chaos: rebellious students flipping over desks, watching pornography while I lectured, or—most frighteningly—ignoring me completely, choosing loud conversations with peers over listening for whatever wisdom I might impart.

Those dreams were the result of my subconscious working through fears that had dogged my teaching career, fears about unruly students upending my weak façade of competency. But after I won a teaching award—which affirmed that I might be competent after all—my department chair started showing up in my nocturnal visions, demanding that I teach courses for which I lacked any preparation: a general biology class one night, a Spanish class the next. In my dreams I always


said yes, as I am a people pleaser even when asleep. But then all kinds of hell would break loose; it turns out that if you don't speak Spanish, teaching Spanish can be exceedingly difficult.

Sometimes dreams do come true. This past year

my chair asked me to teach a class not in my discipline. Not Spanish, thank goodness, but something still outside my usual range of journalism and nonfiction courses. Because we are a small department, because a colleague was going on sabbatical, because I liked reading contemporary world literature—for all these reasons, I got lassoed into teaching our department's survey course on

20th- and 21st-century global literature. Or maybe not lassoed, but my chair asked, and I couldn't help but say yes, my people-pleasing habit complicating my life once again.

In the weeks before the semester started, I put together a syllabus based on what my colleague had already done for the course, my



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own reading tastes, and my pedagogical training in composition, well aware that teaching writing and teaching literature often require different approaches. And on the first day of class, sweat trickling down my back, I decided to be honest rather than bluff, telling students that the course was not in my disciplinary wheelhouse and that we would be learning about contemporary world literature together. That I would be grading their efforts, and they would be evaluating mine, was just an unfortunate dynamic of our shared journey.

Teaching the course was rough, to say the least. I spent significantly more time preparing for it than for my other courses combined: trying to understand reading assignments, researching the context for each author's work, creating PowerPoint presentations and in-class activities that would help students comprehend the work they'd read (or, at least, that they were supposed to have read). During class I felt consistently on edge, wary that the next student's question about the text would be my undoing; and I felt consistently relieved when each period ended, because I'd survived, again. Walking back to my office, I imagined myself skipping and twirling with jubilation, much as George Constanza does in my favorite episode of *Seinfeld*.

And then the semester was over. We had all survived. Students' evaluations suggested they had enjoyed the course, developed an appreciation for non-Western writers, and sharpened their worldviews, all outcomes I'd hoped for—not only for my students but also for myself. After 20 years as a professor, I also learned a great deal in teaching a subject unfamiliar to me, both about the subject itself and, more broadly, about the college classroom.

Teaching a subject I didn't know well actually made me a better teacher for a number of reasons.

First, teaching a new subject required me to

use different pedagogical tools. My teaching strategies have always served me well in writing classes, and I've become accustomed to relying on those strategies without taking time to learn new approaches. Teaching course content that was unfamiliar to me challenged me to expand my pedagogical toolbox, and I spent significant time looking online and in teaching journals for different ways to deliver content, facilitate discussions about texts, and keep students engaged with the difficult work they were reading. Some of the new strategies I employed in the literature class informed my planning for other classes, challenging me to step beyond my comfort zone and try something new. As a result I am no doubt a better teacher; no longer content with the safest, easiest, and most predictable classroom methods.

Second, teaching a new subject demanded that I be less complacent. Let's face it: after teaching the same basic load for 20 years, it's easy to become complacent. I have electronic files for my class plans going back to 2003, and while I generally revise my syllabi each semester, those files serve as a convenient safety net, especially on those days when planning time is limited. Teaching new material meant developing a clear road map for each day's class and then following that road map closely as my students and I navigated the unfamiliar terrain. This challenge to my complacency actually modified how I taught my other courses.

Third, teaching a new subject gave me empathy for my students. It's been more than 30 years since I was an undergraduate just trying to get through each day's homework. Teaching new material sharpened my insight into the challenges my students face. Many of the reading assignments were new to me, just as they were to my students, giving us all the opportunity to encounter texts together for the first time. As I struggled to comprehend a Japanese novelist or wondered about the cultural contexts that fueled

the angst of a Russian poet, I gained empathy for my students, who were no doubt struggling as well with what we read. Often during in-class discussions as I watched my students grapple with a text, its meaning just beyond their reach, I gained renewed respect for my students' hard cognitive efforts, recognizing as well that I don't always appreciate young minds at work.

Finally, teaching a new subject gave me renewed respect for my colleagues. I appreciate my faculty colleagues, and know they work hard in their respective disciplines. But I really have no idea what that work looks like. Teaching a literature course gave me a clear sense of what my peers do in their classrooms, the challenges

they face, and how the rhythms of their semester might differ from mine. I also have new admiration for how much reading my colleagues who teach three or four literature classes must do every semester, especially given how swamped I was by the reading for one course. And while teaching Spanish will never be an option for me, I am reminded that colleagues in other disciplines are also working hard. Teaching a new subject challenges me to explore what developing class plans in different disciplines might look like. Twenty years into a successful faculty career, it's given me an invaluable lesson: that I still have a lot to learn about not only unfamiliar course content but the art of teaching as well.



Teaching in Troubling Times


Maryellen Weimer
March 2020

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we deal with closed campuses and everything going online, we find ourselves teaching in the face of an array of circumstances that make learning difficult. The undercurrents of the unknown run deep. There are our own health concerns and those of the ones we love. There are financial worries. Will there be food in the grocery stores? How do we avoid getting on each other's nerves here at home? How long will this last? And finally, how do we teach when minds and hearts are a thousand places other than learning?

We can help students focus by providing the leadership that they've come to expect from us. Although we may feel inches from chaos, we do know how to teach, and we understand how students learn. That doesn't mean we ignore or downplay the challenges, but what's happening in the course—that's our bailiwick. Calm, steady leadership quiets panic and conveys confidence that we'll figure it out together.

Teaching under a new set of circumstances requires flexibility—the ability to respond to events on the fly. It's not a time for rigid standards and fixed policies or for clinging to how things have always been done. At this point, most

of us have cobbled together a plan for what's going to happen in the course, but it's a work in progress and will evolve as circumstances change. We've unexpectedly been jolted off course, but we are still on the road and committed to doing what it takes to move the course forward.



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it out together.*

Along with the uncertainty of the situation comes an opportunity to be with our students in different and deeper ways. Helping these students become a community of learners may be easier than it's been in any other course.

As challenges emerge, we can talk about them! We can ask students to describe how problems look from their perspective and encourage them to share ideas, solutions, and other options. There's no need for social distancing with remote teaching. In fact, it's a case for a close relationship with the teacher and students working together in the face of shared struggles.

It's not always bad for students to see teachers struggling with the details. My colleague Lolita was telling me stories the other day about her first attempts with a synchronous online session—and she's an experienced online instructor. She was ready for her second set of PowerPoints, but where were they? She clicked on icons and moved

from screen to screen—her face registering the disgust, frustration, and embarrassment she felt, forgetting that 40 students were looking on. With no PowerPoints, she had to give up and end the session early, but with poise and grit in her voice she announced that she would find them and do better next class session. I'll bet students identified with her, comforted by the fact it's a trying time for everyone.

The gift teachers most need to give themselves right now is space for a less-than-best performance. Frustrating teaching experiences are filled with potential for learning—for the teacher, yes, but also for the students who get to see how a pro builds mistakes into a better performance. Instruc-

tors need to occupy that space with humility but also with confidence. We are master learners who know that mistakes are powerful teachers.

Teaching in troubling times opens up learning possibilities beyond those the course provides. In compelling ways, we are making sense of our priorities and seeing more clearly what really matters. Life is possible with fewer than 24 rolls stashed in the bathroom. We are experiencing emptiness without our communities—and grubby fullness with too much family. But the absence and closeness of those most meaningful to us awakens the frightful possibility of losing any of them. This is life on the edge with lessons ready for learning. All that's missing is a teacher.



A Skull, a Screen, and a Quarantine: Teaching Shakespeare during the Pandemic

Nichole DeWall
March 2021

In more than a decade of teaching *Romeo and Juliet* at my small liberal arts college, I'd never had a student walk through class wearing only a towel. Then again, I'd never taught Shakespeare during a pandemic before.

Like many first-time remote instructors, I prepped my fall semester by researching best practices in synchronous online education, fretting about bandwidth and Zoom fatigue. But while my colleagues agonized over being so far away from our students, I worried about the opposite: that Zoom teaching brought us too close.

For all its usefulness, we've learned that Zoom is very bad at keeping secrets, and that concerned me. I was neither interested in my students' secrets nor particularly keen to share mine. I knew my students would Zoom in from spaces that in pre-pandemic times they'd kept private: dorms, cars, locker rooms, and family homes. I

was planning to teach from my bedroom while my two young children attended virtual school from makeshift workspaces in our house. Without the more neutral space of the classroom, it all felt way too personal.

You see, I've never been the kind of professor who knows much about her students' personal lives. While I enthusiastically support their public endeavors—concerts, athletic events, thesis presentations—I don't often know who they're dating, what they post on social media, or what they do after

hours. My students and I tend to form lasting connections by reading great literature together.

Likewise, I don't share much about my private life beyond the occasional anecdote. My ability to be discrete, of course, is a marker of privilege: I don't have a visible disability that divulges itself to the world without my consent, and the luxury of steady childcare ensures that my kids never

It's no wonder, then, that the idea of Zoom teaching felt so uncomfortable: it threatened to rupture my careful seal between work and home.

accompany me to work. During my two pregnancies, I resented my swelling body for broadcasting my private business to my classes. When my students organized a baby shower for me, I was touched by the gesture; inwardly, though, I cringed.

As an assistant professor—newly minted, young, and female—I was advised against becoming too chummy with my students: “Don’t try to be their friends,” a colleague warned, “you’ll lose all authority.” Perhaps I inherited a certain stoicism from my Scandinavian ancestors, or as a Gen-Xer I’ll never understand my students’ generational embrace of self-revelation.

In truth, I am envious of my colleagues’ more casual relationships with our students and their seemingly effortless abilities to move fluidly between their professional and private selves. They pepper their lectures with personal stories of loss, persistence, and joy. My colleagues adorn their offices with family photos and their kids’ artwork; my well-worn facsimile of the First Folio is the most personal object on display in mine.

It’s no wonder, then, that the idea of Zoom teaching felt so uncomfortable: it threatened to rupture my careful seal between work and home. “I feel like teaching from home will humanize me,” a colleague said. I nodded, and wondered what I was missing. What I did miss was the liminal stillness of my commute through the rural Illinois countryside. I missed feeling the quiet morning calm of campus give way to the scuttle and rush of students. I longed for the small rituals of the classroom: a backpack unzipping, a pencil poised, a book spine splaying. Above all, I missed the cathedral-like hush that descended upon us when we read out Shakespeare’s words.

I attempted to make new rituals. I commandeered a corner of our bedroom and staged it with bookshelves and a few select objects: Yorick’s skull, the Droeshout portrait. If my space looked enough like my campus office, my students

wouldn’t sense the basket of dirty laundry or unmade bed just a few feet away. In a few weeks, I thought, I would forget how unnatural this all feels.

Teaching is performative; as a Shakespearean, I am undismayed by the notion that we are all actors on the world’s stage. As my students tentatively filtered into our Zoom classroom on the first day, I was determined to play the role of The Before Times Professor: rigorous, professional, and competent.

But it became clear after the first week that my students needed something different from me. They were at sea. They needed connections, not complications. They needed a professor who was more open, more vulnerable: a Falstaff, not a Henry IV.

And so I adapted. I forced myself to get personal. I shared my fears about the rising coronavirus cases in our area. I asked students to introduce me to their pets, children, and roommates. They lounged around on their beds, Zoomed in from their (parked) cars, and attended sessions during their breaks at McDonald’s. “I put up a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign for our writing conference,” a student revealed one afternoon, sheepishly, “but . . . well . . .” His voice trailed off. It was clear from his roommates’ game of Grand Theft Auto in the background that his request had gone unheeded. “No biggie,” I said, and reminded him of our newly adopted class mottos: “Come as you are” and “Embrace the weirdness.” My students were doing their best, and their efforts were commendable.

Before COVID-19, I dismissed get-to-know-you games as wastes of time; now I scoured the internet for virtual icebreakers. I let my students choose which pair of Shakespeare-themed socks I wore and polled them about their favorite Thanksgiving foods. One morning, I asked my 10-year-old son to recite Puck’s epilogue for the class. When my seven-year-old misplaced the

password to one of her many e-learning apps, I stepped away briefly; my students understood. I exhaled.

The pandemic, of course, had a way of making everything personal. As the virus stalked closer to our small Midwestern town, my students and I braced for impact. My students' parents, siblings, and grandparents lost their jobs or got sick. Together, we bore witness to the horrors of human frailty. The morning that preliminary vaccine efficacy data were released, we cheered in celebration.

The virus didn't care about my students' precious college experiences. Despite my university's best efforts, some of my students became sick and quarantined during the semester. Most of them made full recoveries, but one infected student confessed that she'd lost vision in her left eye. My heart sank. "I'm so sorry that this is happening to you," I said, and instinctively placed my hand on my screen. She smiled back anxiously.

After that first week, I made a conscious decision to adopt a new teaching persona, one who turned away from complicating Shakespeare and leaned into my students' connections to the plays. Instead of focusing on *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* allegorical references to Queen Elizabeth, my students were drawn to Titania's plague-infested forest and its altered seasons. This upside-down world resonated with them like never before.

When we reached *Hamlet's* churchyard scene, I held my plastic skull up to the camera. While students peered into Yorick's hollow sockets, we talked of our pandemic's memento mori: refrigerated morgue trucks, intubators, and N95 masks. Even so, we managed a few laughs. Prince

Hal's conflict between the Boar's Head Tavern and his father's court was my students' conflict too: "He just wants to go out and have a beer with his buddies," one student remarked, sighing, "I can totally relate." When Friar John is quarantined in *Romeo and Juliet*, a student exclaimed, "No wonder the play feels apocalyptic! They're in the middle of a pandemic, too!" "Excellent point," I affirmed. "I guess *Romeo and Juliet* forgot about that whole social distancing thing, huh?," another student quipped. Pandemic humor.

I worried that my students' experiences in my class were not as robust or rigorous as their pre-pandemic peers'. But perhaps this semester had revealed the immense generosity of Shakespeare's work. The plays expanded, contracted, and accommodated. They were always just what we needed them to be.

I harbor no illusions that one semester of pandemic teaching will radically change who I am as a professor or as a person. I will probably never decorate my campus office with family pictures or connect with students on social media. Going forward, though, I will try to better understand my students' needs, even if doing so feels uncomfortable at first. It took a once-in-a-century pandemic to show me just how full my students' lives are, and I won't soon forget that lesson.

During our last class, I intended to deliver inspirational remarks about the persistence of the human spirit and the power of the humanities; instead, I simply told my students what an honor it was to be their teacher. They each waved goodbye from their little gray box, and I took a moment to capture this final pandemic tableau in my mind's eye. Then I logged off.



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