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Western Carolina University

Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



Setting Fires: Igniting Minds In and Out of the Classroom

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Booklet One

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The Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series is a publication of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at Western Carolina University. The Series is intended to stimulate and support both scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching & learning by drawing contemplative attention to various aspects of the methods, goals and visions of teaching and creating learning opportunities with students.

Through their experience and wisdom about learning, the writers in the Series want to open a continuous dialogue among colleagues about the always ancient, always new profession of teaching. If the Series acts as a catalyst for a new renaissance of teaching & learning at WCU, it will be serving its purpose.

Responses to this booklet can be made directly to the author or can be sent to the email discussion list, TEACHING, that exists expressly for all full and part-time faculty and GTAs to engage in an ongoing dialogue about any and all aspects of teaching & learning. If not on the list, request to be subscribed by sending an email to altany@email.wcu.edu.

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Alan Altany, Editor, *Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series*
and Director, Coulter Faculty Center

Setting Fires: Igniting Minds In and Out of the Classroom

The first week of school I went to the University Club to welcome new faculty and to rub elbows with colleagues I had not seen over the summer. The place was packed, crowded with experienced faculty I have known for years and inexperienced, fresh faculty all getting to know one another. Everyone seemed so animated and enthusiastic as they were explaining what they taught or what areas they were researching or talking about what they had done over the summer. I wish we had captured the scene on video tape to use as an introductory video for our classes, to show them this is what it is like to be at a university, this is why I became a professor of whatever, this is how exciting research can be.

At one point I was talking with Laura Cruz, a new professor in the History department, who was bubbling with pleasure over her freshman class. She had asked them if they could have a conversation with anyone in history who would it be and what would they ask. They chose historical figures that ranged from Dale Earnhardt, to Elvis, to Alexander the Great, and to Johann Fichte, the German Idealist philosopher. Imagine having a freshman seminar with a historical assortment like that answering the very questions students want to know about. What a great way to start a class. I was frankly jealous and decided that I'm stealing this idea myself for next year.

Which brings me to why I am writing this essay. Alan Altany, Director of the Faculty Center, approached me this summer and, in terms bordering on ageism, suggested that he needed someone who was "long in the teeth," "well, maybe been around awhile" who still had great enthusiasm for teaching. He asked me to write about what I do to keep coming back to teaching fresh with new enthusiasm year after year. With retirement getting closer every year, I took his question to mean that he wanted me to explain how I stayed so young. Who could resist that ploy? He wanted me to offer advice to new faculty on how to keep the teaching irons hot and how to keep the fire from going out.

But the question is in some ways misdirected. Its focus is on teaching, and that is not where it should be. Learning is what counts. If there's no learning, teaching hasn't occurred. No matter how hot you are as a teacher, if the fire doesn't catch in the minds of the students, nothing much has happened. Indeed, teaching rarely can claim much more than it struck the match to the minds that were already ready to burn. In fact, most of what we learn as humans is gained outside the classroom, independently and without any instruction. I spent 20 years of my life outside the university as a businessman, nurseryman, consultant, and in workforce development. I have never been instructed in any of the professions I have entered including teaching. I had to learn how to run an ad agency, to write and produce TV commercials, to do management and marketing consulting, to grow conifer tree seedlings, and even to teach in a university classroom,

all on my own. Though I got my Ph.D. in English literature, I had absolutely no instruction in how to teach, and I gather that is still largely the case with most disciplines.

The question then should be what have I learned about learning. Recently, I've been dotingly watching my two year old granddaughter learn to crawl, walk, talk and exert her will and personality, surely among the most complex intellectual skills we ever acquire. Here's what I've concluded. Truly, learning is essential to survival and fundamental to being human. Sitting still to learn is hard for children and adults. We want our learning to be about the real world with real outcomes, or else it needs to be as entertaining as a game. We all resist having to learn 'just because you have to' (remember the multiplication tables). We want learning that is connected to other ideas in order to help us make sense of the world. We know very well that what we learn will change because the world changes, so it is important to experience other's ideas, other's viewpoints and hear their stories. We want to see how things work, what will happen if, why did that do that, and so on. We want to know where are the cookies, how can I get out of here, how do I get help, and who's in charge. Sometimes we learn from listening but mostly we learn from watching others in order to do what they do or because it looks like fun or looks useful. Sometimes we learn by chance—cats scratch, fish don't like it out of water, some people like it quiet. Finally, the best way to learn is by doing something, by yourself or with others. Two year olds don't learn as much when you tell them things as when they do something and experience the results. Neither do 20 year olds. If you observe children or students long, you learn each of us is different. Some are intellectually curious, always exploring, getting into things. Others want to be shown, prefer routine, and are uncomfortable with new experience. In fact, there are a variety of learning styles.

Remember

Remember your best teacher? I remember my bacteriology professor whose class was the best class I ever had in any discipline. He asked us to read the book and gave weekly tests on its contents. But in class he talked about the really interesting things, mostly about new developments in the field, the inner scoop on famous bacteriologists and their personal life, the weird stuff in science, and other things he was excited about. Sometimes he would relate it to the text, but most times he was just sharing his excitement about his discipline. In the lab was where I remember him most fondly. He insisted that we isolate five bacteria from soil samples we brought in and identify them and then write up our justification. He would show us how to do stains and tests we needed to use in the process, but most of the time he spent coming by and looking over our shoulders and getting excited when we were on the right trail or pointing out our errors. He simply coached us to do our best. In that class I found a very rare bacteria, and another student identified what the professor believed was a totally new strain. We could not stop talking about what we were doing, and the textbook became what it should be—a simple reference book to help us understand the real work of identifying and understanding the way bacteria worked in the world.

I believe one key to keeping fresh is remembering, remembering especially those electrifying moments when you were all fired up, when you discovered something new, when you first decided to major in your field, or when the ideas fell into place,. Those moments are what our students want to hear. They are curious about the people who do science, or anthropology, or history, or art. If we are not still excited about our field, why should they be? They want to hear the stories of the discipline. Imagine simply being introduced to the concept of the double helix in DNA and not getting the excitement that drove Watson and Crick, or being taught about quantum theory in physics and not hearing about Einstein's conflicts with Heisenberg and Bohr and the historical context at the time, or not getting to hear about Picasso and Joyce and Hemingway getting drunk at Gertrude Stein's salon in Paris.

Explore

Every discipline is marked by discovery and exploration. Even when we look back at our own research and growth in the profession, the moments that stand out are those insights we had when we opened new territories or discovered what others had overlooked. Every field is constantly changing, expanding what is known, undertaking new approaches, shedding old theories, and testing new or even radical ideas in order to expand our understanding of the world we live in. We should do the same. Teaching the same thing year after year is a disservice to your students and your discipline. If you want to keep the fires from burning out, periodically burn your lecture notes and start over. Or perhaps volunteer to teach a new course outside your expertise so that you can be learning as your students learn. Or visit a class totally outside your discipline. What does organizational management have to say about Heaven in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or vice versa? The Clerk is a model for the perfect teacher in *The Canterbury Tales*, "Gladly would he learn and gladly teach." Try doing some research into learning theory and the scholarship of teaching. The Faculty Center has an excellent library of this material. Find out what some wonderful teachers at Western Carolina University do in their classes and adapt some of their techniques. Ask your students what would better facilitate learning in your class. Let the class project be to prepare the ideal teaching module for that subject matter for future students.

Make it Real

Very few of our disciplines are so abstract that they have no contact with reality. Even non-Euclidean geometry and topology have found their real world applications. The human mind is constantly in the process of making mental constructs in order to better understand reality and predict or appropriately react to phenomenon. Often, however, we get absorbed in the abstract and forget that the foundation of all our theories is the sensible world. When our disciplines stray too far from the real into the abstract like the idealism of Bishop Berkeley, we need a Dr. Johnson to kick a stone and say, "I refute it thus." We should remind ourselves that the theories of our discipline will one day be outmoded, but the real, palpable world they purport to explain will remain.

In every course I teach I make sure at least 20 percent of student work is in projects that relate to the community and have a real audience and a real product at the end that is useful to

someone other than me. Though case studies are useful, students still see them as class work—it just isn't real; it's just for the test because the case is something that has already happened and already has an answer. In a literature class, I might have the class prepare a web based study guide for high school classes; in a composition class they might prepare a publication for next year's freshmen; in a technical writing class they might be doing technical reports or editing or preparing white papers for technical firms in the region. Doing real world work puts into practice many of the elements you have taught and it solidifies what your students have learned. The bonus is that real world projects often confront us as a class with situations none of us knows about, including me. Then we all become researchers and learners. That way we can share the thrill of doing real projects, plus it instills in students service learning ideas and the need for quality work.

Forget Covering the Material

Ok, maybe that is too simplistic. But the longer I teach each course the harder it is to cover the same ground I did when I began teaching. Back then there was the false belief that a professor's job was to master the subject matter of the discipline and deliver it to the students. Now with the web and the doubling of knowledge almost yearly, none of us can keep up, and any reasonably savvy student can in a few hours download the latest research and print off much more than the professor was taught during an entire graduate program. Delivering content is beside the point now. What counts is how to use information, how to sift through all that is available and create a workable proposition that expands our perception of the way things are. That is what we are supposed to show our students how to do. Look at Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman's lectures on physics called *Five Easy Pieces* covering little more than the basics of classical mechanics and quantum mechanics. Or recall the stories of the famous biologist, Louis Agassiz, who is reported to have told his students for the first several weeks of zoology to "Look at your fish," stopping by periodically to find out what they had observed but not lecturing, not covering any material. As Blake suggests, anything we observe closely is worthy of study. We need but "To see a World in a Grain of Sand." Where would we be today had the makers of silicon chips not looked more closely at the grain of sand?

Make connections

Though we have become specialists in our disciplines, the rest of the population must be generalists, answering questions regarding finance, handling psychological issues, selecting music for a party, preparing a menu, and soothing a rebellious teenager, all in a day's work. Our students want to know how the subject we are teaching relates to anything in their world or the world they will face. We need to stay up with the news, with popular culture, with the Dale Earnhardts and Elvis Costellos of the day and whenever possible relate the topic to the contemporary world. Learning about the music, films and TV that this generation views and listens to helps us understand how they perceive the world and the issues they think are important. If you can occasionally relate a key figure in your discipline to Bart Simpson or a political movement to the *Lord of the Rings*, your stock will go up as a teacher and you will lose a decade from your age in your students' eyes.

Laugh it up

Hey, it's not that serious. Remember in most of our disciplines, half of what we are teaching will be obsolete in a decade, and none of us knows which half. I think it is important to laugh with your students, at yourself, at what is happening in the world, at the very discipline you teach. I like to find cartoons that make fun of teachers and students and the academic world. If we show our students that we are human and that we do not take ourselves too seriously, perhaps they will practice a bit of humility as they grow older. Nothing is more ridiculous than a self-absorbed professor. Have a joke day and ask students to bring in jokes or cartoons that relate to the subject. You'd be amazed at what students learn when they're having fun.

Ask for Help

None of us got where we are alone. Just because we are the professors now does not mean we know it all or that we are above getting help. I try to participate in Faculty Center activities as much as my schedule will allow. I almost always find solutions for problems from colleagues or from readings the Center suggests. But to me the biggest help can come from our students. Find out how well you are doing in helping them learn by asking them. Hand out little cards at the end of class to find out what is still puzzling. The next day address those issues and do it again. Let them to help you adjust your teaching to their needs.

Technology is often a big problem for faculty. Most of us are marginally competent using computers, but our students grew up with implanted chips. Let them show you what they know on the computer. You are an expert in your field, but computers are something they can teach you. They love it. Occasionally ask teams of students to teach part of the lessons. I have even asked my students to help me write the final exam. They prepare three short answer questions and one essay question that I might use on the final and reproduce them for their peers as a study guide. Often their questions are harder than I would have written, but they have then prepared themselves more thoroughly than if they had been trying to second guess me.

Pay Attention

As teachers we will often face undergraduate classes where fewer than 15% learn the way we do. Those who hang on our every word are most likely destined to head to graduate school as we did. The others will make up the rest of the world outside the academy. I hear some colleagues complain about the intelligence level of our students or talk about the SAT scores and class rankings as if those measured intelligence rather than schooling. Howard Gardner has pointed out that there are multiple intelligences, and those that are prized by educational institutions are a small sample. Every community has success stories of people who have not graduated from high school, started with little money, got little training, and began with little more than a laborer's background yet became someone the rest of us admire. Often we hear stories of a genius who did not talk until almost the first grade or mathematicians like Einstein who had difficulty with school math. We should not expect our students from the start to think the way we do, to grasp our discipline as easily as we do, or to think it is as important as we do. Many of them are in our class simply to broaden their perspectives on the way to some other calling, or

they are fulfilling some requirement, or they are waiting for their picture of the world to clear so that they can decide where they belong.

I like to think that each class is filled with hidden geniuses each with a different intelligence profile and that it is my job to nurture each one as much as possible in my field. But what we do in class is not nearly as important as what they do outside of class with the ideas and examples and theories and stories from our disciplines. An A on a test is nowhere near as important as having a student talk about ideas in the dorm or over dinner. The goal of teaching should be to so disturb, excite, inspire, or restructure our student's thinking that they can't stop thinking and have to talk it over with their friends. Most of us spent long hours discussing ideas, altering our perceptions, and expanding our thinking in those dormitory bull sessions that are so important to what a residential college is all about. When students who are involved in distance learning complain about the lack of human contact, we flatter ourselves if we think they are speaking of us. They want cohorts with whom they can test their ideas.

Get Personal

John Dewey, the major figure in American pragmatism and education, once described the ideal of teaching and learning as a student and a teacher sitting on a log talking about the world.

Knowledge is a human construction, arrived at by a shared understanding among others of a like mind. Knowing something without sharing it is suspect. Can we really say we know something if we cannot articulate it to others? We need our students. And they need us. Each of our students wants to be known as a human being worthy of recognition, even conversation. It is hard to get to know students in a large class, but the best teachers develop techniques to address each student by name in class and arrange conferences to build relationships with them. Personal connections—they are what makes us human. The contacts your students make with you can become major touchstones in their lives. Remember those professors who took the time to know you and how important they became?

Feed the Fires

The generation we teach now is the generation that will manage the retirement homes and assisted living centers we will move to one day. If they do not learn the core values of being human, of being responsible, and of being committed to continually learning across all disciplines, our final years may be quite miserable. And yet unlike many professions, as teachers every year we can start over with new faces, different historical figures to inform us, a new set of notes, a laugh or two, some memories, and more real projects. Every year if we keep the spark alive we can set fire to a new class and in the process renew ourselves to keep the irons hot. Teaching is the way to stay young.



Bioessay

Looking back, it is hard to believe I became a college professor and even harder to accept that I am now approaching the end of my career. I ran away from first grade on the second day because it seemed crazy to sit inside in rows when I could be outside exploring. Not a good start on an academic career. I suppose it was an omen of things to come. I've been going in and out of school ever since and always questioning what goes on there.

In high school I was more interested in neutrinos and other subatomic particles and in underground literature, such as *Catcher In the Rye* and Kerouac's *On the Road* than anything we covered in classrooms. I attended Georgia Tech for two years before an unfortunate encounter with partial differential equations changed my career plans, and I dropped out to do manual labor and redirect.

Because I read a lot of fiction and philosophy and wrote poetry while I worked, I decided to go to Chapel Hill to get a degree in English. Despite having several excellent teachers, my most significant learning took place outside of class: in the cafeteria discussing Camus and Sartre or Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, in bars discussing art and literature and jazz, in the *Daily Tar Heel* office discussing politics and the Speaker Ban policy, or on the street marching in the civil rights movement. Frankly, college academics seemed disengaged and remote though I did well and enjoyed intellectual pursuits. I graduated and married my love, June.

After a tour in the Army where I was a Russian linguist, cryptographer, and traffic analyst, I enrolled in graduate school in English back at Chapel Hill. Once again, I found myself learning more outside of class than in. Russell Banks, William Matthews and I founded *Lillabulero* magazine and press, publishing some of the most important contemporary writers of that period, many of whom, such as Robert Morgan, Robert Creeley and Robert Bly are now among the most respected members of the literary establishment. I learned more about the literary canon, literary criticism, poetry, and fiction as an editor and writer than in all my classes combined.

I began teaching at WCU in 1968 while working on my dissertation on Black Mountain College and its writers. I published chapters on the Black Mountain writers, French literary criticism, southern literature and my own poetry. During the Carlton era, I lost my position at WCU in 1974. Over the next 20 years I started a Foxfire type magazine in South Carolina, founded an advertising agency in Waynesville, became a marketing and small business consultant, wrote film and video scripts, and co-managed with June our tree seedling nursery.

I returned to teaching in 1993. At WCU I have specialized in Appalachian and American Literature, professional and technical writing and editing, and the interplay of technology and teaching. My recent publications include a new edition of Jesse Stuart's *Mr. Gallion's School*, technical manuals, numerous encyclopedia articles, a pending chapter on teaching technical writing, and one of the cover articles in the most recent issue of *Educause*.



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