

Coulter Faculty Center

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Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



WCU Open Classroom Project: More Fun Than Getting a Big Raise

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Booklet Two

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. Further information about the list is available at <http://facctr.wcu.edu/discussion.html>.

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The WCU Open Classroom Project: More Fun Than Getting a Big Raise

It was Wednesday, August 21, 2002, and I was there in Killian 264 to watch Chancellor Bardo teach on the first day of his Sociology 494 course. I find first days extremely interesting; the pedagogical literature claims that students form lasting impressions about a professor and a course during the first 10 minutes of their first class meeting. A month later, I visited Dr. Bardo's class a second time and saw first hand how that initial relationship with his students had grown and developed. Since that visit during the first week of the semester, I have also seen Charles Wallis, Lisen Roberts, Byron Hollowell, Jim Nicholl, Julia Barnes, Sloan Despeaux, Erin McNelis, Pat Acheson, and Shan Manickam. I haven't had this much fun since 1999, the last time I got a big raise in my paycheck.

Visiting classes has generated a lot of excitement for me over the last three years. I have seen Kathy Ivey, Gary Poole, Maurice Phipps, Marsha Holmes, Ron Morgan, Julie Johnson, John Habel, Jim Byer, Gael Graham, Daryl Hale, Gayle Miller, Henry Mainwaring, Grace Allen, Margie Koch, Bruce Henderson, David Dorondo, Gerry Schwartz, Hal Herzog, and many others too numerous to mention. I have visited science and math classes where I have had trouble understanding what the students and professor were talking about. I have visited foreign language classes where I could only understand an occasional word. I have donned a bathing suit and visited a class in Reid Pool where I learned how to roll over in a kayak. In fact, I have visited a classroom every week of the academic year for 3 straight years. I am proud of my streak; I like to think of myself as the Cal Ripken of class visitation.

But I never visit to evaluate. I have always visited as a student of teaching. I can always learn more about this very difficult profession, and I believe I have left each one of these classrooms with something that has helped me become a better teacher. Visiting my colleague's classrooms has been the most valuable and interesting professional development activity that I have undertaken in my 30 years of teaching at Western Carolina University.

So I feel confident in asserting that visiting a colleague's classroom is

- (1) the most pleasant way to improve one's teaching skill
- (2) the most efficient way to create a collegial atmosphere at WCU

- (3) the quickest way for all of us to understand and respect diversity in teaching styles
- (4) the best way to create a thorough and genuine excitement and respect for teaching across the WCU campus
- (5) the surest way to make Western a highly respected teaching institution
- (6) the most profound way to discover the rigor and elegance that underlies every academic discipline at WCU
- (7) the easiest way to pick up practical teaching tips

But I don't believe that these assertions are going to be powerful enough to convince you to join the Open Classroom Project or start visiting classes. Some faculty are perhaps anxious about opening up their classroom because they see teaching as a private matter. Some believe that academic freedoms are compromised by class visitation, and some might resist visitors because they are insecure about their teaching skill and see class visitation as a threatening situation. Others are more confident in their teaching skill and are willing to open up their classrooms to visitors but are hesitant themselves to visit other classes. They might say, "Terry, I just don't have the TIME to add class visitation to my list of things to do." And this is a justifiable response. We are all too busy and we are getting busier every day. Personally, I think it is the computers. They save us time but seem to multiply our workload as well.

So, my pitch is different. My main assertion is that class visitation is FUN. As a form of comparison, a nice, fat raise is fun, but eventually you take extra money for granted. You never take class visitation for granted because each visit is a brand new pleasure.

For example, I visited Julia Barnes's freshman statistics class and found myself an "outlier." She was demonstrating the concepts of median and quartiles and asked members of the class to stand in front, lined up according to height. At 6'4," I was placed on one of the outer edges. The students saw immediately how factoring my height into the mix would skew the distribution. Later, Julia's colleague, Charles Wallis, another distinguished teacher, playfully referred to me in public as an "out and out liar."

I visited Bill Hyatt's Criminal Justice class and saw how he punctuated his lecture/discussion with the calling out of student names. He does this, he tells me, in order to facilitate his mastery of names. I am not very good at names, but immediately I saw how I could use his technique to solve another problem: bringing students back to attention who are dozing in class. I have never tolerated sleeping in my classes but

confrontations are ugly. I saw that Bill's technique of gently calling out a student's name, as if Bill were personalizing his remarks, would accomplish exactly what I needed with inattentive students. I could get them back into the class period without creating unpleasant feelings.

I visited Tony Hickey's Freshman Sociology class, and he talked about the distinction between primary and secondary groups, specifically the difference between membership in a family and membership in a work environment. I understood in a flash that I had spent nearly 30 years in Cullowhee expecting the university to take the place of my dysfunctional family. I had always wanted the university to consider me irreplaceable (a quality of membership in a primary group) and I now realized that this was simply naive. In the 1970s, I spent a semester visiting Gene McDowell's Introduction to Psychology class. His description of a classic experiment helped me discover one of the keys to human motivation: people are motivated by anything that is difficult enough to provide a satisfying challenge while still easy enough to ensure regular success. In the 70s, I also attended every class period of Curtis Wood's History of Tudor-Stuart England. I not only learned more about the time period than I ever had known before but also discovered that an adept student does not have to take notes in a lecture class. I could multiply the anecdotes until Christmas, but I hope you get the idea. Visiting classes is FUN. And people always find time to have fun.

Visiting classes is fun because observing and learning is exciting. The bottom line is that nobody who observes life closely has ever been bored. When you visit a class, you get to observe student and teacher behavior in a way you cannot when you are doing the teaching yourself. As a visitor, you are free to focus your attention wherever you want, for as long as you want. You can speculate for minutes on why that young woman in the corner is playing with her hair. Is she bored or is her nervous tic an indication that she is listening more intently? You get to observe student intelligence-- what a joy that is—without having to make pedagogical decisions about how you are going to respond to it. You get to observe the brilliance of your colleague doing the teaching, and this is very exciting because you can speculate on what he or she is probably thinking as he or she is working out pedagogical issues. You've been there before; you know the problems; you revel in new solutions.

But, to be honest, I think visiting classes is also fun because you don't have to do any work. You get to sit back and watch as other people take on the challenges. The students and teacher have to answer the questions, not you. Sometimes visiting classes is fun because your colleague has moments that inspire you. Sometimes your colleague is struggling and it's a relief because it's not you having to solve the problems. Sometimes it's fun because you see students who need to be dealt with in some way but

you don't have to react; you can watch to see how your colleague responds, comparing his or her response to one you might employ. You don't have to answer questions or be brilliant. It's like a pleasant yet profitable break in your busy day.

For me, a special pleasure comes from cross-disciplinary visitations, watching teachers and students in areas of study I am not familiar with. I especially seek out math and science classes because I did not do well in them as a student myself. When I visit these classes, I enjoy feeling again what it's like to not understand easily. In a math class, for example, all the undergraduates seem to know what is going on and I am at sea. I feel like I am listening to a foreign language. As a result, it is easier to imagine what students must sometimes feel when they say they are "not good at English." I also enjoy learning new things that I probably ought of have learned when I was an undergraduate, like how those little microscopic things are replicating themselves on our skin. And, of course, I always enjoy discovering how the teaching and learning situation in other disciplines can be different from the situations I work in and how sometimes they can be very similar.

So, I am here to sell the PLEASURES of class visitation, but, obviously, the TIME factor is the most serious obstacle to your taking up the practice of visiting classes. I agree that we are all busy and that none of us has enough time to do all the things we want to do. But we all take the time to do what gives us pleasure. I have no problem finding the time to visit a class each week because I simply steal the time from something less pleasurable. Maybe visiting a class a week means serving on fewer committees or publishing one less paper a year. Maybe it's saying "no" to a speaking engagement. But class visitation never seems like a burden to me. I visit classes for the same reason I play golf--because it gives me great pleasure--and like everyone else, I make time to do what gives me pleasure.

So, to those who would say, "I don't have time to visit any classes," I would say, "do you have time for one visit a semester?" Do you have time for visiting one 50-minute class period during the next 15 weeks? When visiting classes becomes a pleasurable habit, you will never think again about how much time it takes.

Addendum: How Are Habits Created?

(read this only if you are still tempted to say "no")

If you are still reading, you are leaning on the edge of the best decision of your professional life. Imagine a future where you don't care how little you get paid because

your job is so joyful. Imagine working in a department, school, and university, where many of your colleagues are visiting your classes and you are visiting theirs on a regular basis. Can you imagine the vibrancy of the atmosphere? Can you imagine the collegiality? Can you imagine how much better the beer and wine would taste at the UClub on Friday afternoon? There would be no more grousing about salaries, under prepared students, or struggles with administrators. You and your colleagues would be happy because your jobs are so much fun. I really believe that regular class visitation can help do this for you.

But you would have to develop a new habit. How are habits created? Repetition is an obvious factor, but the initial experience is probably the essential element in the forming of a new habit. To create a habit, the initial experiences have to be easy and pleasant enough to want to repeat.

Consider this very prosaic example. At the risk of grossing you out, I would admit that I once did not floss my teeth. I had read about its benefits, my dentist had urged me to start, and I knew that it would probably be good for me, but I just didn't think I had the time for it. One day, something pushed me over the edge of lethargy and I just started. I discovered that daily flossing wasn't very time consuming and that it was easier than I had expected. Gradually I came to feel good about my improved dental hygiene and I even began to look forward to the clean taste it gave me every morning. It was an added bonus that flossing was good for me, but the real motivator was that flossing started to become pleasant. After awhile, flossing became second nature and now I would no more start the day without flossing than I would start the day without brushing. How long does flossing take now? Two minutes? One? I don't know because I don't care. It's part of my daily life.

Luckily, good habits are as hard to break as bad ones. Get a good habit going and you don't think about it as virtuous; you think about it as being a natural and inevitable part of your life. Obviously, duty (you "ought" to do this) is not an effective long-term motivator. If it were, more people would quit smoking. People quit smoking (or drinking or partaking of harmful drugs) when they finally understand, thoroughly and clearly, that they are doing serious harm to their bodies. As long as they believe that the pleasure of the bad habit is greater than the pleasure of giving it up, people will continue to poison their bodies and shorten their lives. Similarly, people take up good habits when they understand, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the new habit will make their lives more pleasant. For that reason, I appeal to the FUN of visiting classes. You may not have as much fun as I do, but you will never know until you at least give it a try.

But I can hear some of you saying, “okay, Terry; I’ll start sometime before the semester is over, sometime when I can see a little more leisure in my life.” No. Start today, even if you only visit one class this semester. Call a colleague today and ask if you can visit this week. Email Alan Altany and get the current list of your colleagues in the Open Classroom Project. If you put off this email or phone call until tomorrow, you are unconsciously looking for an excuse to avoid this new behavior. Do you really believe, despite all that I have said, that the behavior is too time-consuming (come on, 50 minutes a semester or even 50 minutes a month)? Maybe you don’t believe that you will have as much fun as I describe. You are still thinking that this is something you “ought” to do. Forget “ought.” This is a pleasure you deserve. This is a break in your day. This is a breath of fresh air. This is an opportunity to flatter a colleague, to observe students without responsibility, an opportunity to learn something interesting. As a happy by-product of this new habit, you will most likely become a more efficient and happier teacher. How can you pass this up? You have nothing to lose but 50 minutes of your precious time.

Contact Alan Altany at the Faculty Center right now and he will get you started. At the back of this booklet you will see a description of the program’s rationale and guidelines. Then contact Alan to receive a list of all the teachers who are enrolled in the Open Classroom Project this semester. Every one of these teachers is willing to let you drop in at any time to watch the educational process at work. These teachers will understand that you are not there to evaluate. They will understand that you are there to enjoy your observation. Maybe you want to contact Alan and add your name to the list of colleagues who are willing to open their classes to others. But a warning for you: as much fun as it is to have a colleague observe your classroom, it is infinitely more fun to be the observer. Decide today that you are going to visit one class this semester and then see if it gives you enough pleasure to repeat the experience next semester. If it gives you enough pleasure, you might try two class periods next year. Whatever time you decide to give class visitation, this amount of time will be exactly right for you because you will be doing something you enjoy.



Bioessay

I don't remember much about Kindergarten through 3rd grade, but in the 4th grade my teacher, Miss Edna Westrate, didn't like me. My fellow 4th grader, Teddy Geldhof, had told her that during recess I called her "an old witch," and for most of that year I spent as much time in detention as I did in the classroom. As I remember, I deserved every one of those punishments. At the annual PTA conference, Miss Westrate told my mother that I wouldn't amount to much and that I would probably end up in prison. I haven't been in prison yet, so it seems Miss Westrate was only half right, at best.

In 5th and 6th grade I was a very able student but after a move to a larger school I faltered a little and made mostly C's in 7th and 8th grades. Then I hit my academic stride in 9th and started a string of exemplary GPAs that didn't slow down until I hit graduate school, where I realized that making great grades was pretty trivial compared to passing qualifying exams and finishing a dissertation. As a result of this academic career, I have always been sympathetic with the disenchanting and frustrated student, and I have always exhorted students to put grades in perspective.

I didn't choose to be a teacher so much as I blithely accepted the suggestion of parents and other adult role models that I might enjoy a teacher career. After making mostly straight A's as a student, I thought being a teacher would be easy and fun. I believed that all I had to do was talk brilliantly and the students would be enthralled. After my Masters degree, I taught for a year at a community college in Michigan, and when the students weren't enthralled (maybe I didn't talk brilliantly enough), I ran back to the safety of graduate school. Of course, I had to face the facts again when I came to Western in 1972, and, after my first 5 years at WCU, I almost quit the teaching profession again because I knew I still wasn't magical in the classroom. But during the summer of 1977, my vocational and existential crisis led me to wonder if teaching would be more satisfying if I paid more attention to the students as interesting people. That idea was the great turning point in my teaching career and teaching has been increasingly exciting ever since.

In 1987, I started writing about teaching. A Vice-Chancellor's Instructional Improvement Grant paid for the printing of an in-house monograph called Everyone Can Help Teach Writing and an edited version of that manuscript can be found on WCU's Writing Center Home Page. Since then, my publications have been exclusively pedagogical. In 2000, I was promoted to the Professor rank without a traditional publication record in "refereed journals." My promotion proved that Western is a place where you can become a full Professor on the basis of your dedication to teaching. I wish Miss Westrate were still around so I could show her that I turned out okay.

Open Classroom Project

Teaching is an action, an art and craft, an experience to be engaged. To observe how one's colleagues teach has the potential to enable one to see one's own teaching from a new perspective and to gain a fresh enthusiasm for the dignity, worth, practices and spirit of teaching & learning.

The Open Classroom Project is an opportunity for faculty to learn more about teaching methods and goals by directly experiencing the classroom teaching of others. It can serve as a means to create a more collegial and scholarly community of teachers where teaching is BOTH a personal AND a public activity.

A premise for the program is that teaching well is not easy and requires sustained effort, awareness, collegial support, encouragement and a process of ongoing development for the least experienced teachers to the most seasoned senior faculty.

Faculty volunteer to open their classrooms to visits by other faculty (and GTAs) and those who do volunteer are themselves encouraged to visit the classes of other volunteering faculty. Much like faculty share their research with colleagues for review and for construction of further understanding, the Open Classroom faculty are sharing their teaching with colleagues as part of a new renaissance of teaching & learning at a WCU.

Purpose

To allow colleagues to enrich their teaching by observing the classes of others. The observer will not be evaluating the instructor or the class and all participation is voluntary and formative only. The purpose is for the observer to gain insight into different approaches to teaching that may further one's own professional development as a teacher.

Procedure

The Faculty Center will collect teaching schedules of instructors who volunteer to open one or more of their classes for observation and make that information available to part and full-time faculty and GTAs. For those who would like to visit a colleague's class, simply contact the instructor to make sure the class is meeting as scheduled on the date you would like to visit and to find out if activities planned for this date are appropriate for an observation visit.



Note from the editor:

Faculty can open classes by sending the following information to altany@email.wcu.edu:

- Instructor's office phone number
- prefix number of course(s)
- course titles
- days & times classes meet
- locations

Link to Archive of Booklet Series