

Reflection on Teaching

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The first class I taught, "Population and Society," met on Tuesday evenings at Temple University in 1974. I was the youngest person in the room. Thus began a love affair with the classroom which has endured for over four decades. As it has happened, though, my classrooms have not been exclusively academic. I feel lucky to have had a career which has placed me in many settings: colleges and investment banks, libraries and trading floors, boardrooms and seminar rooms, cities and towns. Even during my two decade hiatus from academia, however, I was never very far from the classroom. So nobody was especially surprised when, after twenty years, I once again "found myself" on a college campus.

At Gordon State College, I teach high school valedictorians, and I teach developmental learning students; I teach students from small towns, from farms, and from inner-city Atlanta; I teach adolescents, and occasionally I teach sexagenarians. With such rich diversity, I cannot accomplish my goals by "teaching to the middle;" I seek to reach out to all my students and find I can do so following a few simple precepts:

- ✓ **A student-teacher relationship is just that, a relationship.** After a twenty year break from higher education, I was afraid that in my fifties and sixties, I would not be able to relate to students as I could in my twenties and thirties. I was wrong. Students can tell who's really taking an interest in them and who's merely going through the motions. I want to know who my students are and where they want to go. And I can offer so much more to help them get there than I could thirty years ago.
- ✓ **Students will embrace the notion of a structured learning community with appropriate rules, roles, and expectations.** On day one of each class, I share my concept of collaborative learning and set out a clear set of rules and expectations. For the most part, I find that students appreciate the structure of a learning community and are willing to do their share to make it work.
- ✓ **In my classroom, we are all learning.** But we're not all learning the same things in the same way at the same pace. My strongest students are taking in all the details. Other students are struggling with more basic issues. Some are learning from me, some from other students, and some from the text. I can tolerate a certain amount of "controlled boisterousness," as long as it pertains to the subject at hand.
- ✓ **If I enjoy my class, then my students will too, and they will learn.** Frankly, that's my "philosophy of teaching" in one sentence. One of my older students once wrote me: "Although your brains and education are a plus, your heart is what puts you over the top." I might add to that my sense of humor, which never fails me in the classroom. I'm in the classroom because I want to be there, and my students know it.

When it comes to my classroom, I readily admit to being a technology junkie. When I come across a strategy that looks "cool," I look for a way to incorporate it into one (or all) of my classes. Often, what initially looked useful does not work well in the context of my subject, my teaching approach, or my student mix, and I end the "experiment" without regret. No technology works well for everyone. In feeding my technology habit,

therefore, I look for tools which complement my own approach to the classroom. That approach can be summarized, I think, with two words: **immediacy** and **collaboration**.

As for **immediacy**, a concept I “discovered” a few years ago defined as behavior reducing the perceived distance, both physical and relational, between instructor and student, I am reminded of Moliere’s *Bourgeois Gentleman* who discovered he had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it! I have always managed my classroom in close physical proximity to my students, moving about the classroom, trying to learn not just their names, but some of their individual peculiarities, using humor, making frequent eye contact, shaking hands when appropriate, even “high fiving.” Such behavior has always felt natural to me, and I have never felt vulnerable or compromised. Despite the collegial nature of my interaction with my students, they know that I’m the professor and they’re the students.

While immediacy has characterized my classroom all along, **collaboration** is a practice which I have embraced in a more deliberate way. The first thing that visitors to my classroom, who are always welcome, notice is the arrangement of the desks into teams, not just for specific team activities but throughout the class. I assign students to teams, chosen in advance to reflect and benefit from the diversity of our students, on the first day of class as students enter the room. While I had previously experimented with groups, my structured use of collaborative learning teams began with my first accounting class in 2007, when I came across an “ancillary” to the text called “Cooperative Learning and Instructors Guide” which intrigued me. On the first day of class, I tried a “think-pair-share” on the question “What is accounting?” Seeing my classroom come alive with conversations among students, I was immediately hooked and over the last eight years have made collaborative learning teams an integral part of my classroom.

Faculty and students alike are often skeptical about “group work,” with good reason. Asking randomly chosen or, even worse, self-selected groups to merely solve a problem or answer a question is at best a hit-or-miss proposition. If activities, roles, and rewards are specifically and fairly defined, however, I have found that students not only embrace the opportunity to meet and work with their peers, but they grow to understand that they each have something to offer in the learning process. I am well aware that my classes, all of which emphasize quantitative tools and analysis, cover technical material which some students find challenging. I do my best to explain those concepts in a lecture/demonstration framework, but the reality is that time and time again I’ve seen students finally “get it” when one of their teammates, sitting next to them at a table, explains a concept to them.

I believe that education is the key to intellectual growth, social mobility, and economic productivity. I believe that what we do at Gordon State College is important, that we can have a critical and lasting influence on our students' lives. Now, after fifteen years at Gordon, I’ve actually begun to see it work. We teach our students, and of course, we don’t hear from most of them after they leave. But we do try to stay in contact as best we can (for which, I would add, Facebook is a marvelous tool). Among the greatest satisfaction derived from my work has been hearing from former Gordon students whom I have taught or advised, often from modest backgrounds, about how they’ve finished college, gotten jobs they’re excited about, and can see successful futures for themselves. In their success, I find my success.