Four Decades of Teaching and Learning: A Reflection

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My Journey

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. Nearly forty years later, teaching my first evening class at Gordon State College, I found that the evening walk home evoked distinct memories of that first class. All those years ago, I managed to teach without Prezi or PowerPoint, with no multimedia station, with neither bonus bucks nor laser pointer, never having heard of collaborative learning teams—just wandering about the classroom with notes in hand, lecturing, questioning, and generally holding forth on demography. My students often seemed interested, even engaged. Thus began a love affair with the classroom which has endured for nearly 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. Without fail, though, the place I’ve always been most comfortable and relaxed has always been the classroom. Even during my two decade hiatus from academia, I was never very far from the classroom. I built training programs, videotapes of which have been used long after I moved on, everywhere I worked, and I found reasons to speak to students on a number of college campuses. So nobody was especially surprised when, after twenty years, I once again “found myself” on a college campus.

Even before teaching was part of my “job description” as a division chair at Gordon State College, I sought out, in my initial role as Director of Institutional Research, opportunities to return to the classroom, volunteering to teach Introductory Statistics as well as a Colloquium on Investments and Financial Markets and giving a number of guest lectures on my areas of academic expertise, finance, accounting, and demography, as well as avocational interests such as the “Opera and Me” presentation I gave to our music appreciation classes on three occasions. When, after seven years as division chair, I took on a full time teaching load, I realized that, finally, I had the job I always wanted.

My Students

There are those, I know, who would have expected to see me at a school with more prestige, privilege, and pomp than Gordon State, but frankly, I’ve been there. Really, anyone who’s knowledgeable, intelligent, and reasonably articulate can teach students in such schools. Our students at Gordon State need more, I think, because they give meaning to the word “diversity.” 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 I occasionally 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, and if they pursue accounting as a career, as some do, then in a few years they’ll know more than I do. 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.

As described by “Professor X” in *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower*, our students in general are “those whose names don’t come up in the debates about advanced placement courses, adolescent overachievers, and cutthroat college admissions.” Often first generation college students, many of our students are struggling to find their way. Often starting out with modest ambitions; they’re simply not used to academic success. As a result, we often tend to underestimate them. It’s a mistake. We need to help them raise their expectations of themselves by making demands of them. I ask them to be an active member of my class—to communicate well, to take responsibility, to participate in the discussion, to analytically consider the quantitative data characteristic of the classes I teach, and finally, to put it all together in ways which will serve them well not just academically, but intellectually and professionally as well. If I show them, step-by-step, what they need to do, they rarely disappoint me.
My Classroom

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. So I’ve especially embraced “technologies” which enhance immediacy. Prezi’s “live action” display, for example, is more engaging than PowerPoint as I walk around the room. Handing the students the play money ‘rewards’ I use for various kinds of participation works well for me because I’m out there in the classroom among them. Most recently acquired, my Mobi Portable Interactive Whiteboard allows me to work problems and annotate presentations while I’m wandering about the classroom.

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 eight years ago, 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 often 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 in teaching classes like accounting and statistics I 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.

Again, specific tools and technologies facilitate the collaborative process. Team marker boards are especially useful in sharing information both within and between teams, and while I found team clickers, which I experimented with a few years ago, did not especially suit me, a decidedly ‘low tech” alternative, Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique (IF-AT) scratch-off multiple choice cards generate unusually high team engagement with the added benefit of simply being fun. Since a high proportion of our students are commuters, I don’t require teams to meet outside of class (although I have discovered that many do, especially in preparing for tests), but over last two years I have used Piazza.com, a free online discussion and course management site especially aimed at promoting student collaboration in problem solving, to promote collaboration outside of class.

The value of collaboration, of course, goes far beyond learning course material, but is critical to pursuing an objective stated in the syllabus for every one of my classes:

I believe that all business classes should share the objective of helping you learn to conduct yourselves in a businesslike and professional manner. Accordingly, I expect that you’ll dress and groom appropriately, treat one another with respect, communicate effectively and articulately, maintain high expectations and commitment, and take pride in work well done by both yourself and your colleagues. Prepare well for class; ask questions when you have them; answer questions when you’re asked them; talk when you have something interesting to say; help your colleagues both in class team activities and online. Enjoy being a member of our community; get to know one another, and have fun!

I believe that education is the key to 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 over a decade 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.