

What We Talk About When We Talk About Learning

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2004 Lindback Award Winner



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In 2003, Community College of Philadelphia inaugurated the annual Lindback Lecture, which is given by the recipient of the previous year's Lindback Award. The Lindback Lecture provides an opportunity for the entire academic community to draw on the teaching mastery and scholarship of the Lindback awardee. This publication serves to memorialize this lecture, presented to the College community, on March 17, 2005.

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In 1966, I was 17. I had graduated from high school in June and had spent the summer working for Schraft's Restaurant at 15th and Chestnut Streets. On a warm fall morning, dressed in jacket and tie—out of habit and anticipation—I found myself at the Randolph Theatre on Chestnut Street for an orientation program for new students at the Community College of Philadelphia. After some speeches, we moved to classrooms at the campus, located in the old Snellenberg's Department Store on South 11th Street. I met a few of my fellow freshmen, exchanged names and compared schedules. Everyone I met was from a different high school, some in parts of the city I had never ventured into. I am sure that when I went home that day, I had plenty to tell my mother. I don't remember that night in particular, but I bet that we talked at the dinner table about my first day, just as thousands of beginning students and their family members have done since then.

Years later, after I had returned to the College as a counselor, my mother began taking classes at Community College of Philadelphia. Disabled by a heart attack, the unschooled waitress who had pounded into my head the importance of education was thrilled to have the opportunity to continue her own formal education, which had stopped at the age of 14, when she left her village in rural Québec for a job in the city to help support her eight younger brothers and sisters who were living with their widower father. When my mother began taking classes at the College, I was married and living a 10-minute drive away, but I'd see her at school, talk with her on the phone and see her at her apartment for Sunday dinners. I remember hearing about her wonderful English teacher, Mr. Hummel, and about that other teacher who wasn't quite so wonderful. I remember the pride she took in mastering beginning Italian with Dr. DeMarco and learning about Michelangelo from Bobby Burke. I remember the palpable joy of

learning being something of a surprise to her, a blessing, as she would put it. Last summer, nearing the 25th anniversary of her death, I opened the steamer trunk in our basement and for the first time went through papers and odds and ends she had saved. Mixed in with the letters, faded photos and legal and financial documents, and dwarfing them in terms of number, was a treasure trove of Community College of Philadelphia lore: notebooks, corrected writing assignments and tests, even her photo ID card. She had lived into her 60s, had worked in various parts of Canada and the United States, yet so much of what she saved was from her few semesters as a part-time student at the College. In a way, she was speaking to me from the grave, a quarter-century later, still telling me what was important.

Years after my mother's time at the College, my wife, Kathleen, spent two years in the Community College of Philadelphia Nursing program, and again, I heard tales from the classrooms of the College. Courses more difficult than many of the ones she had taken in graduate school. Stimulating teachers and fellow students. Even more recently, my son completed the honors program at the College. Challenging texts, smart teachers and classmates who expected something of him. I watched him venture into the conversation, which people like Evan Seymour have wisely guided for so many years on the third floor of the Mint Building. Through the '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s, family members and I shared student stories about the College. Meanwhile, in thousands of other homes and apartments across the city, other families were doing the same thing, and still do. What is the nature of this kind of talk? What does it accomplish? What is its place in the education of our students?

What we witness, do and think as students is a significant part of our educational experience, of our learning. It has to do with the acquisition of skills and knowledge and with our enculturation into an academic community. Much of it is abstract, as befits involvement in the academic culture. It is all part of our orientation to and entrance into a particular life of the mind, one organized by our particular academic discipline. For essayist Richard Rodriguez, it involved learning ways of talking, thinking and writing, which came to him in

neither a natural nor an automatic way (1981, p. 48). So much of what we learn in the classroom may be both foreign and at odds with what we find when we leave the classroom and return to our homes (Rodriguez, 1981, pp. 46-47). In the form of ideas and issues, some of our educational experiences and observations find their way into our discussions at the dinner table. Some families provide highly sophisticated sounding boards for intellectual discussion. Whether we come from such a family or one like that of Richard Rodriguez, we all go home from class with plenty to talk about. But even in the most sophisticated household of dinner table intellectuals, the talk is not restricted to linear, analytical thought, the kind you might find in an honors seminar. Sitting around the dinner table, we do what people have done for thousands of years: we talk about ourselves and other people, about what we have experienced and learned. We tell stories. For us, as for the characters in the Raymond Carver story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” the stories may help us understand the past, but the experience of telling the stories may be more about understanding the mysteries of the present. Jayne Anne Phillips’s analysis of the characters in Carver’s story applies beyond the four troubled souls working their way through a bottle of gin: like Mel, Terri, Laura and Nick, and like our ancestors and our students, we “tell stories in an attempt to discover or communicate the moment” (1981).

Using stories is one thing that we have in common with our students. Many other things, of course, separate us from them: skills, knowledge, experience and, perhaps most significantly, engagement and participation in academic culture. In so many important ways, faculty and students simply do not think alike, act alike or believe the same things. This divide between student and faculty has always existed and continues to exist to this day for students in colleges and universities across the nation, but the gap is never greater than it is for the nontraditional student in the community college. We must never forget how alien, intimidating and unwelcoming this experience can be for our students, despite our best efforts. Every semester, I am reminded of the dignity, decency, integrity and intelligence of our students. As an alumnus of Community College of Philadelphia and the product of an English-as-a-Second Language, working-class,

single parent family, I never have had difficulty seeing myself in them and them in me. But I know that, like me back in the fall of 1966, they need more than new skills and knowledge. As their teachers, we must do what others did for us: welcome them into academic culture. As Martin Spear and Dennis McGrath posited in *The Academic Crisis of the Community College*, we, their teachers and counselors, along with College administrators and staff, “should be trying to bridge the gulf of cultural disarticulation, to make academics inviting and engaging” (1991, p. 95).

A student enters your classroom the first day of the semester. She wants to do well. In the classroom, she is emotionally, as well as physically, present. Unlike so many of her peers, she is what Laurence Steinberg of Temple University’s Psychology department would describe as an engaged student (1996). “I want to go into computers,” she tells you, “because it’s a good field.” She has what we might call an instrumental view of education; for her, the degree or certificate at the end of the line is a ticket to a better job, a better life. Her attendance is almost perfect. In class, she has the book on her desk, and she takes notes throughout every lecture and discussion. Her work comes in on time and shows a grasp of the text and of the task. She is especially strong on measures of factual retention, less competent at analysis or interpretation. She treats you with almost obsequious respect. She counts on you to provide the material; she will do the note taking, the reading and rereading of textbooks and handouts, the highlighting in yellow and the three-colored underlining of materials. You arrive for class each morning, and she eyes your precious notes hungrily. You, with your dog-eared notes and a wealth of supporting material tucked away in the recesses of your mind, stand before her. She opens her notebook, and you realize that she might as well be what essayist Sydney J. Harris called “an animate sausage casing,” opening itself to be filled—to be stuffed—with education. She is a sausage casing, and you are a sausage-stuffer. The bell rings. You open your mouth and begin stuffing.

In your next class, another engaged student waits for you. You taught him last semester and recruited him for the linked classes that you teach with several colleagues. Countless times, you've seen him squirreled away in a corner of the library. He's older than most of the other students in the class, has gone back to school after years of other responsibilities. Clearly, he loves his new life. In fact, his eyes light up at times. You cannot help but admire this student's intrinsic view of education. When you overheard him chastise classmates for being materialistic drones, you had all you could do to keep from patting him on the back. This student is more like an oyster than a sausage. As Harris tells us, "The job of teaching is not to stuff them and then seal them up, but to help them open and reveal the riches within." Your student is taking what he can from your teaching, your texts and from everything else in his environment, and, like a healthy oyster, he is developing his pearl of wisdom. You've told him that he is enhancing what he had all along. You've praised his internal locus of control. But when you came across several study groups from his class in the library and finally saw him alone at his study carrel, an unsettling feeling gripped you. You recalled the story of Barbara Jordan's first semester in law school. Excluded from study groups by the white students, she trusted that spending hours alone in the library would see her through, as it had in high school and college. When one of her fellow African-American classmates organized a study group for the newly admitted African-American law students, she saw her life change as a consequence of this newfound engagement.

The more you think about your student, the more his avoidance of study groups seems consistent for him; last semester, in class, he buckled under any challenge from faculty or students. He seemed surprised that merely saying that something was true would not suffice. Again, he reminds you of Barbara Jordan and another insight about learning. In her 1979 autobiography, she recounted recognizing that her high school debate approach had fallen flat in law school. "I could no longer orate and let that pass for reasoning. ... You had to think and read and understand and reason. ... Well, that was a new thing for me. I cannot, I really cannot describe what that did to my insides and to my head. I thought, 'I'm being educated finally'"

(1979). In the College library, your student in the study carrel catches sight of you and waves. He looks beleaguered. You nod back and force a smile.

These are the good ones, the students who are engaged, who do care. Filling out their classrooms are students who come less well-prepared in terms of skills and attitudes. And this is happening in colleges and universities across the nation: rampant disengagement. Steinberg's research shows that this phenomenon of "deliberate disenchantment" occurs in all ethnic groups and in all socioeconomic levels (1996, p. 13).

Peer influence is pervasive, and in most cases, that is not a good thing. Of course, amidst hordes of disengaged students, engaged students thrive, but the norms of popular culture have tilted toward disengagement. American students socialize more (p. 177), spend more time at part-time jobs (p. 172) and read and study less than their counterparts abroad (Steinberg, 1996, p. 19). Not surprisingly, recent reports show high school achievement levels in the U.S. dipping lower than those in many other nations (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2004). And it is not for lack of trying. Despite a generation of school reform, we have "the poorest outcomes per dollar spent on education," according to 2003 data gathered and analyzed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Norris, 2004, A22).

On the postsecondary level, remedial classes dot the university landscape. These considerations make for a bleak outlook for so many of the nation's students, but students at Penn, Penn State or Temple typically do not come from family situations as challenged as those of so many of our students. Every semester, we fill out drop forms in the wake of the sudden disappearance of solid students, as the forces of nonacademic life take their toll. Steinberg's conclusion that the causes of mass student disengagement and poor achievement lie beyond the classroom is useful in understanding the workings and problems of American society but by itself offers little hope to the classroom teacher at any level of education in America. The prepared and the unprepared. The engaged and the disengaged. Sausages and oysters. What are we as teachers trying to get them to do?

Teaching, difficult under any circumstances, is risky business because it is a dance we do with an unskilled partner who often has little interest in following our lead. Even our students who possess an instrumental view of education, a drive to amass credits, get credentialed and become marketable—those who learn the steps—may never get the swing of the rhumba or grasp the synergy of moving with a partner and creating the uniqueness of that dance, that moment. Of greater concern are our students who, lacking an instrumental and/or extrinsic reward-based view of education, have a hard time learning the basic steps. And even our students who intrinsically appreciate learning may be hamstrung by their own idiosyncratic approach or by the realities of life outside the classroom.

McGrath and Spear pointed out that our differences with students are both small and large, that we “appear to disagree about the most basic, most mundane features of the classroom, as well as the larger vision of the nature and purpose of education—whether being on time is important, for instance, or what counts as participation, what kinds of thinking are valued and whether any of it matters” (1991, p. 5).

Several months ago, I administered to English 101 students an adaptation of an inventory originally devised by Vince Castronuovo and Max Eirich that is used to this day by the Collaborative Learning Community in their orientation program for new students. The students rank 16 items contributing to academic success. I calculated the average rankings of the students and later shared the results with them so that they could see how their thinking lined up with that of their classmates. Then I shared with them the numbers for the Transfer Opportunities Program faculty. Overwhelmingly, students and faculty agreed that motivation and adequate study time were important and that the “teacher’s course and classroom policies” were relatively unimportant.

The differences between faculty and students were more interesting: “teacher’s ability to communicate subject matter effectively” was ranked second by students but ninth by faculty. The concept of locus of control or attributional style may well explain this discrepancy. At one

extreme are students with what Steinberg would call a healthy attributional style, that is, individuals who explain their success or failure in terms of factors over which they have control, such as time spent studying. At the other end of the spectrum are students who place greater weight on factors beyond their control, such as innate ability, luck and teacher fairness. This particular difference in perspective disturbs because, as Steinberg points out, “a student’s attributional style is significantly predictive of his or her performance in school” (1996, p. 92). When I look at educational factors such as the ones on this inventory, I cannot help but wonder about interrelationships among them, for instance, the notion that certain factors may underlie or explain others. Another disagreement between students and faculty points to what I believe is such a common denominator in understanding academic success. One of the most telling disagreements regarded the item “student’s view of how the educational process works and what a student needs to do to function effectively in the educational system.” Faculty rated this the most essential item; students rated it ninth.

So much of our work in education, whether we teach the cha-cha or Boolean equations, depends on the students’ view of the educational process. Our sausage-stuffing students’ self-limitation is evident, but even those with intrinsic motivation, those with the oyster view, have problems. On opening day, when we ask students what it takes to be successful in college, they chorus back at us, “Motivation!” Commencement speakers have told them that all they need to do is follow their dream. Determination will conquer all. What they cannot know without experience is that their trusted motivation will ebb and flow. Faculty, observers of the semesterly rise and fall of motivation and subject to the same phenomenon themselves, know that something needs to be in place in the minds and in the lives of students to help them stay the course when the vicissitudes of life compete for attention and dampen that first day’s zeal. We teach a path which requires persistence, not the first-day-of-the-semester energy which launches a student to the bookstore right after class, but the dull routine, for instance, of getting up on time. To succeed, students need more than first-day drive. They need a complex combination of attitudes, awarenesses and practices.

Even students who have some or most of the motivational traits may not succeed if they do not know what is expected and required of them. They need the enculturation, and we need them to have it. Whether we realize it or not, in addition to teaching academic skill and content, we also teach academic life. This is nothing short of guiding and welcoming students into the academic world of study and discourse of which we are a part. If they ever want more than a passing familiarity with a few of our dance steps, they need to know what we chemists, accountants, designers and sociologists do when we do the work we love—how and why we read, calculate, analyze and how and why we act a certain way toward each other and toward them. We owe them nothing less.

One of the defining traits of this audience—the College faculty and staff—distinguishes it from a significant number of our students. Somewhere in our lives, we developed a devotion to certain ideas, indeed, to the idea of ideas. Working with ideas became interesting and important to us. We did more than select a major; we chose a field of ideas and activities devoted to those ideas. We met others with similar interests: classmates, teachers, mentors, colleagues. And our lives increasingly intersected with theirs. We became part of academic culture, products and practitioners of a discipline. We became educated, which is to say, we experienced change in how we thought and acted: we became more like those who welcomed us. But we have more than one vocation. Yes, we are drawn to academic subjects, but we are also drawn to another discipline: helping others learn the subject area which is our passion. What we demand of the students who enter our classes every September and January is the kind of engagement which we acquired somewhere along the line. Of course, some of us stumbled around for a number of years, waiting for academic love to bloom and manifest itself in our behavior. But as Steinberg's observations of contemporary America show, we were coming from the influence and experience of a very different era.

Students at an urban community college have such great needs and face such daunting challenges. Representing a diversity of disciplines, we teach our subject area, but we also teach learning. Although our

expectations of students are cognitive and discipline-specific, they are also broader in nature. When college teachers list their most desired learning outcomes, they agree, regardless of discipline (Gregory, 2004). And what they want—what we want—transcends the purely academic. In his recent article in the *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, Butler University’s Marshall Gregory reports that the list of most desired learning outcomes made by faculty from professional schools was identical to the wishes of undergraduate humanities and sciences faculty. At heart, regardless of discipline, we share certain goals. According to Gregory, these include wanting our students “to become more open minded ... introspective ... creative ... curious ... to think more critically, become better problem solvers, imagine more vividly and in more detail, use evidence more responsibly, make better arguments, use language with greater clarity and precision, find joy in learning for its own sake, become more intellectually flexible, become more tolerant of differences, become more sensitive to moral principles and to show greater ethical concern for other people” (Gregory, 2004).

The list reads like a behavior code for boy scouts or girl scouts, or for the professorate. Gregory argues that teaching disciplinary knowledge helps to “change not only what our students know about our subject matter but also what they know about the world and what they know about themselves.” Thus, by teaching content, we teach more than content. And we impact our students inside and outside the classroom. How we deal with students is a telling part of what we do with them. According to Gregory, four ethical commitments stand at the heart of effective teaching, and, I believe, by implication, at the heart of citizenship: fairness, respect, charity and civility (2004).

Gregory sees fairness as central. If a student does not trust that her teacher uses “defensible and intelligible standards” in his evaluation of her work, “none of the teacher’s other virtues ... will outweigh students’ sense of injury—sometimes their outrage—at being treated unfairly. The ethic of fairness is the gateway through which every other teacherly ambition for any class must either pass or get strangled at the start” (2004).

Even if we evaluate a student's work fairly, we may still disrespect a student in our dealings with him or her. Gregory sees respect for a student's personal dignity as "fundamental to good teaching because it is the one ethic that ties any community of human beings together through the recognition of common human experience and common human need" (2004).

When I read "charity" on Gregory's list, my brow wrinkled and I braced myself for a force-feeding of New Age philosophy. By charity, I believe Gregory means a generosity of spirit manifest in our interactions with people. Gregory believes that this sensibility is a necessary component of interaction in all social communities and thus should characterize our interactions with students, as well as with faculty, support staff and so on (2004). Of course, our ears must be tuned to detect false notes in student stories, lest fairness be the victim of our kind hearts. Just as we must establish and maintain trust, so too, we must at least hope that those around us will do their fair share for trust and understanding. A generosity of spirit should propel us to take the first step, to give the student the benefit of the doubt. The crusty teacher within reminds me that people, including students, can be incredibly creative in their manipulation and deceit and that the wise, kind-hearted teacher has a fully charged crap detector right next to the box of tissues in her office.

Civility concerns how we handle the above three ethical components. Gregory points out that welcoming behavior toward students "creates social relations that underwrite rather than undermine human flourishing" (2004). This, of course, implies at least a smidgen of that quality so elusive in the halls of academia: humility.

Over the break in January, I shared Gregory's ideas with several of my former students. One evening, over tomato pie and barbecue ribs, four veterans of the Transfer Opportunities Program joined Vince Castronuovo and me to explore Gregory's ideas in the light of their experience. We asked the students if they believed that they had changed in the areas Gregory talks about.

Reggie, a former valedictorian at Strawberry Mansion High School who hopes to transfer to Penn and major in English, was quick to recognize his own improvement in being open-minded, introspective and respectful of others. Seen by everyone around him as a good student in high school, Reggie said that he did not become a serious student until he reached the College. Pressed to explain, he cited the text-based approach of the Transfer Opportunities Program—which is to say, a reliance on mostly primary texts—for his newfound engagement, pointing to his work with Clint Gould in Humanities. Exposure to things about which he knew nothing prior to his entrance into the College, for instance, the Middle East, sparked interest in other new areas. “I guess it’s like a snowball,” he said, “falling down a mountain. When you get just a little bit ... of momentum ... it becomes bigger ... larger. That’s definitely what did it for me—the content.”

Our discussion ranged from Gregory’s list of desired traits in students to his suggested ethical commitments for faculty. Several days after the session, after transcribing the discussion and reading it over, I was struck by how much of what the students said had to do with the interaction of students with faculty and with other students. They agreed that the text-based approach was important, but in their view, the way faculty kept it text-based, that is, the way faculty interacted with them and the way they interacted with classmates, was also telling.

Coming from Norristown, Trevor, like Reggie, was the product of a working-class background and epitomized the vulnerable, nontraditional student in his first term at the College. “Here I am, a drop-out, a carpenter for 15 years,” he said. “What the hell can I contribute to this class? ...” Taking a summer course in his weakest area, math, he scored two 60s and a 40 in his first three quizzes. In a conversation outside of class, his teacher, Geoff Schulz, gave him clear direction as to what he needed to do to pass. The subtext of Geoff’s message was expectation and confidence. As Trevor told it, “He just kind of went down the list with me, and I wound up getting an A in that class.” Trevor, an Education major at Temple University now,

recognized Geoff Schulz as demonstrating the four ethical commitments that Gregory sees at the heart of effective teaching. Commenting on Trevor's story, John, who recently graduated with a degree in history from Temple, saw the make-or-break-it nature of Trevor's math class crisis as one which, absent a certain kind of intervention, is likely to go a very different direction. "And it sounds like if not for having a decent professor," John said, "who did concern himself with being fair, respecting his students and that kind of thing ... you never, ever would have gotten this far. You're probably like thousands of kids, young men, in that exact same situation, having failed that first couple of quizzes and in their minds proved to themselves that, see, I knew I couldn't do it, and (who) then. ... went back to whatever life they were unhappy with before." Clearly, Geoff Schulz was teaching more than algebra.

Chris, who now holds a B.A. in History from the University of Minnesota and who hopes to begin graduate school soon, came to Community College of Philadelphia with determination but credits the academic peer culture in the Transfer Opportunities Program with his growing ease in college. Responding to a comment by Trevor about the social support benefits of their academic experience at the College, Chris said, "You're going to college to learn, but actually you're going there in a very social atmosphere. ... It seems like the learning comes with that." Transferring to Minnesota, he soon saw the steady diet of enormous, impersonal lecture classes as a minefield for new students; however, having developed an understanding of what he needed to do to thrive in classroom situations, he was a successful, if not thrilled, student in that environment. "The Transfer Opportunities Program really ruined it for me," he said, "because after going to the U, everything was going to be a comparison to TOP, and (the U) just did not measure up." While it is gratifying to us that he found a program at the College superior to his experience at a prestigious Big Ten university, I am more impressed by the fact that when faced with a different, less-stimulating academic experience, he thrived, nonetheless.

Trevor too has found his post-College academic experience less socially supportive but finds a useful social component in his own way. Like

the others, he spoke unabashedly about his joy of learning. He seems to enjoy it most when he can enjoy it with others, and doing so has helped him. He mentioned a conversation with a nonstudent friend, a fellow carpenter, with whom he shared his excitement about the project he was doing on poet Etheridge Knight. “We wound up talking for about two, three hours about this project,” he said. “(We’re) digging into this poem, and it was great. I went to bed all high. I was charged up. My presentation the next day, I’m saying, this is great. I nailed the presentation.”

As you can imagine, it was easy and enjoyable to get to know these students. Reggie’s first experience with Gary Mullin, the coordinator of the Transfer Opportunities Program, parallels Trevor’s introduction to Geoff Schulz. After a disappointing semester at Temple immediately after high school and then being away from school for a few years, Reggie questioned whether he belonged in a college setting. “I didn’t know if I could handle it,” he said. “And I had a talk with Gary (Mullin). (Looking over my test scores) He told me ... you belong here. And that really gave me a lot of confidence. ... And it was really important to me to hear that from someone who’s already established and someone who is where I want to be.”

Working in collaboration maximized our social connection with students. John pointed to a quote in the piece by Gregory: “To students, all interactions with their teachers are both intellectual and social—and the social part of the interaction has at least as much to do with how well they learn as the intellectual part of the interaction.” Asked how different their experiences would have been if they had taken the same courseload as separate, discrete courses with the same faculty, Trevor articulated a whole-greater-than-the-sum-of-the-parts view of our collaboration. “It’s not like we had individual teachers per se,” he said. “We had a group of teachers. You guys acted as an entity.” Speaking of the faculty, John said, “You guys were all over the same spot basically, in between classes ... half of us would end up hanging out in your offices. ... And it increased the comfort level and everybody’s willingness to interact with each other.”

We, in the Transfer Opportunities Program faculty, had the advantages of a unified and text-based curriculum, a consistent and common view of the nature of academic writing and a pool of fairly high-scoring students, but something as simple as having offices clustered near our classroom turned out to be a critical element in our functioning. The fruits of collaborative teaching are many and obvious, but colleges are not structured so as to make collaborative teaching the norm. When we are hired as teachers, we are assigned to several classes each semester. Only one of us is assigned to each class. There is an inescapable solitary nature to the job of teaching—solo planning, lecturing, discussion leading, evaluation and assessment—yet so much of our work as teachers is done in close proximity to hundreds of our peers, each chattering away in his own classroom or scribbling away in her own office. So near and yet so far. In his recent article about learning in the community college, Tom Ott wisely reminds us that “the greatest enemy of excellent teaching is isolation” (2004). Through grass roots programs such as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning activities developed at the College by Tom Ott and supported by Judith Gay, all of us, we who participate in collaborative work and also those fine teachers who plough on in relative isolation, can connect and learn from each other.

Listening to the tape of our students’ discussion, I was struck by two other things. Again and again, our four former students told stories about their experiences in order to make their points. Chris lit up while telling the others about our trip to New York to see Christopher Walken in the, believe it or not, musical production of the James Joyce short story, “The Dead.” Reggie pointed to his introduction to Camus’ *The Stranger* in Clint Gould’s class as having made him more open-minded. John spoke of conversations about material and about class experiences with his father and his wife. Trevor acknowledged his girlfriend’s patience at listening to all of his tales about the College. I believe that, for these students, telling stories about their education does more than inform the story’s listener and deepen the connection between teller and listener. For these four students, telling their stories is more than a testament to content or professors or classmates they valued. Telling the stories helps them understand the changes they have

experienced, that is, their growth. It demonstrates their awareness of the importance of their enculturation. It is evidence of its success.

In college, we learn to think linearly, to develop our ideas, to analyze. These are, of course, virtues and requirements of academic writing and culture. This new, even alien, kind of thinking that we encourage and insist students develop is different from what even most of us do most of the time. Part and parcel of our academic disciplines, it is nonetheless an acquired taste and practice. It is not primal but the product of centuries of intellectual heritage and years of our own self-discipline. Even the most intellectual of us uses another form of thought and expression. And this universal trait is for good reason. As Daniel T. Willingham points out in the “Ask the Cognitive Scientist” section of *American Educator* in Summer 2004, “our minds treat stories differently than other types of material” (p. 43). According to Willingham, we give a privileged status to story as a kind of information. We turn naturally to narrative. On Saturday nights, we gravitate toward it in movies and theatre, for both its escapist and interpretive value. At the dinner table after holiday meals, we share stories. When we meet old friends or make new ones, we do it. Teachers do it with colleagues, and students do it with classmates when they reconnect after semester or midsemester breaks.

Willingham tells us that while the content of stories is interesting, something inherent in the structure of stories makes them engaging: “Story structure naturally leads the listener (or reader) to make inferences that are neither terribly easy, nor impossibly difficult. New information that is a little bit puzzling, but which we can understand, is deemed more interesting than new information that is either very easy or very difficult to understand” (Willingham, 2004, p. 44). Stories are also easier to comprehend than other kinds of information. This is because “we know the format, and that gives us a reasonable idea of what to expect. When an event is described in a story, we expect the event will be causally related to a prior event in the story.” This expected causality also makes stories easy to remember.

Stories help us not only escape from but also delve into the complexities of life (Perrine, 1959, p. 4). Our own life stories bind us to the people who are involved in our stories. This is true of all people in all times. In his study of the people of the small community of Ballymenone in Northern Ireland, folklorist Henry Glassie found in communicative human sound a way to understand the people (1982, p. 37). “The shape of Ballymenone’s concept of sound,” he wrote, “can be imagined as a terraced sequence leading upward from silence to music and from separation to social accord.” He equates kinds of talk with kinds of behavior. Goodness, he tells us, is found in human action, such as making and sharing food, and also in talk. When talk “does the work of food: gathering personal energy into a gift to others which pleases them in the moment, then (it) carries them on to further life” (p. 36). His conceptualization of sound in the community deals with entertainment, nurturing and social connection. At base, we have silence, ideally superseded by increasingly more aesthetically pleasing and socially connective kinds of sound, leading to ordinary talk, to chat, then to that clever-dog humor the Irish call *craic*, and onward and upward to story, poetry, song and music. Try to picture at one end, two people sitting together in silence, and at the other, the same two, with elegant energy on fiddle and Uilleann pipes, regaling each other and anyone else within earshot. “With each step, entertainment increases, sound becomes more beautiful and the intention of the creator of sound becomes more clearly to please the listener. ... Central and crucial to this rising sequence is the story” (p. 37).

In an essay titled “Into the Silence,” the late fiction writer and college professor Andre Dubus reflected on the universality of story and on the special place that it holds in our lives. In contrast with abstract speech, the telling of “the stories that are part of the collection of stories that is our earthly lives” is what we do with people whom we care for and want close to us (1991, p. 91). Dubus wrote of the time that he and his wife spent in counseling and of the nature of that kind of talk. Much of what he wrote about the process of talking, in particular, of using stories, echoes what so many of us tell our writing students every semester about the process of writing a first draft.

“What we did in the counselor’s office was tell stories. A good counselor won’t let you get by with the lack of honesty and commitment we bring to abstractions. And when we told these stories, we discovered the truths that were their essence, that were the very reasons we needed to tell the stories; and, like honest fiction writers, we did not know the truth of the stories until we told them. Or, more accurately, until the stories told themselves, took their form and direction from the tactile language of our memory, our pain and our hope” (Dubus, 1991, p. 92).

In his conclusion to the essay, Dubus was writing about fiction writers but also about all people, and his thoughts line up well with Henry Glassey’s take on sound in society. Dubus’s words are directive, particularly for us in education: “All of us need to speak into the silence of mortality, to interrupt and ever so briefly stop that quiet flow, and with stories, try to understand at least some of it” (p. 92).

Spear and McGrath have shown us the importance of the student’s entrance into academic culture. Gregory reminds us that relationships can underline or erase our best intentions. But just as we want our students to do more than merely accumulate basic skills and knowledge, like so many stuffed sausages, so too should we want to make academic culture a welcoming one for them. Not by dumbing down curriculum or by trying to become their buddies, but by sharing our passion for our fields, our appreciation for the interconnectedness of ideas and our recognition that, for better or worse, students and faculty become part of each other’s stories. In the end, if we welcome them into the academic life, we will be all the richer.

The other thing which struck me when I was listening to the discussion of my students was how much we all laughed. Transcribing the tape, I found myself writing “laughter” because to ignore the laughter would have been to miss a vital part of the meaning of the discussion. If we bother to listen, humor runs rampant through our lives, and it is part of our stories and is an indication of our connection with one another, testament, if you will, to the degree to which we have been able to connect and to understand. I hear that laughter

when I remember those conversations with my mother, and I hope I hear it in conversations with students in the future.

To some degree, our students will enter our lives and our stories, and we will enter theirs. We can do so by accident, or we can do it with purpose. We can do it with the conviction that we have something worth sharing. We can do it with respect, for they, like we, are learners. And we can do it with some measure of joy, for it is good work.

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