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Teaching Matters, Volume 3 : Essays by Faculty and Staff of the University of Maine at Farmington

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Teaching Matters

Volume 3:

Essays by Faculty and Staff
at the University of Maine at Farmington

Edited by Linda Britt

With a Foreword by Edward Serna

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Foreword

*Edward Serna, President
University of Maine at Farmington*

Great thinkers have always known why teaching matters. Helen Keller saw clearly when she wrote, “The highest result of education is tolerance.” That was 1926. A couple of centuries earlier, Aristotle agreed: “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”

Valuing the gift of wisdom shared is not new. How we do it now, however, is. Teachers are constantly evolving to help students unlock their own imaginations. They invite students to follow them on a journey that each will wander along and learn from in their own way. Where they end up is one of life’s wonderful mysteries. None of us knows who we’ll become one day.

We do know, more than any time ever before, just how malleable and resilient our minds and hearts actually are. I was thrilled to learn that no matter our age, or how long it takes us to find a path to commit to, we are always learning and seeing through slightly brighter eyes.

Of course, good teaching often cultivates skills. Those skills build competency, and confidence, both of which prepare us to contribute and support ourselves. Learning deeply is usually slow going. It takes the patience of devoted teachers to change the very way we view the world.

Plenty of this happens in our formal classrooms. Skilled educators craft a plan to introduce information, test how well their students understand it, and challenge their thinking. The best teachers I’ve had the good fortune to learn from want even more: They want their students to get hooked—to come to *love* learning and keep it up.

Somehow, these generous connections seem to draw people and ideas and meaning through time. Anyone who watched teachers adapt with creativity and strength during the COVID-19 pandemic now appreciates how much they give to our children and students of all ages. Essential? Teachers have *always* been the conduit for human thought and experience that is worth passing down.

Fortunately, the skill of educating well is a craft and art that can be taught. We would know. The University of Maine at Farmington began as the Western State Normal School in 1864. Its goal was to provide model classrooms in which faculty taught model teaching practices. And its liberal arts curriculum later broadened its offerings. It was founded to train the most essential leaders among us.

Generations of future teachers would come to learn, in the fertile ground of Farmington, how to plant seeds of imagination and understanding. This place, and the communities where those seeds eventually landed, gave life to new fields of discovery and a widely educated populace. It still does.

Feeding, sheltering and caring for others is how we all begin. But teaching one another is how we all grow—and thrive. The essays that follow reflect our dedicated faculty members' many paths through this wild and noble adventure. Please follow along with them, and see where you end up.

Editor's Note

Linda Britt

One of the things I am pretty certain about is that during my forty-plus year career in the classroom, I have learned a lot about teaching: a lot about delivering content, a lot about teacher-student interactions, a lot about creating assignments, a lot about student learning styles... I thought I knew just about everything I needed to know to help my students flourish.

This past year changed that. Yes, there was a pandemic, and yes, that necessarily changed how I delivered content and interacted with students. But the lessons I learned transcended the pandemic, and I was reminded again that as teachers, we are constantly exploring and learning, and adapting our courses accordingly. This volume of *Teaching Matters* is a testament to that.

Reading these essays, I learned what geraniums have to do with teachable moments, what a “one-sheet wonder” is, why it’s a *good* thing to feel foreign in a classroom, and what experiential learning means. (Hint: it depends on whom you ask!) I learned what a “values wall” is, and how to build one. I learned what “ungrading” means.

One of the contributors confesses to not reading the book she wrote her first essay on when she started college. Another makes us see the way a stage becomes a classroom. Still another took a gamble and asked her students to choose the novel they would read for her course (Hint: it wasn’t *The Great Gatsby*). And one turned the outdoor spaces of the UMF campus into his classroom for an entire semester.

Special thanks to all my colleagues, to President Serna and Dean Quackenbush for supporting this project, and to Angela Leclair for the cover design.

I have always learned from my colleagues, but perhaps never so much as these past two years. I am ever grateful to them, and to this place. At UMF, teaching matters.

Linda Britt is Professor Emerita of Spanish at UMF, as well as a playwright. Her publications include numerous translations, several plays, including Mrs. Smith Goes to Washington and American Dreams, along with two previous edited volumes of Teaching Matters.

Geraniums

Theresa Overall

“The geranium on the windowsill just died, but teacher you went right on.” More than forty years after reading Albert Cullum’s book with that name, I consider the title more of an anti-mantra...something I repeat over and over again, to remind me to pray that I never become that teacher. I was in my first year of teaching, and found the cautionary tale in the professional development section of our school library. I’ve heard that recent re-publications of the book don’t even include some of the original poems. I wouldn’t know. I only read it once. It’s like that horror movie you accidentally saw and that still gives you nightmares (and you’ll never watch again).

A portion of my written teaching philosophy focuses on “capturing the teachable moment.” I include the travel analogy of “embrace the U-turn” because when you do make that U-turn, when you venture from your intended journey, you will see things you never planned on that could delightfully surprise you, and you get to see them twice—once on the path away from the intended one, and again on the way back. I used to be afraid of making U-turns—it felt like an admission of some horrible mistake. Now I embrace both the U-turns when I travel and the teachable moments in my classroom.

When my students in October of 1989 asked me what 6.9 on the Richter Scale meant, I didn’t say, “Wait four months and I’ll introduce you to decimals because right now I must follow the curriculum.” We jumped right into a makeshift introduction to decimals without the benefit of fractions (no worries...I used money and in those days, every student understood money even if they didn’t understand the math behind it). The delightful surprise for me was when I discovered the Richter Scale was a logarithmic scale. At the end of our mini-lesson on decimals, I announced, “And now to talk about the Richter Scale.” Using play money to create a picture, I said, “Imagine a 1.0 on the Richter Scale is a penny. A 2.0 would be ten times bigger (so it would equal a dime). A 3.0 is ten times bigger than that (a dollar).” The students then easily calculated the remaining “magnitudes” of the scale. I did have to cheat a little and say, “So a 6.9 is much closer to a 7.0 than it is to a 6.0” and just left them

satisfied that they had a beginning understanding of both decimals and the severity of the San Francisco Earthquake and that someday they could learn more about this fascinating thing called logarithms. Another reward for capturing that teachable moment in October was the groundwork that had already been laid when we got to the traditional decimal unit in February. It was definitely a side trip that had adventure on the way out as I let student curiosity drive us away from the standard curriculum and had beauty on the way back as we all had a better understanding of the power of natural phenomena and the magic of mathematics to describe it.

I will pause here to say, but not apologize, that you may have thought this essay was supposed to be about teaching at the college level. And it will be, soon enough. But I firmly believe that good teaching is good teaching. Whether teaching swimming lessons to 18-month-olds, long division to third graders, coding to high schoolers, or the nuances of assessment to pre-service teachers, my teaching philosophy holds true in all settings, including, “Capture the teachable moment.” Beth Lewis describes my thoughts on this topic when she writes, “A teachable moment is not something that you can plan for; rather, it is a fleeting opportunity that must be sensed and seized by the teacher.”

As a math teacher, I try to help students see math all around them. I want math concepts to have a real-world application. I can’t always answer the question, “When will I ever use this?” but I can keep that question at bay by proactively answering a different question, “Who uses this and why?” (It turns out, that’s true for my work with pre-service teachers. I want them to see good teaching and learning in all things. I want the concepts, theories, and best practices I teach in my classes to feel like they will be practical and applicable to them in every moment when they are the teachers. It’s true when I teach calligraphy and we practice the craft by making nametags and addressing envelopes and designing Valentine’s cards. I hope it’s true in all things I teach...because good teaching is good teaching.)

During my 21 years of teaching elementary school math, I even went so far as to create my own teachable moments. The Problem of the Day was the opening event of every class and involved something from that day’s newspaper. It might be an analysis of 3-pointers in a basketball game the night before, the landing of a rover on Mars, weather statistics, the rescue of a spelunker from a cave, the price of gold, the

red paperclip bartering story...there is always something in the news. The problem with (aka the excitement of) the Problem of the Day was I never knew where it might take us. An analysis of rainfall or temperature patterns could be over in five minutes, but one quick Problem of the Day based on a ski report turned into an on-going obsession for months in one class--they couldn't wait until the next ski report. The 1997 successful Mars Rover popped up in the news frequently, for months after its landing, and students that year couldn't get enough of it. I used that data for lessons on measurement, time, place value, exponents, and more. The subsequent failure of the Mars Climate Orbiter a year later, due to miscommunications between teams using metric and English measuring systems, had students running down to my room, even though they weren't in my grade anymore, to reminisce about our space conversations and the importance of good math.

Not everyone “gets it” when it comes to the power of the teachable moment. I was the lead math teacher for a second grade team the year the Texas Rangers made it to the playoffs—the first time in the club's history after many losing seasons. We followed the “magic number,” learned how some baseball statistics were calculated, made predictions about the upcoming games, and worked on numerous story problems involving real facts and figures related to the Rangers. The next year, I moved to third grade along with my students, and we continued to find math in all things and revel in it. In early October, the second grade math teacher I had worked with the year before came to me to ask for advice on how to make story problems come alive, because it just wasn't working for her this year. I asked her to show me the story problems she was using so we could analyze them--she pulled up the Rangers story problems from the year before. 365 days after the fact no longer makes a teachable moment.

In my classes for pre-service teachers, I've learned not to be afraid to talk about the news of the day. Sadly, it's often tragedies that we talk about the most, but I hope at least I'm modeling how they can capture teachable moments and openly discuss tragedies when they're a teacher. How can you not talk about school shootings (Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High), teacher wages (type “teacher strike” into a search engine and see how many different states' names show up in the autofill), or teachers being fired, when those events are happening all around you and will affect you when you are a teacher? In the moment, I have to let them

debrief on their related K-12 experiences as students and talk about strategies for their future as teachers. At the end of the semester and even many semesters later, it is those conversations that the students remember and tell me about using in their classrooms.

So capturing teachable moments is central to creating great learning opportunities for students. Now let's take that in a different direction. I assert that, as a teacher, I can capture teachable moments for myself. There are "fleeting opportunities that must be sensed and seized by the teacher" when it comes to the decisions I make about how I teach. And the good decisions will warrant long-term positive effects. After Beth Lewis defines a teachable moment, she goes on to describe that "Often it will require a brief digression that temporarily sidetracks the original lesson plan so that the teacher can explain a concept that has captured the students' attention. Taking the time to explore this tangent is almost always worthwhile. A teachable moment could ultimately evolve into a full-blown lesson plan or unit of instruction." I've seen this time and again in my teaching. And now looking back over a forty-plus year career of teaching, I realize that outside forces have often caused "brief digressions that temporarily sidetrack" my plans, but when I "take the time to explore this tangent," and consider my response to the digression in a wholistic way staying focused on what's important, it has been "always worthwhile" and has often "evolved" into meaningful changes and improvements in my teaching.

I started teaching at University of Maine Farmington in January 2007. I was privileged to become a part of "The Dream Team"—the faculty that taught the block of courses that students take as part of their practicum experience. We were a dynamic trio of experienced K-12 teacher leaders who always considered what was best for students in all of our decisions. We constantly reviewed what we were doing and made tweaks and improvements along the way—sometimes one-shot changes to meet the needs of a specific student or group of students, and sometimes permanent changes--because they were "better" for all concerned. (Faculty sanity as well as student learning and student growth were considered in all decisions.)

In fall 2009, H1N1 was a global concern. Not very far into the semester, we were told we had to submit plans for how we would work with students who contracted the virus and would be required to quarantine for two weeks after

recovery. If this pandemic swept through the population as feared, we would have many students who would miss a lot of class time, even though they were fully capable of participating in our class, but not able to be in our classroom. Skype was fairly new then; of the few students who were familiar with it, most were using it to stay in touch with friends back home or overseas, and probably fewer than 25% of my students had even heard of it. I thought it would be a good backup plan, but as I thought about the logistics, I knew I couldn't be the point person for each quarantined student and still teach effectively to the whole group that was in the room, especially if there were more than one student out at the time. What to do? Let the students take the lead. I created "Skype Buddies." Quarantined students would contact a fellow student in class who wasn't in quarantine and they would Skype with each other during class. The student in the room would be the eyes and ears for the one in quarantine...turning the camera as needed, using the chat to communicate, relaying questions to the class on behalf of the quarantined student, etc. It seemed like a solid plan that took into consideration both faculty sanity and student learning.

We had to submit our plan in writing only to the provost, but I figured it wasn't much of a plan if I didn't have the groundwork set in place. I implemented it in all of my classes and let the Dream Team know what I was doing so they could submit the same H1N1 Plan for the classes in which they had practicum students. Students were put in random groups of 5 or 6 (making sure, where possible, at least 1 Skype expert was in each group). I gave class time for them to create accounts if they didn't already have one, exchange Skype names, and try out the software to make sure they knew how to use mute, chat, etc. And then we waited. And H1N1 never showed its face on our campus.

A few weeks after that, I received an email from a student whose aunt had passed away. He needed to be in Connecticut for the funeral. He was riding down a day before the funeral with his parents and would miss my class. Would it be possible for him to use a Skype Buddy and participate in class since our class time didn't conflict with any of the services for his aunt. "Why not?" I thought. And so he participated, and it was a nice pilot to prove that the plan would work in the case of a pandemic. Later that semester, a student had to take his roommate to the emergency room and so he Skyped into class from the ER waiting room. An older woman in the waiting room with him was curious what he was doing and soon she joined our class

as well. Skype Buddies went from a plan on paper to an actual working concept to meet the needs of students.

For 20 semesters since then, I've invested the time at the beginning of the semester to put a similar plan in place. I now call it Backup Buddies, as Skype is less popular; newer technologies are in common use now and offer more features than Skype. Each group of Backup Buddies picks a technology that they're comfortable with and exchanges contact information for that technology. One semester, I had five teams in one class and each group was using a different technology. But the concept remains the same. I've never had an individual student abuse the privilege, but many a commuter student has appreciated it when a tree fell across their driveway and they couldn't get to class or they had a child sick at home from school and no daycare options. It's been helpful for a student on crutches to save a painful trip across campus, and for a student who was selected to give a presentation at a national conference and was out of state, but not participating in the conference during class time. And the bonus (for the return trip of the U-turn) is that many students said they never would've met some of the other students in my class had they not been put into that random group at the beginning of the semester. I imagine most faculty never had to implement their H1N1 plan and many probably hardly remember having one. But I was fortunate enough to find a solution to that "brief digression that temporarily sidetracked" my plans that then "evolved" into meaningful changes and improvements in my teaching.

In the secondary education program, we run our practicum experience a little differently than most. Middle schools and high schools typically run a block schedule, so instead of having all 8 classes for 40 minutes a day, students have 4 classes for 80 minutes one day, the other 4 the next day, and they alternate days. If we implemented our practicum like a class on a college schedule, for example, Tuesday and Thursday from 8:00-10:20, the pre-service teacher would experience, at best, a hodgepodge of high school or middle school classes, and barely get to know any students, as it might be several weeks before they would see the same group again. Because we require practicum students to take nearly a full load of classes in the same semester, all taught by the Dream Team, we can play around with the schedule. And so we double up on the campus class time for three weeks and then don't have campus classes for three weeks. During the second period of three weeks, the students can be full-time in their

mentor teacher's classroom, getting to know the students, finding out which shoes are really uncomfortable after a full day of teaching, figuring out what to do when there's a fire drill in the middle of a lesson you're teaching, using prep periods to work with their mentor on designing a lesson...the pre-service teachers describe it as "student teaching with training wheels." Because we had two "blocks" of students in practicum, we could flip which ones were in the field and which ones were in classes on campus. It is an example of "sensing and seizing" an opportunity that was made by some giants who came before me...a creative solution that benefits everyone involved.

Another unexpected digression in my teaching career was when UMF was forced to change its spring semester calendar to align with the other UMaine System campuses, instead of with the local K-12 schools, where so many of our pre-service teachers carried out their practica, field placements, and student teaching. The university spring break no longer aligned with the public school spring break. This meant, according to the current practicum schedule, that one section of secondary education practicum students didn't have a place to be for one week and thus were going to lose a week of field experience. The Dream Team actually considered forgoing the three weeks on- and three weeks off- schedule in their brainstorming of solutions to this problem. But we kept brainstorming. A feature of secondary education practicum's schedule was that we had worked out a schedule that kept both blocks on campus for the first two weeks while the field supervisor secured good placements. We built on that and created a new experience in the middle of the semester that would have both blocks on campus sharing research with each other in a mock professional conference setting. We then did some tricky rearranging of the flip/flop schedule so that both blocks had an equal number of days in the field. There were additional U-turn bonuses to this unique solution; it turned out to be such a great addition to the practicum experience that we then tweaked the fall semester schedule to create a similar experience for those practicum students, even though no university calendar changes had been made to require it. When you create a great improvement you implement it every chance you get.

As I reflect on my teaching adventure to date, it is now 2021. To say that the last year's journey has been "interesting" is an understatement. It not only involved the biggest U-turn ever, but there have been hairpin turns, washed out bridges, and road closures on top of that. We were notified on a Wednesday afternoon that the

next two days would be our last to see our students in person and we would “go remote” 10 days later (with our “spring break” in between). I was really fortunate that each of my classes had already built a strong sense of community and were familiar with all the technology they would need (my classes already use a lot of technology and oddly enough, that semester, we had used Zoom at least once in each class). The final six weeks of the semester, we continued our synchronous classes using Zoom, and I required students to individually check in with me using Zoom as well. I spent as much time checking on student wellness as I did giving feedback on course work, and often we ended up doing both in a single Zoom session. I gave very little written feedback, but instead had individual conversations with students about their work. It was the first of several bonuses to the big U-turn. We all made it through the semester and there was much rejoicing at the end.

Next, I had to focus on the fall semester. How could I teach completely online with a group of students that didn’t know the technology I was using and hadn’t built a sense of community? Fortunately, I had the summer to figure it out. I created an “achievement log”—a Google spreadsheet with a tab for every rubric we would use during the semester. Each student had their own achievement log, electronically shared in such a way that only the two of us could see it, and only I could edit it (but they could comment)—it was a personalized grade book in a sense. I added to my syllabus that all feedback would be given in one-to-one conversations over Zoom, and it was the student’s responsibility to sign up for times to see me. I used the appointment feature in Google Calendar to set up the times I was available for one-to-one conversations, and I reminded students each week when something was due that they needed to set up a time to meet with me about it. The first appointment was me demonstrating how the achievement log would work for both of us, as well as practicing Zoom techniques they would need in order to feel comfortable in our sessions. This process surpassed any type of feedback I’d ever given...it became a conversation. Students could give insights that hadn’t been captured in the project, and we’d decide how to incorporate them into the project to make it stronger. I could give feedback and find out immediately if it was interpreted the way I meant, instead of having an email exchange over several days struggling to figure out the miscommunication. And in the process (my U-turn bonus), I learned so much more about my students—whose dad was having chemo and that the student was the only family member who could drive; whose parent had to change shifts in order to keep

their job and my student was now the caretaker after school for two younger brothers; whose job now required 30 hours a week instead of 10 in order to stay employed and to help pay rent because mom had lost her job.

When you ask a teacher, “What do you do?”, listen carefully to the answer. There’s a difference between “I teach math to third graders” and “I teach third graders math.” In good teaching, the students come first. In my new feedback process, students definitely came first in an authentic way that I hadn’t ever achieved before. A good teacher is a lifelong learner, and I was learning in the pandemic.

To build community, I knew it wouldn’t be enough to do one or two ice breakers at the beginning of the semester. These students were going to miss out on the opportunities before and after class to get to know each other, to walk down the hall together chatting about things besides my course content. I had decided it was a worthwhile investment of time to dedicate 5 minutes once a week to a community-building exercise, though I couldn’t imagine coming up with one icebreaker a week for 15 weeks, or doing that every week across the entire semester without the exercise starting to feel contrived and corny. Then it dawned on me to let the students lead them. I establish teams in my classes anyway, so I put teams in charge of each week’s community builder. Sometimes we went over the 5 minutes, but it always seemed worth it. Every voice was heard, we got to know something about everyone, and the conversations in the chat window felt like conversations we would have in person and got the chat warmed up for class discussions. The more interesting the community builder, it seemed, the better the conversations were that day in class.

For the spring semester, I kept both the one-to-one feedback and the team-led community builders. I tweaked my processes a little to make them more efficient, but the heart stayed the same. Both of those “seize the moment” responses to the big U-turn made a big difference in my teaching, and I’m pretty certain in my students’ learning also. I call them “the silver lining in a COVID Cloud.” In fall 2021, we will go back to face-to-face teaching and I can’t wait. But I will be bringing one-to-one feedback and community builders led by students with me from my virtual teaching experience into my physical classroom.

Geraniums are a hardy plant. They come in a rainbow of colors and they are drought-tolerant. I love that even the leaves of the geranium plant are fragrant. I hope that in all my years of teaching, I've been a geranium—vibrant and hardy. I know I've survived several droughts, including two and a half semesters of remote teaching and learning during a global pandemic. I hope I've helped students become drought-tolerant as well. The idea of the geranium going all out—of having both bloom and leaf being fragrant--appeals to me. I believe I've brought all of me to the table in my teaching. I hope I never let the geranium on the windowsill die, which would keep me out of Albert Cullum's conundrum. But I believe the anti-mantra of the book inspired me to be the best possible teacher I can be in every teachable moment.

Professor Theresa Overall taught in K-12 settings and was a leader in the use of technology in the classroom for 21 years before pursuing graduate degrees in educational technology. She came to UMF "just for one semester" as a visiting professor from Texas but fell in love with UMF, the fabulous students and colleagues, the Farmington community, and the State of Maine; she's been here ever since.

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On Permission

Aaron Wyanski

I was adamant that I never wanted to teach. The idea once repulsed me. I wanted to make art, not talk about it. With the impetuosity of youth, I yearned to make my mark on the world, and with my white male privilege, I felt destined for greatness. But, like many other musicians, my career as an educator began for simple reasons: someone offered me money to teach them to play the piano, and, since I was broke, I agreed.

My qualifications boiled down to the fact that I could operate a piano myself. I had zero experience teaching. I hadn't taken any classes dealing with education, I was never trained on best practices, I was never observed and given feedback. Instead, I was placed in a small room with a piano and a student. The student was supposed to leave the room "better" at music than when they walked in. This was the extent of my job description.

I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. And my ignorance was compounded by my unusual path to the piano, an instrument I did not start playing until the venerable age of eighteen years old, when I was already pursuing a degree in music. I had no business deciding to become a professional pianist at that age, and I wouldn't have done so if I hadn't been surrounded by exceptional teachers, teachers willing to meet me at my level, affirm my identity, and give me the benefit of their experience with generosity. In short: they gave me permission. We start teaching by modeling those who taught us, which I continue to do, and I'm fortunate to have had some wonderful models. But by starting piano so late, and because I became so serious so quickly, there was no translating the content of my own first lessons to my students, who mainly consisted of children, many of which didn't exactly want to be there in the first place.

At first it was about surviving each lesson. Just get through it. Run out the clock if necessary. I was working for a community music school, so I had nothing to do with booking the lessons, and had no control over who came into my teaching studio. But one by one they came, sat on the bench for their allotted time, and then were released back into the wild. There wasn't much thought given to pedagogy. I

didn't even know what the word pedagogy meant. I grabbed the closest beginner piano method book and did whatever it said to do, dragging my students through each piece.

A few years went by. Teaching became my main source of income, and I viewed that as a necessary compromise, something to endure on the way to better things. I certainly didn't identify as an educator, though I was by no means apathetic to my students. I wanted them to succeed, and I was even starting to develop something approaching a teaching style. Around this time, I began to notice a discernable gap between two broad groups of my students: those who could play, and those who couldn't. As the pedagogue Abby Whiteside put it while assessing her own early teaching methods with frustration, my students either "played or didn't play, and that was that. The talented ones progressed, the others didn't – and I could do nothing about it."¹ This distressed me. Wasn't it my job to take someone who couldn't play and get them to play? Was I really willing to write off such a large percentage of my students?

Then a young, shy student with floppy brown hair came in for his first lesson. He was especially quiet. Every time he played a wrong note, he exhaled audibly, crossed his arms, and squeezed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He would then completely shut down and remain unresponsive to all my attempts to keep the lesson going. I tried everything I could think of to get him to try again, but once that mistake was made, he retreated, and I couldn't get him out of his shell. This kept recurring week after week.

One day I opted for a radically different approach: What if it didn't matter if he played in a lesson at all? We spent the next several lessons just talking, at first about nothing in particular. I asked about his day, he complained about school, I told bad jokes, sometimes he'd laugh. He was more open and engaged than he had been with me ever before. I began to slowly introduce the same musical material we had been stuck on, but now when he played wrong notes—because he felt safe enough to not have to be perfect—he could learn from those mistakes. He began improving rapidly. I continued putting our teacher-student bond first and the material second. Inside jokes ensued. I made up a jingle, playing on his name, to the tune of Hooray for Hollywood, and greeted him with it every week. He would roll his eyes, but always reminded me if I forgot to sing it. We built trust. We created a safe space together.

¹ Whiteside, Abby. *Indispensables of Piano Playing*. New York: Scribner, 1955.

Years went by and eventually this student, the same student who was once part of the “cannot play” category, auditioned and was accepted into a prestigious performing arts high school. I owe my career to this student and what he taught me: How we teach is more valuable than what we teach. All can play. Meet the student wherever they are. Your relationship to the student becomes a model for the student to create relationships with the material. When you address their needs, they start to see how to attend to the needs of the material.

As a music teacher, I’m lucky to maintain close contact with the basic, primal, mechanics of learning directly. The physicality of learning an instrument connects us to some of our first learning experiences as human beings: coordinating ourselves with our desired outcomes. When someone comes into a lesson and I place a new piece of music in front of them that they cannot play, how do we get them to play it? Simple. By playing the piece. You learn to play the piece by playing the piece. It’s simple, and contradictory, and beautiful. It’s everything I love most about life. It’s not in any way glamorous, though. If you’ll allow me to rephrase: You learn to play the piece by failing to play the piece. There is no substitute for this. Think about learning to walk or speak. Failure and success are not opposing outcomes. They are both the process. And process is the point.

I don’t want to paint a naïve picture either. There are in some cases severe limitations. It’s a privilege to be able-bodied, for example. But in my experience, this process is still the best approach for students facing their own overwhelming challenges. I had a student who could not use their left-hand thumb who played the classical repertoire with as much conviction and virtuosity as any of my other students. This student had repeatedly been told by potential teachers that it wasn’t worth their time to take lessons. Such is the power of permission.

Anyone who isn’t failing regularly isn’t learning, but people need to feel safe in order to fail. It’s not always comfortable, but I think it’s essential that my students be able to witness me failing from time to time. And I believe that as educators, we should strive to find new ways to reward process over product. This is more straightforward in the one-to-one environment of the music lesson, but it is the same skill set I employ in my classroom. There is a collective relationship among everyone in the room, there is a general relationship between myself and the students as a whole, and then there are the individual relationships I have with each student. When it goes well, you can feel the air in the room change. Everyone is contributing to an environment that gives everyone permission to be the best version of themselves. I

can't think of a more worthwhile pursuit. It took me a while to come to terms with my love of being an educator, but the big shift was when I started to understand just how much creativity is required in this profession. Teaching isn't separate from great art. Teaching is great art.

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Adventures in Ungrading

Anne Marie Wolf

A Facebook message from my friend Jenna said, “I’m thinking about trying this. Want to do it together?” It came with a link to an article in a teaching publication about something called “ungrading.” A fearless and innovative teacher herself, Jenna knows that I am open to trying lots of new things in my teaching. Over the past few years, this has included several simulation games from the Reacting to the Past pedagogy, which has generated Facebook posts like “Tomorrow is trial day, and I really hope the Socratics get it together to defend their man because his enemies are preparing well. They’ve been meeting and emailing me with questions” or “Today in the plague game it was another dice roll day, and two people died, and I’m making them research medieval beliefs about ghosts and come back and haunt the room now.” Jenna has always followed these developments with amusement and interest. But what she was proposing seemed an even bigger reach than converting your classroom into the Athenian *pnux* or the town council in a medieval English town. No grading? Really? How?

Grading is probably most professors’ least favorite part of teaching. Increasingly, I simply dreaded the process of having to decide on points for every single written exam answer, quibble with myself at midnight over whether a paper should receive a B- or a C+, design elaborate ways to divide up the course grade into weighted percentages for different components, or watch students take their returned paper, look at the grade, and not read any of the comments. It seemed like it cheapened our endeavor of learning together and habituated them to seek external validation rather than growth in their skills and knowledge. Could we not just read about interesting things together and explore them? Why clutter up the process with all these points and grades and weighted percentages? As UMF’s Fulbright program adviser, I have worked with students to hone the essays for their Fulbright applications, and have relished the process of offering feedback and suggestions without the burden of determining a grade. Could reading work assigned for classes be more like that?

Despite my misgivings and frustrations, I had gamely carried on grading, since I had the impression that it was needed for student learning. I saw it as a sacrifice I made for the benefit of students and the wider public good. But the article Jenna sent, and several others my google searching turned up, made me rethink that. Neurological

research shows that the brain does not learn as well when a person is under stress – any kind of stress, including worrying about grades. Psychological research points to the benefits of nurturing curiosity and encouraging students to pursue interests they develop and projects that are meaningful for them. Crucially, the experience of other professors in a wide range of disciplines and institutions showed that when released from the pressure of grades, students did not, as I had feared, get lazy and produce lower quality work. On the contrary, these colleagues reported that students were more adventuresome in their work, more willing to tackle a difficult question or to make a more challenging argument, because they were less worried about failing at it.

With ungrading, students still do assignments, and they still receive feedback from the professor. At the end of the semester, they even receive a course grade, since universities still require that sort of thing. But individual assignments are not graded, and the course grade is based on the work they put in and the learning that took place, with more of an emphasis on sustained engagement with the learning process than the final result.

Another common feature is that students themselves need to describe the work they did and the learning that resulted and propose a grade for themselves. Most professors using ungrading reserve the right to override a grade a student proposes, but they consistently report that the need to do that is rare because, almost always, students arrive at the same assessment the professors themselves would have. The benefits of students self-assessing are the gain in self-awareness, a heightened awareness of their own learning (which itself motivates learning), and the encouragement to take responsibility for actions they themselves took to foster their learning. At the end of the semester now, my students submit a somewhat involved (multi-part) final reflection on the semester, in which one of the things they must do is propose a grade, and then during finals week I have individual meetings with them to discuss those papers. Mostly I agree with the grades they propose, and we discuss their learning and their plans to continue to foster it. A handful of times (so far) I have overridden a proposed grade, usually for women who were not giving themselves enough credit for their impressive work.

As I pondered during that winter break after Jenna's Facebook message, and read more about ungrading, I decided I would adopt the concept, but modify some of the methods I was learning about. I wanted to encourage students to design their own projects around their interests, but not to require this of everyone, because I thought some would struggle with just the common readings and assignments, and would be

best served by focusing on those. And I wanted to include a research component in all my classes, but not commit us to the time it takes to do multiple assignments scaffolding toward a semester-long research paper. Plus I wanted the research to be fun and to become a habit, rather than having to worry about finding “enough” on a topic or developing a worthwhile argument to present. I decided that at the end of the day, what I wanted to foster was a habit of doing more research in order to learn more when something strikes you as interesting or suspicious. Citizens in a democracy need to feel like the normal thing to do when you would like to learn more about something is to go learn it – and to have the habit and tools for doing that. I also wanted students to choose an academic goal to work on in a specific way over the course of the semester, and to hold themselves accountable for it. In addition, I suspected that if my students were left to propose their own grades without even basic guidance, it would cause more of that anxiety I was trying to minimize. On the other hand, I did not want them obsessing over meeting criteria for different letter grade levels, either, as I imagined would happen if I spelled out specific criteria for different letter grades.

The result of my musing was implemented in all three classes in the spring of 2020, with minor variations between classes. At the heart of the system was the “B list” – a list of things they had to do at either a “good faith” level of engagement (attendance and participation, daily readings done and informal writing on them submitted ahead of class, etc.) and papers that needed to be handed in and deemed “accepted” by me (as opposed to “revise and resubmit”). At the beginning of the semester, they wrote a 2-page “starting point paper” in which they stated what academic goal they chose to work on specifically and discussed some questions and intellectual interests they had related to the course. The B list included making progress on the academic goal they set, as well as maintaining a habit of reading they would do on their own about things that might come up in class that they found interesting, which I called “hobby research.” They did not write a formal research paper using it, and they were free to follow one area of intense interest the whole semester or to wander into multiple areas over the semester as they followed emerging interests, as long as they engaged in the process of wondering, questioning, and searching out answers using credible and useful sources. Periodic reflection papers gave them the opportunity to report back on their learning, efforts, and progress, and gave me a window into how all of this was working. Pre-COVID, I also had individual meetings with them to discuss their plans and progress. I explained that if,

at the end of the semester, they met all the criteria on the B list, they should propose a grade of B.

I started the semester in January 2020 excited about the plans I had made. (Cue laugh track here.) Since they could revise papers until they were accepted, there was no danger of a low grade on an early paper dooming their prospects for the semester, and there were lots of incentives to attend to my feedback and suggestions, so I no longer felt like time spent on comments was too often wasted. Since the stronger students also had to set learning goals for themselves and show progress, they could not coast, content that if they simply handed in their normal work, they would get a high grade. They had to push themselves, too. And everyone had to develop the habit of becoming curious about something and seeking more information on it, just for pure interest and enjoyment.

The coup de grace was that for a grade higher than a B, students could propose a project for which they did additional work to learn more about the class material. They had to produce something from that learning, and that product would be assessed solely on a “good faith effort” standard. If it were a small project requiring little time and effort, it could raise the final course grade to a B+, higher if it were more involved. I encouraged them to be creative in the product they chose to create. If they had always wanted to learn how to create a website, for instance, this was their chance. As long as they worked on it in good faith, the project would bump up their grade. What I loved about this was that the students who strive to earn an A, for whom that usually means pleasing a professor and jumping through whatever hoops that professor had laid out, now had to plan something of their own and think seriously about what they wanted to learn. They had to do more than be conscientious in completing work someone else assigned and designed.

I tried not to seem as nervous as I was when I explained all this during that first class in January. But I could tell students were wary. So we have no tests or quizzes? How will we know how we’re doing? Do we have to get our hobby research sources approved by you first? What kind of projects are you thinking of? What kinds of academic goals can we set? Can you give us some examples? Their questions stretched beyond just that first day, but eventually they settled into a willingness to try it out. But I knew I was onto something by the very nature of the questions, variations on a theme of “what does the professor want?”

Over the course of the semester, which included moving online rapidly in mid-March due to COVID, my fears eased. No, they weren’t any less likely to do the

readings. The quality of their formal papers was about the same as usual. Over half had to revise them to get them to the “OK, this is now done” level, some more than once. I had not a single office hours conversation about what grade someone had and how to improve it, but several about books and authors they had been reading or might want to read for their hobby reading, and others about the projects they were doing to earn a grade higher than a B. One student, a computer science major and music aficionado, devised a website on music promoted by fascist regimes, his first experience designing a website. Two students, one creative writing major and one education major, wrote short stories. One of them was historical fiction set in the time of the expedition of Hernán Cortés. It showed quite a bit of research (with discursive footnotes to prove it). And in the final conferences with students that semester, several of them mentioned that they wanted to keep working on their project after the semester was over. I counted this as a win and decided to continue using an ungrading system, and I made tweaks over the next two semesters.

Some changes were due to the lessening of my nervousness about the whole endeavor. At first, I had students handing in reflection papers every two or three weeks and scheduling in-person conferences with me after most of those – all in addition to that final, cumulative reflection due in lieu of a final exam. Looking back, I know I was thinking that this way, if something went wrong and wasn’t working, I would catch it soon enough to do something about it. This past semester, a student who had been in one of my classes that first time noted in her final reflection paper that she thought it worked better to have fewer check-ins this time around (two after that initial brief paper at the beginning of the semester) because it felt less like she was constantly reporting to me.

In deference to the move to a totally online format and to the general taxing of everyone’s energies during the ongoing pandemic, this semester I dropped the hobby reading requirement for everyone. Interestingly, some students I had had before didn’t seem to notice that change and kept doing it anyway. So much the better. I am not sure dropping it was the right thing to do. I place a premium on developing the habit of having questions and seeking answers to them. But the classes all had other demands that were substantive, ones everyone in the class was required to do, and I thought it might be best to take one thing off the plate to allow them to focus on our common endeavors. I expect to bring back the hobby reading, or perhaps suggest that as a project they can choose for a grade higher than a B.

Now three semesters into this ungrading adventure, I am planning to continue it. Not all students love it. For some, I have discovered, the system actually increases their stress. One first-year student reported, “College in general so far has worsened my grade anxiety just because I cannot see my updated grades whenever I want. Standard grades, while they can cause some problems, work for me as a number to keep me on track and without them, I tend to get distracted and just hope I am doing well enough to pass. I don’t like the idea of not knowing exactly how I am doing at all times.”² Another explained, “For me it made things more stressful because the only way I could feel comfortable finishing any assignment was if I put everything I had into it at all times. It made learning more of a chore at times. Whereas in a regular grading system if I was busy that week and needed to cut a corner on a summary of a text I feel as though I could. With ungrading I could not. I feel as though I always needed to improve, never stopping, always improving. I do enjoy learning and this class did nothing to take that away, but I feel this system of grading made this at times the most exhausting class.” On the other hand, a student who chose not to do the optional project to earn a grade higher than a B wrote, “I found that I cared somewhat less about what I was doing when I didn’t need to shoot for an A.” He specifically mentioned grammar as something he let slide, since it didn’t seem to matter as much for the grade.

These students’ experiences are not causing me to retreat from using this system, but they do make me wonder what I can do to help students notice their own contributions to their anxiety levels and strategize with them to address that. Why do you need to constantly keep track of grades and “just hope” you’re doing well enough? Why not trust the professor’s assurances that if she saw evidence of work not done in good faith, she would tell you in the feedback? It almost seems like there is a resistance to relaxing.. Why did you add to your stress by letting yourself feel that nothing you ever did was good enough? Those are choices that lie within a student’s realm of action, something they seem not to realize. And can you care about the quality of your writing even when there is no potential A awaiting you? (And if not, what motivation will you bring to writing that you do as a professional after college?) For some, a little openness to something new, and a little time, might be all that is needed. One student explained, “The ungrading system created a lot of anxiety for me at the beginning. I do not think I have yet entered a class with another purpose than to learn to my maximum ability, but I have always used grades also to reflect that

² All student quotes used with permission.

accomplishment of learning as much as possible. Getting an A essentially meant that I had reached a level of satisfaction in my learning, it was a mirror of my effort and dedication. Nonetheless, not having that grading system to guarantee that my efforts were being successful was very conflicting at first. As time went by, I began trusting it more and more, and began realizing that this system is all about measuring oneself, to pace your own work and your progress, as a learning experience approved by you, not by anyone else.”

More common were those who took to this new system readily and praised it. Their final reflection papers include such points as:

“Although it is important to me to come out with a good grade, this class has given me less stress on if I am passing or not, and it lets me focus on just learning material and incorporating them into class discussions. ... Overall, this class has given me more motivation for classwork because I wasn’t stressed about what my calculated grade was.”

“I honestly think with the ungraded system in place I was able to learn so much more than I would have regularly. I was able to approach each assignment for what it was, a chance to learn more, and not be constantly worried about putting the wrong answer down or not fully understanding because as long as I tried I would be okay. ... I found that I was actually putting in a bit more effort than I typically would with my assignments.”

“So, if for example, I was only able to find one main point for a chapter, I didn’t feel like I had to make up another point or force another point in order to get a certain number of points in order to get the grade. I’m not sure if that totally makes sense but I feel like there is less making stuff up just to get a required number of points to get a grade.”

“If there was an aspect of ungrading I would take to other classes, it would be the way it allows for more opportunities to get feedback.”

“Un-grading makes the experience of being in a class much better, even if it’s somewhat less cut and dry than a more traditional class experience.”

I have enough answers now to the questions that ran through my head in those initial weeks after Jenna’s Facebook message to know that I want to continue with this adventure. Is it really possible to conduct a class without grading things? Yes. Do

students learn less? Not really. Most seem to learn more. Can we just read interesting things together and explore them and not clutter things up? Definitely.

As always, I probably will never have answers to the long-term and most important questions: Will this lead to more curious and independent thinkers twenty years down the road? Will they be more confident in their ability to learn things on their own? Will their intrinsic motivation increase? Will they adjust more readily to their post-college jobs, when they won't have grades on every little thing they do? Will they come to have greater respect for themselves and for the dignity of inquiry and pondering things? Will they be less reliant on others' approval and pats on the back? I don't know, but I suspect so.

At UMF since 2010, Anne Marie Wolf is a professor of history whose specialty and publications are in medieval Iberia and Christian-Muslim relations. She has been a Fulbright ambassador and National Endowment for Humanities summer fellow and tries to spend as much time in Spain as possible.

Fostering Creativity and Literacy, One Opportunity at a Time

Kathryn Will and Laurie MacWhinnie

One of the most beautiful pieces of being at UMF is the creation of synergistic magic. Though assigned responsibilities frame our work for the institution, it is often the small moments that happen in passing, both on campus and off, that lead to the most impactful opportunities in the campus community. Faculty and staff work closely together in their different roles in student support. The small size of the campus allows for flexibility in the ways in which this manifests.

In 2012, Laurie took her first week-long Summer Book Arts class at the University of Southern Maine. Book Arts is more than making books. While it includes both the physical structure of the book and the conceptual design of the content, it also encompasses a wide range of artistic processes, such as creative writing, image creation, printing, lettering, and paper making. It is both the process of making a book and the creation of art in book form. Although Laurie's art experience at the time was limited, she was interested in learning more about the creative side of making books. It was an exhausting, but inspiring, seven days packed with lettering techniques, silk screen printing, creating paste papers and making books. She enjoyed the class so much, she took it each summer for the next four years.

Laurie's experience led her to create a series of Book Arts workshops for Gold Leaf senior college, an organization devoted to lifelong learning. In the Fall of 2014 at a staff orientation, Laurie met a new Early Childhood Education faculty member, Char Moffit. The conversation began on the topic of assigned courses, but quickly turned to authors, illustrators and favorite children's books--a passion for both of them. As they shared thoughts on storylines, artwork and unique book forms, Laurie mentioned one of her favorite children's books--Emily Gravett's *The Rabbit Problem*, a picture book in a calendar format with pop-ups--and her interest in book arts. Coming out of that conversation, Laurie created a basic book-making session and they tested it out in two literacy classes during the Spring semester.

In the first iteration, Laurie covered what book artist Erin Sweeney (who taught in Book Arts Summer 2012) calls "one sheet wonders" – simple books made from a

single piece of paper. The goal was to teach UMF students aspiring to be elementary educators some techniques they could use as a literacy-related activity in their own classrooms. Through examination of models for creative inspiration, the students engaged in the creation of eight book formats, and two types of book covers, in the 90-minute session. The students were then tasked with making a children's book to share with the class. The students were encouraged to give some thought to content and to pair their story concept with one of the book formats they had practiced. The students enjoyed the workshop and many were excited by the idea of using book arts in their own practice of teaching. Some students made alphabet books, or books with pictures and corresponding words. Others created story books using simple sentences accompanying photos of a family pet. A few special education majors made books with multiple textures, using materials available from Everyone's Resource Depot. Some of the truly inspired students put their artistic talents into elaborate drawings or collage pictures for one-of-a-kind story books.

When Kathryn joined the faculty in the Fall of 2016 as an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education, Laurie extended an invitation to work together. During the first semester, the library session addressing the use of library resources remained essentially the same as Laurie had done in the past with the K-3 literacy class. Students learned how to find and request children's books from Mantor Library, the Spenciner Center, and other libraries throughout Maine, and how to find reviews and curriculum-related resources in NoveList K-8. Kathryn was interested in the book arts project, but they did not implement it until the Fall of 2017.

In that first semester of book arts collaboration, the students participated in the One Sheet Wonders workshop, and were tasked with creating a book of their choosing without restrictions or constraints on their project. It was beneficial for the students, because they were able to immerse themselves in the various formats, and to consider the application of what they had learned in the course about the essential components of children's picture books. As part of the debrief in the subsequent class when they shared their work, they discussed the ways in which the One Sheet Wonders might be used with children, but there was no element of implementation with children in this first iteration.

In the Fall of 2018, Kathryn started a literacy clinic in the afterschool program at a nearby elementary school, where the students enrolled in the Early Childhood

section of the K-3 literacy course worked one-on-one with a child. In their work with the children, they sought to learn about their child's literate life--interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Using this information, one of the activities they did was to create a book using a format learned in the One Sheet Wonder workshop for their child. This led to the creation of books that addressed sight words, phonics skills, and letter recognition. Then the Fall of 2019 morphed this project within the Literacy Clinic into a shared activity, where the university students shifted from making a book for a child, to making a book with a child. This change allowed the future educators to move into the mindset of making with children instead of making for the children. This is a really important shift for future educators to experience, as it allows them to be intimately responsive as they move the control of the learning from themselves to the child.

In the Fall of 2018, the section of K-3 Literacy for students majoring in Elementary Education was a little different than the Early Childhood section. They were concurrently enrolled in a field-based class, but the placements were not consistently aligned to the K-3 literacy course. In this iteration, the students were asked to consider how they might create a book as part of a resource set for instruction related to literacy. They identified a skill aligned to a reading standard in the primary grades. They then designed a lesson which included an introductory lesson, the book, and a game they created to facilitate the practice of the skill. At the time, these were hypothetical in nature, but the assignment was evolving to provide deeper, connected learning. The 2018 school year brought an opportunity for the students to volunteer in several primary grade classrooms during their literacy block. The classroom teachers were able to provide sight words the individual children were focusing on, and the future educators created books for the children that provided opportunities for them to practice these sight words. In 2019, Kathryn partnered with a UMF alumni who was teaching in the primary grades. While they did not work directly with the students, the teacher was able to share with our students the results of literacy assessments for each of their students. Our students then were able to create a book and file folder game (as in the previous semester), but with actual students in mind and a targeted skill that would allow their work to be instantly impactful for the children in the development of their literacy skills. In addition to the immediate positive impact on these children, this also provided a powerful way to build connections with alumni of the UMF teacher education program. The alumni

encouraged the University students to reach out if they had questions, invited them to visit their classrooms, and sent thank you notes for their contributions.

With each semester and year, the outcomes of the One Sheet Wonder workshop varied, depending on the evolving opportunities within the community. The project, in all its forms, provided an opportunity for the future teachers to implement what they learned in the workshop, and as Kathryn's connections grew in the local schools and with former students--now alumni, the opportunities also expanded for our current students to authentically experience the use of making books for and with children.

This project also aligns with both the Association of College and Research Librarians' Information Creation as Process frame, the guidelines of the Information Literacy Standards for Teacher Education, and the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards. Students learn that emergent literacy and individualized instruction can be connected through intentional design (book arts) appropriate for an information need. Students are able to choose the communication medium or format that best supports both the learning outcomes and the learning styles of the intended audience.

Diverse representations in the UMF Children's Literature Collection

Through the varied experiences stemming from the One Sheet Wonders workshop, another idea grew and developed that involved the development of the children's literature collection on campus. These ideas were quite disparate in nature, but have become a foundational component of the K-3 literacy course.

As part of the work in the K-3 literacy course, the future educators were required to read 100 books appropriate for K-3 learners. Primarily these were picture books from various genres, with a few chapter books included for consideration for reading aloud. The purpose of this assignment was to provide an immersive experience into children's literature for the future teachers. They were required to read high-quality children's literature, but before they could begin making choices, they needed to learn what to look for in their selections.

As part of this process, the students learned about the characteristics and features of children's literature, its historical development, and the importance of having diverse perspectives represented within a collection. Part of this work entailed

looking at various awards given to books, including the criteria for each award, as well as organizations who issue them. Included in this is the foundational work of Rudine Sims Bishop using windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors as a metaphor for the consideration of diversity. A book can be a window if it allows you to look out into the world, a mirror if you can see yourself reflected in the text, and a sliding glass door if the text allows you to see yourself in another way, place, or position.

Laurie learned about this work in a casual conversation within the course when Kathryn shared moments where the students noticed some diversity gaps in the collection. Laurie and Kathryn talked about what the students noticed and dreamed up the opportunity for the students to make recommendations that would expand the diverse representation of the children's book collection in the library. This had multiple benefits. First, it allowed the students to consider how teachers and librarians might work together in synergistic ways to develop and improve resources. From an instruction librarian's perspective, the assignment aligns with the Information Literacy Standards for Teacher Education by providing students with an opportunity to locate and select information based on its appropriateness both to the specific information need and to the developmental needs of the student. It provides an opportunity for alignment to the ACRL Information Literacy Framework in "Searching as Strategic Exploration" by demonstrating to students the value of seeking guidance from an expert (a librarian) when identifying and evaluating children's literature to recommend for the library collection. It also falls within the Information Literacy Standards for Teacher Education (Standard Two), which require that learners locate information based on its appropriateness to the specific need and the developmental needs of the student, and by assessing the quality and relevance of information found.

For the students each semester, the examination of the current children's literature collection with a survey of new texts forced them to dive deeply into new literature that was not easily accessible on campus. This deepened both their understanding of interlibrary loan resources, and their ways of accessing other means of attaining materials. This was definitely a pragmatic set of skills that they can capitalize on in their future work in education. Finally, it required them to apply the analysis tools they had learned about in our class to make the recommendations.

Once the students collaboratively worked in small groups to develop lists of recommendations, they were shared with Laurie as part of a collection development

initiative focused on building a more robust diverse picture book collection for Mantor Library. Laurie reviewed the titles, consulted with others on the juvenile literature collection development team, and decided what would be purchased with the library funds allotted for the project. When all the books had been received, Laurie and Kathryn arranged a photo session so students could spend a little time looking at the books and have a group picture taken with books they recommended. From the Fall of 2017 through the Spring of 2020, 217 children's books were added to the collection. Many times throughout the semesters, students commented on how empowering it was to know their work positively influenced the diversity of the collection on campus.

Each semester, the students were also given a copy of a brochure prepared by Laurie listing all of the titles chosen by the class, which they could add to their portfolio. The brochure was also added to the library's online Diversity Picture Books library guide (<https://umf.maine.libguides.com/diversitybooks>). The guide serves as a resource for students taking early childhood and elementary education literacy classes, and provides a range of diverse picture book suggestions, tips for evaluating multicultural literature, and links to other children's book lists and diverse publishers.

This series of interconnected assignments provides UMF students with the opportunity to develop evaluation skills they can draw on to choose the best literature for their classroom, as well as the experience of working collaboratively with a librarian, and to practice connecting creativity and the art of making books with developing literacy skills. Our goal is to provide UMF students with a foundation for implementing their own creative approach to teaching as well as an understanding of methods to develop their own learning communities and reflective practices as professional educators. Opportunities such as these collaborations between faculty and librarians that benefit our students are just one of the ways UMF is a wonderful place to be.

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Choose Your Own Adventure

Luann Yetter

In my first-year classroom, students tell me what we're going to read.

A few years ago I found myself in front of a classroom of first-year writing students who expected me to lead a discussion on the popular war memoir *American Sniper*. For any liberal pacifist like myself, this was a bad dream. But I had no one to blame for this situation but myself.

American Sniper had become part of our lesson plan as a result of a teaching strategy I call "choose your own adventure," wherein I let the students choose the book we read. In our required first-year writing classes, each instructor chooses a theme for their section; that way, students have the ability to browse through the offerings and pick a topic they find interesting. Of course the students learn a lot about the topic throughout the semester, but most importantly, the theme serves as a vehicle for the writing assignments. The theme is something of a hook; our main goal in these first-year classes is to help students improve their academic writing skills.

When I first got the chance to choose a theme, I enthusiastically created a class around the lyrics of Bob Dylan. After I had taught Dylan for a few semesters, students encouraged me to add the Beatles, and after a while that class morphed into one about the 1960s. The courses were initially very popular, but through the years I noticed student interest declining. Exposed to the genre by their parents, most of my early students had come to class with a healthy understanding of 1960s classic rock and an eagerness to learn more. But in later years that knowledge and enthusiasm were waning. If they knew about the great musicians of the sixties it was more often through their grandparents. A lot of my students, born in the 2000s, had never heard of Bob Dylan.

It was time for a change. But what topic could I embrace that would also resonate with them?

My first breakthrough in creating my new curriculum was when I decided to plan my class not around a topic, but a book. Students don't read books like they used to, yet I had found when I introduced the right book into the classroom, encouraged them with lots of informal writing assignments and provided plenty of

time for discussion, many nonreaders ended up loving the book. This was what I wanted for my students, to help them fall in love with a book. But which one?

A first-year writing class is not a literature class, though some are based on literature. And I have no special obligation to introduce my students to great literary works. Along with the occasional Creative Writing or English major, the students are Environmental Science majors, Early Childhood majors, Computer Science majors, and students who plan to spend their first year figuring out their major. My goal was to find a book they would all like. Then it dawned on me: why not ask them?

I love the idea of giving students choices. But letting each student pick their own book would be unwieldy. It would be hard for me to keep up with each of their choices and with sixteen different books, certainly wouldn't lend itself well to class discussions. So instead, they could work together to choose a single book. That process in itself, I thought, could be a bonding experience.

And so I embarked on my new ENG 100 theme. I called it "Choose Your Own Adventure" after a book series my own son had loved when he was young. At the beginning of the semester I gave them a list of questions like "What's your all-time favorite book?" "What book have you always wanted to read but haven't?" and the one that turned out to be the most influential, "What book would you like to read because you have seen the movie?" The students filled out the questionnaire and then met in small groups to compare notes: to see if they mentioned any of the same titles, to see if someone else's choices gave them new ideas or if they had read or heard of the other books mentioned. So there we were on the first day, with groups of students who didn't know each other having productive conversations about books. I liked my new approach already.

Thus we created a long list of books, and then over the next couple of weeks we continued to talk about them and research them. We took a series of votes to narrow the choices, until we had whittled the possibilities down to three. Meanwhile, I assigned a few short preliminary readings, among them an essay by Mortimer Adler called "How to Mark a Book" and an excerpt from Malcolm X's autobiography on how he improved his reading and writing skills in prison.

I still remember the short list of titles students came up with that first time. There was *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a true story about wisdom and death that I was eager to read. *The Great Gatsby*, one of my favorite novels, had its champions as well. Having researched and written about the 1920s, I would have much to say about that one.

But this was 2015. The movie *American Sniper* had been released the previous November. It was a huge success: the highest grossing film of 2014 and the highest grossing war film ever. Nearly every one of my sixteen students had seen the movie. And, it turns out, in the final poll, the overwhelming majority of them voted to read the book.

With help from a couple of professional writers, Navy SEAL Chris Kyle wrote a memoir about his experiences in the Iraq War, in the course of which he became the deadliest marksman in U.S. military history. My pacifist self was thinking, “He killed a lot of people, and became a military hero. How am I going to deal with this in class?”

Not very well, as it turned out. After we had read the first few chapters, we had our first class discussion about the book. I began with some neutral questions, but I slowly built up steam and before long I was lecturing my students on the tendency of the American government to wage wars in the self-interest of the military industrial complex...and as you can imagine, the discussion fell apart at that point. I caught them by surprise; I got off track, and I didn’t leave much room for student opinion. After that day I realized I needed to work harder at reining in my political opinions. In the weeks that followed we talked about other aspects of the book: what life was like for Kyle growing up in Texas, the rigors of Navy SEAL training, the challenges faced by Kyle’s wife when he was deployed. We found a lot of common ground when discussing these topics. And as I read further in the book, I was able to admire Kyle’s skill and bravery and to understand that he was doing what he thought was right under unbelievably trying circumstances. In more productive discussions later in the semester, I was able to provide students with a little more context regarding the war. For instance, I was able to dispel the notion (held by many students) that the U.S. had invaded Iraq because Saddam Hussein had been responsible for the 9/11 attack. And in the end we all mourned Kyle’s tragic death at the hands of a combat veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In general, the students liked the book, and they wrote good essays on snipers in the military, cultural differences between Texas and Maine, Kyle’s widow’s life, and more. At the end of the semester I asked them in an anonymous survey if they thought I should let students choose their own book again. The result was a resounding unanimous yes.

That was enough encouragement for me to implement the same plan the next semester, and the following fall I entered my classroom eager to discover what books

my new students had read and would want to read, and which title would ultimately surface as the favorite. When all the lists had been made, all the discussions completed, all the preliminary and final votes taken, the winner was...*American Sniper*. I remember stifling a sigh and telling my students “Well, you’ve made my job easy, because I’ve taught this one before.”

I can’t emphasize enough how much better this semester went. I refrained from political lectures. I provided more background material on Iraq and the war. I found a great article written from the perspective of a sniper fighting with the Syrian opposition. Students liked the book and developed a sensitive, balanced understanding of Kyle, both his strong points and his human shortcomings. They learned something of religious conflicts in the Middle East and the role of the U.S. military in those conflicts. They went from being entertained by the movie *American Sniper* to developing a deeper understanding of it by reading the book and studying its context.

I’ve had the opportunity to use my Choose Your Own Adventure theme a few more times since then. One time students chose Stephen King’s *The Green Mile*, and many of them became intrigued with the history of the electric chair and the ongoing debate over the use of capital punishment. Next was the thriller *You*, which led to much research in the psychology of psychotic killers and many discussions about what not to look for in a romantic partner. This past fall, students chose *Interview with the Vampire*, and we explored the history and evolution of vampire mythology.

I continue to enjoy supervising the process of choosing the book and have even prolonged it, giving the students more opportunities to discuss what they have read and want to read. I’ve added more readings to the beginning of the semester, including excerpts from Helen Hanff’s *Duchess of Bloomsbury Street* on her own self-made education and Patti Smith’s *Devotion*, in which she ponders what compels one to write.

I continue to enjoy my own adventure of going into the semester not knowing what I’m going to teach. Once my students have decided on their book, I’m able to stay a few chapters ahead of them in the reading. But inevitably we begin discussing the book before I’m finished with it. This leads me to enter into a genuine discussion with them about where we think the story will go, our predictions for the characters and our speculations about the ending. I do need to scramble sometimes in order to identify important passages to review in class, prepare good discussion questions and create useful writing prompts, but the spontaneity of this is part of the fun.

Even before I know the book, I have a framework for the semester. No one ever becomes a good writer without first becoming a good reader, so helping students with their reading skills is an integral part of First Year Writing. I want to inspire them to read books on their own, to experience the joy of immersing themselves in a novel or a good piece of creative nonfiction. I want them to understand how the writer manages to tell a story they want to keep reading, and I hope they will become curious enough about the subject matter to head down a few rabbit holes. While we are reading the book, we are constantly writing, since in all my classes I assign an informal written response along with every reading assignment. For these assignments, students write in first person; they write about what they like about the reading, what intrigues them, what readings, films or situations they are reminded of, and, in general, how they relate to the reading personally. I find this prompts them to engage with the reading in all the ways we want them to, and it prepares them to participate in meaningful class discussions.

I also structure a series of formal essays. It is here we work on the academic writing skills they need to succeed in all of their classes. The first formal assignment asks them to analyze the initial readings about reading and writing. The second prompts them to research a subject they have become interested in from reading the book. Generally, they are only a few chapters in when they complete this assignment. But they are far enough along to develop a curiosity about, say, prison conditions in the 1940s if they are reading *The Green Mile*, or the vampire depictions in *Twilight* compared to those in *Interview with a Vampire*. When we're finished with the book, they write a literary analysis. I provide a few prompts for them to choose from in case they haven't gotten an assignment like this before. But I also tell them they are free to come up with their own idea, provided they run it by me first. When it comes to character studies, I've found students will often choose the main character if they can, and often their essays are rather predictable and superficial. So if they choose to do a character study, they have to pick a supporting character, and this prompts them to dig a little deeper.

As we study the book, of course, more and more themes emerge. For instance, in studying *Interview with the Vampire*, we talked a lot about how the main characters were outsiders. What did being alienated from society mean? How did they cope? Another theme that emerged was immortality since vampires may live forever. How did that change their perspective? Was living forever actually a good thing? If immortality shapes a vampire, how does mortality shape us? For the next assignment

I have them step away from the book to explore a theme. I ask them to interview someone about one of the themes we have been talking about. They may not know a sniper or a vampire, but maybe they have a friend who has an interesting story to tell about being an outsider, or maybe they would like to talk to a grandparent about mortality. The interview process helps them develop good questions and hone their listening skills. Students also find it can lead to a good conversation and strengthen bonds.

And finally, only after they have written about what someone else has to say about a theme, I ask them to write what they think about it.

This past semester we had time at the end for students to write their own gothic horror stories inspired by *Interview*. The results were impressive as students explored elements of horror such as werewolves, ghosts and zombies and demonstrated their skills with dialogue and description.

My assignments and feedback are designed to help model what I want students to get out of reading any book. I want them to read it thoughtfully and to be able to discuss it meaningfully with others. I want it to spark their curiosity and send them researching aspects of plot and setting to learn more. I hope they will pull from the book some important themes, think about them and talk about them with others, and maybe the story will even spark their own imaginations and they will invent similar characters and settings for their own amusement. Along with the limited time I have to prepare for the book, especially when it comes to finding and vetting related materials, there are additional drawbacks to this student choice approach. Students aren't likely to choose a classic and challenge their reading skills. However, since this is not a literature class my main goal is not to expose them to great works but to give them something to read so they can write about it. One of these semesters they may choose a young adult or children's novel that is far below college level. This hasn't happened yet, but it may. Harry Potter always comes up as a candidate. However, I figure that if that happens, I can compensate with some more difficult supplemental readings. Many scholarly articles have been written about the Harry Potter series, for instance. Since students tend to choose books that have been made into movies, another drawback is that they may want to watch the movie and avoid the book. I counteract that by requiring them to quote directly from the book in both their informal responses and their formal essays. I try to watch the movie early on so that I can pick up on any references they make that aren't in the book.

Certainly this kind of student choice wouldn't work in most classes. Historians

will be better at choosing the required books for a history class than will their students; biologists need to choose the reading material for their biology class. However, since I am teaching a skills-based class, I have considerably more latitude when it comes to our reading materials. Still, there are other ways to incorporate student choice, and it's an element worth considering.

On balance I'm very happy with my recent approach to first-year writing. By my observation, when students select the book, they become personally invested in their choice. Student choice leads to student engagement. At the end of each semester I survey students about my class, and I ask them specifically about having chosen a book. I have had many students tell me that while they didn't vote for the book that ultimately won, they were still happy to read a book selected by their peers. In all four classes, as part of an anonymous survey, I have asked the question "Should I let my students choose their book next semester?" So far, not a single student has said no.

Luann Yetter has taught first year writing at UMF for over 30 years. She is also the author of three regional history books, including Bar Harbor in the Roaring Twenties.

Supporting the First Year Transition Through Experiential Learning

Linda Beck

Jesse Minor

The transition to college life--both academic and social--can be quite challenging for any first-year student. This transition is further complicated for first-generation college students who do not have a parent, or maybe another family member or friend, to help prepare and guide them through the process. This is one of the reasons UMaine Farmington created “Summer Experience” (SE), a week-long program intended to help students become more familiar with campus, connect with some of their new classmates and upper class student mentors, and gain some early exposure to coursework and discussions at the college level.

Unfortunately, the participation of incoming students in the SE program was constrained by scheduling conflicts with summer jobs and family vacations, largely because SE occurred in mid-June. Moreover, despite its name, Summer Experience offered limited experiential learning, tending instead to feature more traditional academic reading and writing exercises.

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach that combines the conceptual and theoretical knowledge typically taught in a classroom with hands-on learning experiences, culminating in a reflective project, exercise and/or write-up that encourages students to synthesize the knowledge, skills, and insight they gained from these two forms of learning. Experiential learning is an important component of high-impact learning practices that have proven to be critical to undergraduate student success and retention.

In an effort to address both of these issues, a new program was developed in 2019 that fused SE with the First Year Seminar (FYS) in which all first year students are required to enroll. Piloted in Fall 2019, the First Year Fusion (FYF) sections of the FYS program began a week before college orientation in an effort to avoid scheduling conflicts for students with busy summers. During the pre-semester “Fusion Week,” each section engaged in various forms of experiential learning, designed to enhance the students' understanding and engagement with the selected academic theme of the course while also meeting the co-curricular goals and activities associated with SE by

creating a supportive learning community and connection to UMaine Farmington. An added bonus for incoming students is that the intensive week-long program prior to the start of the semester allows the FYS to end mid-term, so that students can focus on their remaining classes during the second half of their initial college semester.

Overview of Pilot First Year Fusion Courses:

In 2019, FYF was launched with pilot sections run by three faculty members with prior expertise in experiential learning. As described above, the pilot courses were structured as an intensive, travel-based experiential field week that took place prior to the semester's start, followed by a truncated half-semester FYS that ended in October. In its pilot year, the planning horizon was somewhat abbreviated when compared to the typical preparation for an off-campus travel course, and the program was launched with three sections. In 2020, the FYF sections were expanded to five offerings, and in 2021 the program is slated to offer 11 sections. Planning is underway for international FYF sections in subsequent years, representing a dramatic increase in the reach, scope, and complexity of the experiential offerings under this new program.

The format and structure of FYF has several rationales. First, the pre-orientation field week provides unparalleled opportunities for cohort-building, and jumpstarts the process of making connections with fellow incoming first year students (before the hectic schedule of college orientation and the inevitable chaos of the first weeks of the semester). For students making the transition to college, having this defined period of intensive focus on one class and with one group of peers forges bonds and creates a useful space between the summer's activities and the upcoming shift into campus life. Second, the pre-semester field week contains sufficient contact hours to allow the seminar portion of the course to be shortened by half a semester. This lightens the students' course load for the latter half of the semester, providing them more time and space to focus on their other courses and final exams. Third, enrollment in FYF courses in the first two pilot years was targeted especially to certain groups of students who can benefit from additional programming and greater social support. This included out-of-state students, who may not have strong prior connections to Maine communities or have family and friends close by. Enrollment was also focused on first-generation college students, as a way of building momentum for college success through completing half a college course even before the semester had begun.

The first three pilot FYF sections were “Making Change in Maine,” taught by geographers Matt McCourt and Jesse Minor, and religion professor Philip Francis’s “The Good Life.” The three classes traveled off campus for Fusion week, with experiential learning as a core component that linked hands-on and outdoor work with course themes, readings, site visits, and activities. At the conclusion of Fusion week, the sections rejoined for final presentations and a group cookout to celebrate the successful completion of half of their first college course at UMaine Farmington.

“The Good Life” FYF prompted the questions “what counts as a good life and how do I go about living that good life?” and approached the topic through a five-day retreat at the Seguinland Institute, an educational nonprofit founded by Philip Francis in Georgetown, Maine, that offers credit-bearing courses through UMaine Farmington. During the Fusion Week, students engaged in a variety of activities such as canoeing, mindfulness and guided reflection, and group food preparation that linked readings in philosophy and nature writing to the questions of what it means to live meaningfully.

“Making Change in Maine” took students on a five-day trip through interior and coastal Maine to meet with a variety of “changemakers,” typically recent UMaine Farmington graduates, who are engaged with positive improvements in their rural communities. Site visits included an arts-based redevelopment project in Monson, a craft brewery and natural history museum in Milo, and an under-construction ice arena in Dover-Foxcroft, followed by a youth boatbuilding program, a 2-room K-8 schoolhouse, and waste management on Little Cranberry Island (Islesford). Experiential learning activities ranged from navigating the sidewalks of Monson wearing goggles (modified to mimic various sorts of visual impairments) and using a guide cane, to hands-on data collection in which students mapped sidewalk hazards in Monson, and used mobile GIS software to map all the houses and addresses on Islesford for the island’s public safety department. The two “Making Change in Maine” sections traveled together in a fully-blended cohort before pursuing separate projects during the half-semester seminar. Matt McCourt’s section of “Making Change in Maine” partnered with UMaine Farmington’s Sweatt-Winter Early Care and Education Center to design and build nature-based playscape elements. Jesse Minor’s section employed public life survey methods to study transportation issues on and near the UMaine Farmington campus.

In 2020, the FYF pilot was expanded to include two additional sections: “Success and Failure” taught as an Honors FYS by Shana Youngdahl, and “How to Succeed in College without Trying” taught by Denisa Cundick. During Fusion week, these FYF sections were combined into a larger cohort, and they explored the Farmington area through visits to outdoor sites that reinforced course themes such as ‘going with the flow/sink or swim’ while floating down the Sandy River. These sections featured tight integration of habits and skills central to college success combined with outdoor activities and experiences, making explicit links between the personal and community resources, attributes that support growth and success, and the natural and social amenities located in Farmington and on campus.

COVID-year experiences:

The novel coronavirus pandemic that was identified in late 2019 caused sharp disruptions to daily life through economic shutdowns, closures of public amenities, and reconfigurations of space to accommodate physical distancing and reduce the risk of virus transmission. The UMaine System responded by converting all Spring 2020 classes to remote offerings following spring break, which was extended by a week to accommodate the change in instructional mode. All work-related and course-based travel was suspended, putting field work, grants, travel courses, athletic competitions, and other off-campus activities on hold. The Fall 2020 semester saw an alteration of course delivery, with far more fully remote courses offered both synchronously and asynchronously, and hybrid/blended courses that combined in-person and online course activities. Some hybrid/blended courses started the semester in-person and converted to remote learning partway through the semester, while others offered combined sections in which some students joined remotely and others attended in-person. Classes were also offered fully on campus and in-person, using classrooms that were altered to accommodate physical distancing and reduced occupancy. Many instructors took advantage of warm and dry weather early in the semester to teach largely or entirely outdoors, where viral transmission risk was even lower (see Minor’s essay on outdoor teaching in this volume).

Under these conditions, FYF could not operate in the way it was initially envisioned and piloted in 2019. Travel was disallowed by the UMaine System, and van occupancy was reduced to 2 people and a driver. As a result, the FYF sections were obliged to operate on foot and in Farmington, with all activities either on or near campus. This required rethinking and revising the FYF sections’ community

partnerships and experiential activities, particularly those planned for the pre-semester field week.

Students returned to campus 2 weeks before the start of the Fall 2020 semester, and were quarantined in their dorm rooms. Upon a negative COVID-19 test, FYF students were cleared to attend field week activities while their peers remained in isolation. Against this setting, FYF represented an opportunity for socialization, cohort-building, and academic exploration that not all incoming UMaine Farmington students encountered. Assessment of the FYF program is ongoing (and will be reported in a future manuscript). Assessment will compare college success and retention of FYF students in relation to students who took ‘traditional’ full-semester FYS courses by comparing GPA and their long-term persistence.

One effect of basing all of the 2020 FYF sections on the UMaine Farmington campus was that all of the participating students gained a fuller orientation to Farmington’s geography and experienced some of its natural and social amenities. Some of the FYF sections were centered on community-engaged topics and service-learning projects, which deepened their exposure to and accelerated their integration into the Farmington community.

Initial Assessment of First Year Fusion:

The benefits of the FYF program were captured through student surveys and faculty debriefing conducted in 2019 and 2020. After the completion of the high-impact Fusion Week in the fall of 2019, students were primed for embarking on their undergraduate adventure. This was evident not only in their outstanding final presentations, but also in their responses to assessment questions. In terms of helping them prepare for academic success at UMaine Farmington, students rated their Fusion Week experience at 4.52 on average on a scale of 1-5, with a score of 5 indicating a significant level of benefit. When asked about their favorite activities, students cited a wide range of experiential learning activities, from mobile geographic mapping to meeting with one of Maine’s “change makers” (a UMaine Farmington graduate), who helped them experience “the difficulties of mobility from the perspective of a visually impaired person through fieldwork.” Students rated the benefits of the Fusion program even higher in terms of their social adjustment (4.7), and indicated that they were highly likely (4.85) to recommend a FYF experience to future incoming students. As one respondent stated, the Fusion Week “was a great way to make friends before school started.” When asked for one of the high points of

the experience, another student noted “I think the whole Fusion program was a high point because I didn’t feel left out. [I could tell that] my classmates and the professor cared about me.”

In light of the successful pilot in 2019, UMaine Farmington decided to add two additional FYF sections in the fall of 2020, only to have COVID nearly cancel the entire program. Fortunately, the resilient faculty and their equally resilient students and TAs managed to pull off a modified version of the courses, or what we lightheartedly came to refer to as “Fusion Lite.” In the Farmington-based Fusion Week, all courses were required to meet on campus with highly modified activities due to COVID restrictions. As before, the FYF students began their course prior to Orientation, but this time all the other incoming students were on campus, sleeping in late, hanging out together, playing pick up games and exploring campus, town and the vicinity (despite protocols) once they received a negative COVID test. Needless to say, this alteration to the FYF program dramatically changed the social and academic context for the expanded pilot and is reflected in slightly lower ratings in the student assessments.

But even if the favorable assessment of the FYF sections was tempered in 2020, there was still a great deal of enthusiasm for the courses. After the completion of the FYF courses in October, students rated its contribution to their preparation for academic success as a 4.04 out of five, indicating that they were likely (4.23) to recommend a Fusion experience to future incoming students. Although they were not able to travel around the state, students emphasized the benefits they found from their experiential learning, even if significantly modified. As one student noted: “My high point of the course was the presentations from various people [who met with us on campus]. It gave me real life stories that eased stress about the overall scheme of things.” Although some may have been envious of the unstructured time of other students not in an FYF section, others recognized the benefits of this opportunity to transition to college: “High points were the first week experience kept me busy and threw me into a class experience.” Another student talked about how the Fusion experience “let us dive into deeper thinking about topics generally not covered in school.”

Undoubtedly, the Class of 2025 who will join us this coming fall will benefit from our ability to return to experiential learning beyond campus. Going forward, we hope to strengthen our assessment of the FYF program through comparison of retention and GPA rates between students who have and have not had the benefit of

the FYF transition to college.

Post-COVID Expansion of the First Year Fusion Model:

Since its inception in 2019, the FYF program has grown from three sections, to five in 2020, with 11 planned for the fall of 2021. Although the FYF experience was significantly modified in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each section was able to retain experiential components while based on UMaine Farmington's campus and strictly adhering to CDC guidelines. The decision to more than double the number of sections this coming fall was tied in part to the anticipation of some degree of continued COVID protocols (that fortunately are likely to be less strict by late 2021). Given that all first-year students were required in fall 2020 to arrive early for testing and quarantining, leaving the majority of students with little to do for a full week prior to Orientation, the decision was made to offer as many FYF sections as possible, so that the students can begin their transition to UMaine Farmington early. With widespread vaccination and tentative plans for requiring vaccinations for all students, fall semester will see a relaxation of testing and isolation protocols. That means that the FYF program can resume its off-campus experiential learning, with plans for sections to do field work in Acadia National Park, visit other sites along the Maine coast, and explore the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

COVID also slowed down but has not stopped UMaine Farmington's plans to expand the FYF program globally. Originally scheduled for fall 2021, two new sets of FYF sections are being developed for fall 2022 that include pre-semester travel segments to Japan and Senegal, during which students will undertake experiential learning with their international counterparts. The Global FYF initiative is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to promote Undergraduate International & Foreign Language Studies. Through the benefits of digital technology, the Global FYF courses will incorporate a Virtual Global Experience after returning to campus, which will support collaborative projects with their international classmates that extend beyond the pre-semester international travel component.

Conclusions:

As we build on the foundation that has been created for FYF in these first two pilot years, it is clear that the program is primed for growth and expansion. A broader FYF program affords the possibility of differentiation across sections beyond what we have attempted thus far. In addition to international FYF offerings, we envision

future sections that will expand on direct service-learning to community groups in various parts of Maine, explore topics in health and wellness, focus on college readiness, and deploy project-based learning in the social sciences and natural sciences. In our view, FYF represents the best of what UMaine Farmington has to offer: authentic, experiential, and diversified programming geared toward student growth and success.

The FYF program also represents the sort of innovation that UMaine Farmington is known for doing so well, and provides a robust opportunity for marketing, niche differentiation, and storytelling that helps recruit students to our campus. The structure and format of FYF is tailored to aid in student retention and collegiate success. As we move beyond the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that this model of curricular innovation will yield significant positive results.

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Session Notes: What Teaching Taught Me about Being a Therapist

Sarah Carnahan

In 2006, I graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Maine at Farmington, with a Bachelor's in Women's Studies, a minor in Psychology, and a Plan. (Yes, that's "Plan" with a capital "P.") Since I was a child, my intelligence and natural aptitude for academics was what brought me attention, and what everyone predicted would bring me great success. However, barring a lottery win that would make me independently wealthy, I could not find a way to be a student forever. Since I could never remember to buy a lottery ticket, I chose what felt like the next best thing to perpetual studentdom – becoming a professor. I knew that I loved life in higher education, I was passionate about my field, and I figured that if I couldn't stay in the classroom as a student, I could certainly provide a meaningful classroom experience for future students. So, in 2007, I enrolled at The Ohio State University and began the trek toward a Ph.D.

Like many, I worked as a teaching assistant (TA) while in graduate school. I had done some TA work at UMF and was excited to continue it. I quickly learned, however, that in some departments, TA was a bit of a misnomer. Though I did actually assist a professor during my first quarter, after that I was largely teaching on my own. I created my own syllabi and assignments, independently graded my students' work, and was the only instructor in the classroom. My faculty supervisor did have to approve my syllabi, and occasionally a faculty member would observe one of my classes. Additionally, all Women's Studies graduate students were required to take a course in Feminist Pedagogy during our first year in the program; we read works such as *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks and *We Make the Road by Walking* by Friere and Horton, and strategized how to incorporate their theories and techniques into our own classrooms. I adored that class, even as I became increasingly aware of the ways in which an R1 institution's bureaucracy and self-perception (dare I say inflated ego?) pushed back against dismantling hierarchy both in and out of the classroom.

As I advanced in my teaching career--becoming a teaching fellow, working as a writing pedagogy consultant for faculty and staff, and mentoring new TA's--the more

I learned about how little value is accorded to teaching at many large universities. For example, many departments did not even have pedagogy classes as part of their curriculum, and if they did, they were often elective courses. Thus, one could complete a PhD and become a professor without ever having taken a single pedagogy class. When faculty members were considered for tenure, teaching was not taken into consideration; instead, it was based solely on research and publications. Not only did this undervalue teaching, but it actively disincentivized spending time and energy to develop one's teaching skills. Occasionally I heard professors in certain larger departments grumble about teaching taking away from their research time.

As I taught higher level undergraduate courses, I started getting requests for recommendations from students applying to graduate school. While I was more than happy to support my students in this way, I was disturbed to learn that there were students who were graduating without ever having taken a class taught by a full professor. In other words, they were spending \$25-45,000 per year to attend classes taught by graduate students who might only be "ahead" of them by a semester or two, and who might not have had any significant teacher training, coursework, or experience. Though my department was small enough that professors did teach occasional undergraduate courses, and were by and large dedicated to teaching, this was not the norm; access to professors was generally a privilege afforded to graduate students.

I became even more profoundly grateful for my undergraduate experience at UMF during this time. Every single class that I attended during my undergraduate years was taught by a professor. Many of them encouraged us to call them by their first names--anathema for undergraduates at Ohio State.³ (Even as a TA I frequently had to reassure my students that it was okay for them to call me by my first name.) Whereas Ohio State undergrads had professional advisors who were not faculty members, my college advisor was the chair of my department. Not only did I have professors as teachers, but I developed close, enduring relationships with them as mentors, both in and out of the classroom. I can only imagine how adrift I would have felt in the classroom had I not attended a school like UMF.

³ I do want to acknowledge the importance of using prestigious titles when applied to those in marginalized identities who have historically been unable to access education and/or positions of power, and who continue to face systemic barriers. Intentionally highlighting accolades earned by people who are marginalized also does important work in deconstructing social stereotypes. Of course, deference must always be paid to the preferences of the person in a prestigious position, and these practices should not be used as "evidence" that equality has been achieved in our society.

After completing my MA, I was accepted into Ohio State's Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) PhD program. During my first year in that program, I took a course in Critical Trauma Theory, through which I learned much more about concepts such as historical and intergenerational trauma, and saw how the tenets that I had learned about in my feminist pedagogy class were also being applied in the mental health fields. During the first weeks of this class, one of our classmates, Jacqui, died by suicide. Her death was a very public expression of a black woman's pain--a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the heart at a public firing range. Needless to say, this shook us all deeply, as individuals and as a community. It also reminded me how immediate and critical the need for humble, affirming, and skilled mental health care can be, a lesson that I had learned as a client years before.

There were many reasons why, toward the end of the first year of my PhD program, I decided to dual enroll in OSU's clinical MSW program. Some of these reasons were personal, some were professional, and some were ethical; many had been building for a while. The more time that I spent spinning in the R1 academic rat race, the more I recognized how incongruent much of it was with my own personal values. And, while I believed then as I do now that teaching can be activism, it started to lose its luster as the way that I wanted to effect change in the world. I found myself clinging to the individual relationships that I developed with my students as a way to continue to enjoy teaching. Meanwhile, I was taking longer and longer to grade assignments. Though no less enamored with my students as people, I was losing interest and focus on helping them develop hegemonic academic skills. And then I took that Critical Trauma Theory course. And then Jacqui died from what might have been a preventable death. I knew what I had to do.

As a dual-enrolled graduate student, I continued doing full-time coursework for my Ph.D., while also working toward my MSW part-time. During the last year of my MSW, I also completed and defended my comprehensive exams, and then wrote and defended my dissertation prospectus. More importantly, during that last year of my MSW program, I secured a graduate assistantship as an intern in Ohio State's college counseling program. While receiving significant clinical supervision and training, I also began providing therapy to university students, both individually and in a group setting. When I stopped teaching and started counseling, I found career clarity--I had been absolutely correct in that I wanted to work in higher education. I loved working with college students and felt honored and humble to be allowed into their lives and their development. It's just that I didn't want to be a professor; I wanted to provide

mental health care for college students. I was able to let myself acknowledge that, while I was a good, competent teacher, I was a great therapist. Five years into graduate school, during which I thought I was training for a prestigious career, I found a humble vocation.

Two years later, I found myself outside, working in my garden in Wilton, Maine. My partner and I had moved back to Maine a year earlier. I continued to teach online for OSU; I didn't touch my dissertation. Then, I passed my state board exams, and entered into full-time clinical practice. I knew that I was capable of writing my dissertation; after all, how many hundreds of pages had I written in graduate school up until that point? But I loved being a therapist; I knew that I had nothing to gain from a PhD. I was forced to recognize that completing it would be for title and ego only, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to foster that. With my hands in the dirt, I heard my own voice suddenly say, "If it's not life affirming, I'm not doing it." My very next thought was, "Oh my god. I think I have to quit my Ph.D."

So I did.

Here's the twist, though, and why I'm writing this essay: I still teach every day. Sure, in clinical practice we call it "psychoeducation" or "bibliotherapy," but it's teaching. For example, a few days ago, I was teaching someone interpersonal communication techniques in one session, and then teaching another client about the neurobiology of eating disorders during my next hour. I have trained other clinicians about working with clients with eating disorders; training is teaching. Here and there, I still even pop into a classroom to present (read: teach) about a topic related to mental health. I regularly find myself aware of the fact that I am using my teacher skills in my clinical work.

I am grateful for the time that I spent in the classroom, and the circumstances under which I did so have made me deeply appreciative of the dedicated faculty that we have at UMF. We are not an institution of academics and researchers who are required to be in the classroom a certain amount of time. The professors at UMF truly are teachers.

I don't regret my circuitous journey to my current occupation; my time in my PhD program and my ultimate career shift helped me gain both confidence and humility. Occasionally, I'll even share a bit about my own wandering journey with clients, when a little therapeutic self-disclosure can help normalize someone's shifting values, desires, and career paths. Though it may be called by different names--psychoeducation, modeling, normalizing, validating--I teach every day, just like the

vast majority of non-faculty staff on college campuses. I'm just not in the classroom. And no one calls me Professor.

Sarah Carnahan is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and provides mental health counseling at UMF. Sarah is also an alum of UMF and The Ohio State University, and is a proud member of the "ABD Forever" club.

Feeling Foreign in the Language Classroom

Cortney Benjamin

“There is a certain humility required for the enterprise of intercultural understanding: one’s own voice may, as in music, harmonize in any cultural environment only on condition of a well-attuned ear.”

- Anne Freadman

On the first day of every new semester, I greet my students in Spanish as they enter the classroom. We complete our first several activities completely in Spanish. This is true for my beginning Spanish classes as well as my upper-level classes. I do not say one word in English until the last half of class when we go over the syllabus for the semester. Some of my students have recently practiced the target language with friends or family members, but most have not communicated in Spanish in months or even years. Some students are shocked that I do not translate everything I say into English. Some are frustrated or overwhelmed, and others are energized by the challenge. For an hour, three times a week, students step into a space where they do not speak the language fluently or understand all of the cultural references and social customs. In the Spanish classroom, each student (and often the instructor) has to acknowledge all that they do not yet know. The Spanish classroom is a space where the students and I must practice cultural humility and learn empathy for other language learners who struggle to understand everyday communication outside the academic setting.

Ideally, every student at UMF would have the opportunity to live abroad. As an undergraduate, my own study abroad experiences taught me to adapt, be independent, and remain curious about cultures, people, and experiences unfamiliar to me. Most importantly, I learned to reflect on my own identity and culture. I grew up in a small town where most folks looked like me, spoke English like me, and practiced the same religion and cultural rituals as I did. As a 20-year-old woman who barely spoke Spanish well enough to accomplish the necessities of living, I was scared when I arrived in Buenos Aires for my first week of classes. I had to figure out how to manage the public transportation system of colectivos and the underground subte to

arrive at each of my classes. There was no centralized campus; rather, my classes were spread out across the city. I did not understand much of what my professors said during the first weeks. None of my Spanish classes in the United States had ever explained the use of the Argentinean second-person singular pronoun *vos*, and I was unaccustomed to the porteño accent. In addition to my new educational surroundings, I had to decipher the subtleties of living with my Argentine family. When did we eat? Was I supposed to use the informal *vos* or the formal *usted* with my host mother? What if I could not communicate with her during an emergency? When I arrived in Buenos Aires, my world turned upside down, and at the same time, it got much bigger. I had to find a new place for myself within this larger global community.

After my first few months in Buenos Aires, there were days when I would arrive back at my host family's house feeling accomplished and proud of the way I navigated the bus system, the conversation I had with the owner of the bookstore, and the fact that my classmates had invited me to participate in their mate ritual. However, there were often days when I tried to talk with someone and my clumsy Spanish was rejected in favor of my conversation partner's more advanced English. There were times when I held up a long line of frustrated people at the bank while I tried to communicate with the teller to get smaller bills, or when I felt alienated from my Argentine classmates who discussed news stories and political events that I did not understand. Even after spending almost a year in the city, I would have breakthrough moments followed by several difficult ones. I developed coping strategies, and I learned the value of making mistakes. I realized that no matter how much time I spent in Argentina, there would still be interactions that I did not understand, and there would still be unwritten rules of behavior that I did not know. Also, a lot of what I learned in Argentina would not translate to Spain or Costa Rica. I would not ever reach the endpoint of fluency and competency. In fact, the endpoint did not exist. It would be a lifelong process of mistakes, dialogue, and learning.

I was privileged to have my study abroad experiences. I had the support of my family and very few personal obligations. Not everyone can afford to leave their jobs for several months to travel abroad. Others have family responsibilities that keep them tethered to their hometowns. During the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of US students have been unable to travel abroad, during a time when it seems especially important that we work to understand cultures, histories, political systems, religions, and institutions different from our own. For these students, I work to make the

Spanish classroom a space where, for just an hour, they can have a taste of the rich experiences that await them outside the borders of the United States. For a short amount of time in my class, students must face the discomfort of not understanding and not being understood.

Just as time abroad can bring a feeling of culture shock, the language classroom makes students feel uncomfortable and disoriented. Especially for students who took a language class in high school and decided they were “bad” at learning languages, the Spanish classroom can make students feel frustrated and vulnerable. When I begin the first day of an elementary Spanish class speaking only Spanish, I imagine half the class is thinking about dropping the course. Some students barely participate, and others try to speak so quietly that no one is able to hear them. Students come up to talk to me after the first class, when they can comfortably speak in English, to let me know that they feel behind in the material, or they did not have to speak in Spanish in their high school Spanish class so now they do not know how. It seems almost every student feels that they speak worse than their classmates do or they do not have the same cultural knowledge that their classmates have acquired from other courses or travel abroad experiences. My work is to help these students find meaning and purpose in the disorienting and challenging space of the language classroom. In Spanish class, students have to learn to evaluate their abilities realistically and recognize the gaps in their knowledge.

The practice of cultural humility begins in the uncomfortable moments when we are challenged to engage in dialogue while knowing that we do not have all of the answers. We learn to accept feedback from our conversation partners, try again, and repeat the never-ending process of working to expand both our language skills and our knowledge of other cultures. I stress to my students that they have to speak and make errors in order to improve. I write this in my welcome email and on my syllabus. I say it again the first week of class when my questions are met with silence. I have found that students are more willing to acknowledge what they do not know and engage with the material in an open and curious way after I show them that I am on the same journey. When I make mistakes with the language and acknowledge them in class, the students become more comfortable taking risks. As the students realize I know a little about a few Spanish-speaking communities, but that there is infinitely more that I do not know about the Hispanic world, they are more enthusiastic about asking questions and finding the answers with me.

Last semester, my first in Farmington, we were talking about nature and wildlife in my elementary Spanish class. I asked the students about their favorite animals, and one student asked how to say “moose” in Spanish. I told them I had never had an opportunity to use the word “moose” in Spanish, and we looked it up in the dictionary together. (In Spanish, the word is *el alce*). My move to Maine and the changes in my surroundings led to new encounters with a language I have been studying for two decades. With the changes in language brought about by the pandemic, the students and I were able to learn together how to talk about masks and quarantine in Spanish. We even learned how to talk about the unmute button in Zoom. We discovered new expressions in English (*anti-masker*) and Spanish (*zoompleaños*), and we discussed how those expressions reflected the different ways that people were adapting and surviving across the globe. The language is always changing, and given the many histories, cultures, and linguistic communities in the Hispanic world, it is impossible to learn it all in a classroom. When my students see that I am still learning in Spanish class, they are more willing to engage in the learning process with me.

In the language classroom, our learning objectives have traditionally centered on language proficiency and cultural competence. For me, cultural humility is a critical component of cultural competency. Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García first introduced the concept of cultural humility within the context of medical education programs as a response to the “pitfall of narrowly defining competence” as “an easily demonstrable mastery of a finite body of knowledge” (118). According to Tervalon and Murray-García, health care providers who consider themselves culturally competent (after taking a few courses) sometimes assume they have knowledge about individual patients and their backgrounds, “knowledge” that often crosses over into the realm of stereotypes (118). Rather than crossing the finish line of cultural expertise, adopting cultural humility emphasizes “a commitment and active engagement in a lifelong process that individuals enter into on an ongoing basis” (Tervalon 119). Individuals have to engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection to better understand their own cultural beliefs. As Deborah Page notes with regard to the foreign language classroom, “If students understand their own cultural biases, they may be able to deal with unfamiliar cultural situations that have not been reviewed in class” (51). The concept of cultural humility does not replace cultural competence, which one continues to seek out, but rather, it builds a solid foundation for a better understanding of the cultural competence that one has acquired.

Especially in my elementary and intermediate Spanish classes, the students start to practice cultural humility on day one in their daily discussions with classmates. In the early levels, much of the classroom discussion revolves around personal experiences. In the units on food, students share what they liked to eat when they were little, and they learn to share recipes that have been passed down in their families. In the unit on family, they share information about their closest family members and the activities they like to do with those family members. They learn to reflect on their own experiences and how those experiences affect their worldviews. Of equal importance, they also learn to listen to their classmates' stories and perspectives with "a well-attuned ear," as Anne Freadman would say, to harmonize in the cultural environment of the Spanish classroom.

Along with an ongoing process of self-reflection, cultural humility also calls us to recognize and address power imbalances in cross-cultural encounters. This is especially important in the language classroom, as my classes are filled mostly with students who do not identify as Hispanic, and I am teaching linguistic and cultural histories that do not belong to me. In the United States, Hispanics and Latinos are racialized in the media and negatively stereotyped as criminals. Spanish-speaking Latinos are often abused just for daring to speak the language in public. If one of the explicit goals of the Spanish classroom is cultural humility, students have to grapple with the unjust power imbalance between native speakers of English and native speakers of Spanish in the United States.

During the semester, there are days when students feel more confident about what they can say and how they can navigate the challenges of engaging with other cultures. There are also days when students feel frustrated and shut down. They stop listening to the YouTube video in Spanish when they do not understand some of the vocabulary, and they ask their classmates to translate the instructions of the in-class activities to English. At this point, one or two students in the class begin to add "o" to the end of English words as a sign to me and their classmates that they have given up. These are the days when we acknowledge and reflect on the difficulties of learning another language. As a class, we talk about how much time, effort, and resources are required to create meaningful communication in a language that is not our first language. We talk about who has access to the time and resources to learn another language in the United States, and about who does not. We also explore the differences between learning a language in the comfort of a classroom on a college campus where we can choose between several languages, and learning a language as a

recently arrived refugee trying to find a job, raise a family, and become part of a new community. As we explicitly reflect on the relationship between language and power in our community, students can begin to interrogate their own cultural predispositions, the attitudes they bring to the classroom, and their interactions with others.

For UMF students who are unable to travel outside the United States, or perhaps even outside the New England area, I hope the Spanish classroom offers a space to practice encounters with other cultures with a humble and respectful attitude. I also hope that they complete the Spanish minor or the language requirement with a better understanding of how their own complex identities and perspectives influence the ways they interact with others. For the students that do have the incredible opportunity to study abroad, the practice of cultural humility beginning in the language classroom on campus will help them be more self-aware than I was upon my arrival in Buenos Aires a decade ago.

At a time when our society is polarized and folks do not know how to communicate with those different from themselves, the language classroom is a space where every person, student or instructor, can practice cultural humility, be comfortable making mistakes, and become accustomed to a life-long process of being curious about and respectful of others. It is a space where we can develop strategies to deal with the discomfort of engaging in situations outside of our own personal frame of reference. We learn to be flexible, humble, and self-aware. I take comfort knowing that these students will leave UMF, find new communities and careers, and act as the bridge between colleagues, neighbors, and friends who cannot find a path to communication.

Cortney Benjamin is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at UMF. She is passionate about teaching elementary Spanish classes, upper-level early modern literature classes, and everything in between.

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More Cats, More Meetings, and a Bigger Project: How a Global Pandemic Transformed the UMF Social Psychology Lab

Karol Mayberry

On March 11th, 2020 two days before the start of spring break, our college president notified students and faculty that our campus would be closing, and all classes would transition to online meetings. Instead of relaxing, most professors spent that spring break urgently learning distance instruction software, rewriting syllabi, and reorganizing course material for the new modality.

At the time, my 3 undergraduate research assistants (RAs) were preparing two research presentations for a national Psychology conference in Chicago in May. Before COVID became a word permanently ricocheting around our minds, we met in person, huddled around a projector screen, scrutinizing statistical analyses, watching videos of emotion displays, or co-writing true-to-life scenarios of human interactions, the focus of our laboratory.

After the announcement that campus was closing, we paused our conference prep and scheduled our first-ever Zoom meeting. The following Monday, we logged onto our computers from our living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchen tables, most of us located just blocks away from each other in our small Maine town. From 4 small squares on the screen, we began the meeting lamenting our exile from campus. My 3 RAs are serious college students who have been laser-beam-focused, since freshman year, on earning top grades and doing extra work, with the goal of applying to graduate or medical school. They were suddenly preoccupied by how they would prepare for their future in this alien environment. And they were wondering how they would actually learn, not just complete, chemistry labs and counseling assignments.

Before the pandemic, we usually started our lab meetings chatting about daily news or upcoming events and future professional goals. Sometimes we spent the first few minutes with break-the-ice prompts like: If you were a professional wrestler, what

would be your entrance theme song? Post-virus, as everyone's face popped onto the computer screen, one by one, we started our meetings with updates on our cats. (We adopted, collectively, 4 cats from our local shelter during the first week of the crisis).

We eventually started talking about the different ways people were handling the crisis across the United States. March in Maine is marked by temperatures in the teens. News stories featuring college students on beaches sounded like a depiction of life on another planet. We watched the warm-climate spring breakers with curiosity, anxiety, and a bit of envy. We wondered: Why were some people, regardless of age, socializing like everything was normal, seemingly unconcerned about contracting or spreading the virus, while others were diligently following social distancing protocols and mourning the loss of normal college life?

They wondered aloud about these different responses. We began speculating about personality traits (like extraversion), political beliefs (like support for President Trump) and news sources (like Fox News), and how these variables might impact a person's social distancing discipline. By early April, with newfound energy and sense of purpose, a germ (!) of a research project was born. What if we surveyed young American adults (age 18–27) and asked about their social distancing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the attitudes we suspected might predict social distance discipline? What accounted for the disparity of responses to social distancing rules?

Over the next month we created a survey of social distancing behavior and demographics like age, sex, news source preference, views of President Trump, beliefs about one's personal invincibility to COVID-19, and extraversion. Next, partially inspired by actual events they had heard or read about, the students wrote 4 stories of people 'breaking quarantine' (to celebrate turning 21 with an in-person party; to gather friends for a game of baseball on a beautiful day in an empty park; to travel several states away to try to save a romantic relationship on the rocks; to use a travel voucher during a time of low travel volume.)

We predicted, and found, that a person's likelihood to follow social isolation recommendations, and their judgements (positive or negative) of others who failed to follow recommendations, varied as a function of their news sources, political ideology, and extraversion. We also asked about substance use (nicotine, alcohol and

marijuana), since others had [predicted](#) that substance use would increase during the pandemic. We sent our survey to UMF's institutional review board, and upon approval immediately uploaded it to a national survey site, named it The Pandemic and You, and awaited responses. In two days, we received 495 replies, and got to work analyzing the data.

What we learned was fascinating. We asked every participant to rate the statement "I support President Trump" on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). As predicted, participants' support for Trump was negatively correlated with 1) their compliance with social-distance practices and 2) their anxiety about the coronavirus, and positively correlated with their endorsement of those scenarios we wrote about with young adults who were breaking quarantine. In addition, Fox News Channel (FNC) viewers significantly differed from other news consumers in terms of how worried they were about COVID-19 and how often they socialized face-to-face with those outside their household. FNC viewers reported significantly less worry about becoming ill, and reported a greater frequency of unprotected face-to-face socializing than non-Fox-viewers. Support for Trump also was related to participants' individual beliefs that the media had overly dramatized the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic. A negative relationship emerged for respondents' support for President Trump in terms of how worried the respondents were about the eventual death toll of COVID-19. In other words, higher support for Trump translated into less worry about the death toll; lower support predicted greater worry. Finally, we discovered a weak, but statistically significant, impact of extraversion on the acceptability of breaking quarantine: extraverts were slightly more likely than self-described introverts to endorse others breaking quarantine. However, this relationship was weaker than we expected, and much weaker than the Trump and FNC effect.

We aren't the first to propose that one of the reasons that the United States has been one of the hardest-hit nations in terms of COVID-19 seems to be due to a large proportion of Americans who consume news that downplayed the crisis. Another large-scale study showed the [link between right-wing news](#) and COVID-19 risk, particularly for followers of [commentators closely aligned with the White House](#). But our data underscored the generalizability of this finding among young adults. In addition, we learned that voters who have an allegiance to President Trump (who downplayed the magnitude of the crisis) were less anxious about the death toll from

COVID-19 on our nation (at least as they guessed it would play out when we asked them in May 2020), and responded with behavior in accordance with this allegiance.

We hope the findings of our sample of 500 young American adults help future pandemic communications and strategies. Understanding idiosyncratic differences between Americans (inclination to be influenced by medical expertise, distrust of scientific reports, and faith in news commentators and politicians, over other sources) may be a key avenue of future research that could reduce the spread of illness and help control future pandemic threats. Though our findings were sobering, we are oddly grateful that they help us understand different responses to the pandemic. The work kept our agitated minds busy and productive during a stressful time, and we hope they might be helpful in fighting the pandemic from a public health standpoint.

We also, of course, are grateful for our 4 pandemic isolation cats: Merry, Pippin, Calcifer and Margo, who turned out to be the best psychotherapists during a pandemic. They brought us immeasurable comfort and normalcy as we pondered the unknown future.

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The student researchers mentioned in the article are Grace McIntosh, UMF 2022, Brandon Martin, UMF 2021, and Nelson Peterson, UMF 2021.

11 Struggles and Triumphs of a First-Gen Student

Mary Ellms

When I sat down to write an essay about my approach to teaching, I reflected upon my experiences as an undergraduate. From 2004-2008, I was a UMF Beaver. I was also a first-generation student, though I didn't know it at the time, and even if I had known it, support programs for first-gen students were not what they are today. Ultimately, it is these experiences that guide my approach to teaching, advising, and even running Orientation programming. I see myself in so many of my students. Perhaps you do, too; I know we have several first-gen faculty and staff at UMF, which gives me such a thrill every November 8th, National First-Generation College Celebration Day. Regardless of your status, I want to share some of my experiences to give you an idea of the pressures, struggles, and triumphs common to first-gen students. We are here. We hope you see us!

1. My family of origin did not attend college.

I'm originally from Ripley, a town of around 400 people in rural central Maine. There's a road in Ripley named after my family, not because they did anything extraordinary but because they once owned a massive farm at the end of the road. I don't know my father's full genealogy, but I know the Ellms family was in the Ripley area as early as the 1840s. My mother's family was Quebecois and crossed the border (which wasn't always a border) many times between the farms of the Beauce region and the woolen mills and shoe factories of Dexter, Maine. My father was and still is self-employed, running a construction company that he inherited from his father. My mother taught herself how to do bookkeeping for my father's business, only going to college for an accounting degree after I graduated from UMF. But in 2004 when I was getting ready to go off to college, neither of my parents had attended college, and they didn't know how to help me navigate it.

2. I was not sure higher education was right for me. I didn't exactly know what it was.

For many years, I wasn't sure that college was something I wanted to do. I got good grades in school and was consistently on the honor roll, but it wasn't because I worked hard or wanted to learn. I simply liked reading and was a strict rule-follower, so I graduated high school 4th in my class simply because I showed up and did all of the work.

I considered college because my teachers assumed I would go and because most of my peers were planning on going. But I didn't know what to choose for a major. I liked meteorology but I wasn't interested in (or good at) any other forms of science or math. I liked music and theater but had little formal education in either because the arts were consistently underfunded or nonexistent in my school district; I had no idea what a music theory or acting class would be like. I liked reading and writing but never as much as *those kids* who could sit there and wax poetic about postmodern literature or the merits of an MFA in creative writing, whatever that was.

I thought college would be High School Grades 13-16, but with residence halls and more students and more clubs and activities. I thought it was the only path for me after high school. I thought it was where I was supposed to go. But whenever I thought about college, I felt overwhelmed.

3. I had obligations and emotional ties that tethered me to home.

Many of my childhood classmates hated Maine and couldn't wait to get out, but I couldn't bear the thought of leaving. I was close to my parents and my extended family. I was especially close to my grandmother and great-aunt, so close that I went out to eat with them every Friday night. I also just liked Maine. I volunteered at my hometown's historical society and food cupboard every weekend. I wasn't interested in living in a city. I wasn't interested in going to a massive school or disappearing in a crowd of people. I wanted to go to a place like the Cheers bar, somewhere "where everybody knows your name."

UMF was the perfect school for me. It was 80 mins from home, far enough to prevent me from running home whenever I felt anxious but close enough to get home quickly if I needed to. It offered programs and classes in all of the topics that interested me: I majored in creative writing, minored in theater, took piano and voice

lessons, and even took a meteorology class with Pam Mitchel. It was small, but still significantly larger than my high school, so it gave me a different educational experience. It was close enough that I could travel home for Friday night dinners with my Mimi and Aunt Jean. It was close enough that when Mimi developed Alzheimer's during my junior and senior years, I went home regularly to help take care of her.

4. I felt like a fish out of water.

I found my people at UMF. I met people who loved reading more than I did. I met people who not only listened to Broadway soundtracks but had actually seen Broadway productions in New York. I met people who understood my love of TV and came to my room to watch *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica* and *The Ashlee Simpson Show* with me, just so they could hear my commentary on them. I made my best friends here, friends I'm still close to today.

But that all took time. A long time.

On Move-In Day 2004, my parents wanted to leave bright and early to be the first in line to check in because my dad didn't want to lose a whole day of work. My parents helped me carry my things up to my third floor room in Scott South, and then they left before I'd unpacked. Mom and I couldn't look at each other without crying.

My 18th birthday was during the first week of classes. I didn't have any friends yet; no one at UMF knew it was my birthday, and it was my first birthday away from my family. My parents sent flowers to my room in Scott South. When my mom called to see how I was doing, I cried and said I wanted to come home.

I got into a minor car accident driving home that first weekend. I'd never been in a car accident before, and I was flustered but okay. The flowers from my parents were in the passenger seat, and they spilled all over the car, water from the vase staining the seat and floor.

Back in Farmington, driving to Walmart was a real problem. I had no experience driving on a four-lane road like the Wilton Road. I had to wait for my roommate to make a trip because I was too scared to drive there myself.

In class, I felt stupid. Everyone saw things in the readings that I just didn't see. Everyone was smarter than me. Everyone worked harder and did better than me. Everyone had already made friends, and I was floundering. Even the kids from my high school who were at UMF seemed to be doing so much better than I was.

And at home, things were changing. My parents didn't treat me the same way. I was learning things they didn't know, and slowly but surely that built a gap between us. I could sense that I was growing apart from them, but I didn't know why, and I was terrified of losing them.

I couldn't understand why this was all so difficult for me. I couldn't see how it was ever going to get better.

5. I just kept swimming.

I don't know how I made it. I look back now and try to figure out what motivated me to keep going. The only thing I can think of is that I didn't know that I could leave. My parents never suggested it to me, and I never thought of it on my own. I thought college was like high school: I had to keep going because there were no other options.

6. I never knew how I was going to pay for it.

My undergraduate education was paid for primarily through student loans. I didn't understand them, and I know my parents with their one FOR EMERGENCIES ONLY credit card hidden in the freezer didn't understand them, either.

At one point I received an email telling me that I needed to sign a document in order for my loan payment to be processed. I thought it was a scam, some deposed head of state waiting for my signature so they could steal my money or my identity. I'd already signed all of the paperwork for my loans with my parents, or so I thought. I deleted the email.

Several weeks later, Mom called me, panicked. "I just got a bill for \$3000 from UMF! Why are they sending us a bill? What did you do?"

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't do anything."

"Well, you better get over to that finances office and figure it out 'cause we don't have an extra \$3000 lying around."

So, terrified of what was going to happen but more terrified of my mother's wrath, I set out to find the Financial Aid office. It turns out that the email I'd deleted was important after all. It told me that I needed to sign a promissory note in order for my \$3000 loan to be applied to my account. Without my signature, my loan money

was gone. While sobbing on the phone with my mother, trying to explain to her what I'd done, the folks in Financial Aid managed to find a different source of funding for me. Without it, I'm not sure if I would've been able to continue at UMF.

My family and I also didn't understand work study. Work study was listed in my financial aid package, but we didn't understand that I had to get a job and earn that money in order to receive it. I didn't work at all during my first year because I wanted to focus on doing well in my classes. You can imagine how shocked my parents were when we all figured out that we owed money because I hadn't actually earned my work study award. Eventually I ended up working two on-campus jobs, one at Alice James Books and the other at the Writing Center, to try to earn as much money as possible so that I could finish my degree.

A few years later, during my master's program, I received a teaching assistantship, but it did not pay enough to cover my expenses, even as a single childless adult. I had to take out more loans in order to finish the program.

Even now as a doctoral student, I can't pay for the program on my own. I refuse to take out more loans, so my classes are covered through tuition waivers as a UMaine System employee. Still, it's difficult to work a full-time job *and* be a graduate student. But I'm doing it. I'm getting there. I'm taking a much longer path than most people, but I'm getting there.

7. I felt (and still feel) a lot of anxiety and shame around my academic performance.

I took AP English Composition in high school and received college credit for it, so my first English class at UMF was ENG181: Literary Analysis and Interpretation. I absolutely loved it! We read so many works I'd never heard of before, and I loved going to class. I never participated in discussion--I still have trouble taking in what everyone else is saying and thinking quickly enough to get a comment in before the conversation shifts--but I loved sitting there and listening to everyone else talk. I loved being in the same room as other people who loved literature as much as I did. I felt good going into our first paper. The professor encouraged everyone to set up meetings with him to go over papers, but I didn't think I needed to. I'd never had to do that in high school; the students who met one-on-one with the teacher in high school were the students who were really struggling. I can still remember our classroom in Ricker Addition and where I was sitting when the

professor handed back our papers and mine had “C-. See me after class.” written on it.

If I’d been alone I would have burst into tears. I’d *always* been good at writing papers. I’d never gotten a grade that low on anything before. *What am I going to tell my parents? My first college paper, and I got my lowest grade ever? And what does the professor want to see me about, anyway? To yell at me? To tell me I’m not good enough to be here? To kick me out of school?* I had no idea. Everything I’d heard was that college professors were strict and punitive, so I was terrified to talk to him.

I waited until everyone left the classroom before I approached the professor. I don’t remember everything that we said, but I do remember that he asked me why I hadn’t attended a one-on-one conference with him, and I told him that I didn’t know I needed to. He pointed out several problems with my paper that he could have corrected if I’d conferenced with him. I apologized a lot and tried not to cry. I was devastated. I was convinced that this paper was a sign that I was a failure and that I wouldn’t make it at UMF.

But the professor was very kind and didn’t act like it was a big deal at all. “Just make sure you conference with me for your next paper,” he said with a smile.

I went back to my room, cried for a bit, and then pulled out my syllabus, highlighting all of the places where he’d blocked off dates for paper conferences so that I wouldn’t miss any more. I felt so embarrassed and worried that I wouldn’t pass the class. [But I did!]

8. I didn’t know what I didn’t know.

I took precalculus. I only needed one math course for my major, and even though my advisor didn’t think it was a great idea, I wanted to take precalculus because I’d taken it in high school and done poorly. [I know, I KNOW, the academic advisor in me is screaming at my 18-year-old self now.] I really wanted a second chance to do better in a subject that was difficult for me.

But I failed to realize two vital things. First, I didn’t know that the class would be full of people who were *good* at math. Most were math majors, science majors, or education majors concentrating in math. I fell behind after the first week.

Second, I didn’t realize that I could drop the course. I didn’t know what dropping a class meant. I’d never been able to change my schedule in high school; once I was in a class, I was in it until it was over. So I assumed precalculus was the

same way, and when my advisor asked how it was going, I was too ashamed to tell her how badly I was struggling.

I went to my professor's office hours every time he had them. I'm sure I was a pain to deal with, and I know more advanced students got irritated seeing me there, usurping so much of the professor's time. I even went to the Math Center for tutoring, and I'm sure those poor tutors were just as frustrated with me. By the end of the semester, I knew what was going to happen: I was going to fail precalculus. I'd done all of the work and I received partial credit for effort, but I don't remember passing a single quiz or test. I knew what was going to happen, and the shame I felt was immense. I didn't know how I was going to tell my family.

I decided to get ahead of it and warn my parents about it before it happened. They knew I'd been struggling, so when I went home for break, I told them that I was going to fail precalculus. I told them everything I'd tried but that it still wasn't enough.

"Did you try your best?" my mom asked.

I'd done all of the work; I didn't skip a single assignment. I didn't miss a single class. I got tutoring through the Math Center. I went to my professor's office hours for help. I'd done everything that I knew to do to be successful in school.

"Yes," I said. "I don't think there's anything else that I could have done."

"Okay, then," Mom said. "It'll be okay. You'll figure it out." And that was that.

I'd finally come to terms with my F by the time grades were posted. I was shocked to see that I received a D- in precalculus. It was low--the lowest grade I'd ever received in *anything*--but I knew it was still passing. I couldn't believe it. It had to be a mistake.

When I returned to UMF, I ran into the professor while I was walking to class. He and I had always joked together, and when he saw me that day, he started joking about how he couldn't get rid of me.

"You're not even taking one of my classes," he said with a laugh.

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to say that I think you made a mistake on my grade last semester."

"Oh?"

I realized that I was trying to tell a math professor that he'd miscalculated something. "Well, I just... I didn't pass anything, so I was expecting an F. But my grade's listed as a D-. I felt like I should be honest about it so you can fix it."

The professor laughed. He said, "It's not wrong. The D- is correct."

I said, "I know I'm not good at math, but I don't see how that's mathematically possible? How do thirty Fs equal a D-?"

He said, "Mary, I don't think I've ever had a student work as hard as you did. You refused to give up. If anyone deserved to pass, it was you." And before I could even think about tearing up, he added, "Plus I don't want to see you in my office hours ever again. Have a good semester."

I remember feeling stunned as I continued my walk to class. I'd never worked so hard for such a bad grade. I'd learned so much, and none of it was precalculus.

9. I didn't know the possibilities.

I took an American literature class. One of the primary texts we read was *The Scarlet Letter*. I'd already read *The Scarlet Letter* in high school, so I didn't plan on rereading it. I already knew what it was about! But when I got to class, I found discussion went in directions I hadn't anticipated. People were talking about parts of the book that I didn't remember and things I'd never noticed. I realized I probably should have reread the book, so I tried to catch up, but I was too far behind. By the time our *Scarlet Letter* paper was due, I'd only managed to reread the first few chapters. My paper was atrocious.

When my paper was returned to me, it didn't even have a grade on it. It just said, "Come see me." *Oh god. What does that mean? He knows I didn't read the book. He's going to yell at me. This is going to be awful.*

When I met with the professor, he asked, "Do you know what's wrong with your paper?"

Besides the fact that I didn't read the book? I hemmed and hawed and didn't know how to respond.

"Did you actually care about this?" he continued. "About the topic? About the paper?"

Wow. Thanks for calling me out. Yikes! But he was right. "No," I said.

"And it shows. You picked something you thought somebody else wanted to read, not something you care about. What do *you* want to say about *The Scarlet Letter*?"

I don't think anyone had ever framed a paper for me in that way before. *I get to choose what I want to write?* I'd always had prompts or questions to guide me, and there was this professor, throwing the door wide open and telling me to write whatever I

wanted. I probably wanted to write something like “5 Reasons Why I Hate *The Scarlet Letter*,” and he probably would have loved that. I don’t remember what topic I ended up choosing for my rewrite, but I do know that when he gave back my paper, I cared far more about his comment than the grade: “This is much better. I can tell it matters to you.”

10. I didn’t know how to navigate graduate school. I didn’t even know what it was.

I entered my master’s program three years after graduating from UMF, so I didn’t have a lot of guidance on the process. I realized very quickly that I was the only one in my cohort who didn’t seem to know how grad school worked. Most of my cohort already knew which professors they wanted to work with and what they wanted to research. I had no advisor and didn’t know how to get one. I had no research topic and didn’t know how to select one. I thought a master’s program was just two more years of classes, and that’s it.

I procrastinated for months before finally asking my favorite professor if he would be my advisor. I’m sure it was nothing out of the ordinary for him, but for me, the stakes were very high. If he said no, I didn’t know what I’d do. Luckily, he accepted me as an advisee, and we had several meetings to pin down a research topic for a thesis. I didn’t even know what a thesis was.

During one meeting, he asked me what I would research if I could research anything. Since I was studying mass communication, I named several books, movies, and TV shows that I liked, and my advisor wrote them all on his whiteboard.

Then he said, “Okay, pick one.”

I was stunned. “To write a thesis on? I can write about TV?”

“Absolutely. Why not?”

“No one takes TV seriously,” I said, remembering all the times I’d been scolded as a child for watching too much TV. People always told me it would rot my brain or make me lazy.

“That’s exactly why you should write about it. Make people take it seriously.”

So I did. I picked my favorite television show, the American version of *The Office*, and I wrote about the ways it represented and normalized surveillance.

As my defense approached, I was terrified. I’d never done anything like it. I didn’t know what to expect.

My advisor tried to calm my nerves. “The person who knows your research best is you. You are the expert in the room on this topic, not me, not anyone else. Act like it.”

So I tried my best.

I passed my defense with distinction.

My family, as proud as they were of me, couldn’t understand how taking more classes and writing papers about TV was going to get me a good job someday. The gap between us widened to a gulf.

11. I know the system wasn’t designed for people like me, but I persist.

I hope you can see now why I care so much about supporting all students through their transition to university life. Academia wasn’t designed with someone like me in mind: a low-income first-generation woman, now trying to complete a doctorate part-time while helping run a small business, working a full-time job, and supporting my own family. And I know that, as hard as this path has been for me, there are other people who tread an even rockier road.

I’ve asked myself many times why I keep going in a field that doesn’t do much to keep me. I keep going because I believe in higher education. I believe in its ability to transform lives because it changed mine. But it’s not perfect. I want it to be more equitable and accessible to more people than it ever has been before. I want the people behind me to have an easier time navigating this system because of the trails so many of us are clearing. I don’t want tomorrow’s students to struggle in the same way that I did.

But I’m still struggling. Recently during one of my grad courses, my classmates and I were overwhelmed by the workload. We tried several things to make it work but still couldn’t do it all. I reached out to our professor to express how much we were struggling, and I mentioned the weight of the pandemic and our many competing priorities. The professor wrote back to me, declining to reduce our workload and saying that, while it was unfortunate that we had all chosen to take on so many competing priorities at this time, academics should be our primary focus.

My response to that is plain and simply “No.” I didn’t choose to take on my family or my job or my business this semester. I didn’t choose to live during a pandemic. Those things were already a part of my life well before I started this course. I chose to take on *the class* at a time when I have so many other priorities, which

demonstrates how much I *do* care about my education. My classmates and my students choose to keep going with their coursework in spite of everything else happening in their lives. But we do exist outside of the classroom. We are students, but we are also employees, caregivers, spouses, parents, business owners, survivors.

Even though I've worked in higher ed for a decade now, I was still crushed and disheartened by the professor's response. This was yet another situation when I asked myself why I'm still fighting so hard to finish my degree. I thought about withdrawing from the course. I thought about quitting the doctoral program.

But then I realized something: Academia needs more people like me. I don't need to change to fit into the academic community. Academia needs to change to accept me and other people with diverse backgrounds and identities.

We're here already. Do you see us?

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Finding and Calibrating Your Moral Compass: Exploring Values and Methods in Teacher Education Courses

Cara Furman

“You lied, Professor Furman?” The question was asked with emphasis and incredulity by Katie,⁴ a senior in my early childhood literacy class. I knew Katie well -- this being her second class with me. She was a bright, curious student who always pushed the conversation deeper and was consistently brave enough to ask questions. The rest of the class seemed equally stunned. I too was incredulous. I had just made a comment that I did not see as about lying at all.

We had been studying assessment tools -- specifically one called a running record, used with beginning readers to record the words they know and don't know as they read basic texts. This is a common early elementary assessment and we were using a standard premade assessment form to guide our analysis. Each student had the form in front of them and we had just watched a video of a child reading. We were now reviewing the form to score the child's reading and determine whether the child was ready to read the next level of books. One of the questions was “does the child touch each word while reading?”

“This is an interesting question,” I had said, “what do you think it's getting at?” The students had determined that touching each word while reading could demonstrate one-to-one correspondence (one written word for each spoken word). This could provide a clue about whether the child had memorized the book or was actually reading it. “Most people though don't touch every word as they read,” I had added and continued, “Some people never use this strategy. From studying the child, I may have other indications about whether they have one-to-one correspondence and if they do, I might simply check the box even if they didn't technically do it.” This was the point where Katie expressed disbelief.

Getting over my surprise at her comment, I had responded, “well, I'm not sure I see this as lying because the goal of the question is to determine whether the child

⁴ I am grateful to the students mentioned in this paper for their original actions and their permission to tell these stories and use their names. Thank you also to their unnamed but influential classmates in ECH 201.

has one-to-one correspondence, and touching the words is simply one indicator. The purpose of the assessment is not so much to assess the level the child achieves as to determine whether they are ready for harder books. It's always a ballpark figure and depends on content as well. So yes, checking the box if I had other indicators might not be entirely factual but it gets at a bigger truth. I don't know. Maybe if I was turning this in officially I might explain exactly what the child did instead of lying, but honestly, making sure they get to read books that challenge them is more important than how this form is filled out."

The students seemed somewhat satisfied with the answer, but I got the sense from their animated body language that they remained intrigued. So was I. The issue, as it bore out that semester, seemed not only about the small lie, but something more deeply rooted: when as a teacher does one turn to one's own professional judgement, and how does the teacher determine how to do so? Further, how does one determine the right thing to do in a particular situation?

A few weeks later I was similarly caught off guard in the same course. We had reviewed a lesson from a popular curriculum and I had asked students what kind of modifications they might make. Instead of responding to my question, students expressed surprise that you could modify a curriculum. These students had already taken many education classes where, I was sure, my colleagues had stressed the importance of innovation, creating one's own curriculum, and modifying existing curriculum. They had been through half the semester with me and I had been emphasizing the importance of modifying activities all along. For example, on a weekly basis, students filled out a "What We Did Chart," in which they wrote down an activity we had done in class, shared the purposes for doing the activity, and then brainstormed how they could modify the activity (adapted from the New York Writing Project). I told them to record only activities that resonated with them -- believing that this further emphasized the value of their individual voices as teachers implementing curriculum. The students' surprise that you could modify the curriculum made me wonder how they were interpreting other coursework and what they actually thought being a teacher was all about.

Katie and her classmates' comments troubled what I had taken for granted as a teacher who is eager for such troubles -- seeing surprise, challenge, and problems as a way to reveal opportunities for growth. I set out to modify my curriculum to emphasize the importance of students' values and the link to their practices-- a process that has grown and shifted over the many semesters since. While what I do

naturally morphs somewhat from semester to semester, I have adopted some new practices:

I now start each semester with activities that ask students to reflect upon their values in a way that connects directly to teaching. For example, in one class students are asked to:

1. List the values they bring to teaching after reading a book that models this (Glover & Keene, 2015).
2. Draw pictures of themselves as a teacher that captures these values (Ticknor, 2016).
3. Explain the connection between the words and the image.

We constantly rehearse the connection between values and actions, analyzing videos and many of the activities we try in class to consider what the purpose of an action might be. For example, when a teacher sits among her students (as opposed to standing at the board) -- what differences in messaging and intention might be occurring?

Towards the end of the semester students build “values walls” (Korthagen, 2001). Given a handout with a series of “bricks” (rectangular boxes), they fill in as many bricks as they want with stated values. They then arrange the bricks in a manner that reflects their commitments. They might put foundational values at the bottom and build others up from them. They might arrange the bricks in a tree formation with core values as a trunk. They might put them in a circle. We then share the walls - highlighting both the values and the arrangement. For example, a student with a tree might comment that they put values they saw as permeating everything such as equity at the trunk and then smaller offshoots on branches such as “making sure students are physically comfortable in class.” Students with circles have commented that everything feels equally important.

This activity then leads into the final assignment, an “Annotated Reflective Portfolio.” This can be turned in as a google document, google slides, or in the form of a website. Students choose the format and arrangement -- again emphasizing the importance of them figuring out what form of presentation will best represent what they believe. Prior to my semester with Katie and her classmates, students would reflect in one assignment and create a resource binder in another. That semester, I wondered if the separation was problematic and I have since merged the two, with

students sharing both the activities they want to take from the class and the values behind why they chose each activity in the same place.

This portfolio pivots between expression of values and examples of how they play out. For example, the first question asks students to identify their core values and to list activities we've done during the semester that connect with those values. A student might write that they value learning through the whole body and give the example of the times we acted out stories we were reading. Students often choose to illustrate this section of the portfolio by including the values chart alongside their narrative.

Just as challenges and surprises reveal places where growth is needed, I also listen carefully to students for indications that the curriculum is resonating. A semester after Katie and her classmates caught me by surprise, Emily provided one such moment. In Emily's class, one assignment was implementing what I called a "strategy share"-- a short pre-planned lesson delivered to the whole class. In this sophomore level class, preparing for this activity is slow and many students find it a somewhat arduous and intimidating assignment. Working alone or in partners, students submit a tentative informal plan upon which they receive feedback. Two weeks before they will do the lesson in class -- they must submit a lesson plan using our department's template and then meet with me. In the meeting, we go through each element of the template -- particularly focusing on the sequence of the lesson, the materials needed, what an assessment might measure, and the goals. In other words, I ask students what they are trying to achieve with this lesson and we interrogate the plan to make sure it fits with that intention. In most cases, at this juncture, significant modifications are made to the lessons. These are new teachers and often while their intentions and ideas are great, they need help with the details of implementation.

Importantly, I build my feedback on their stated intentions -- telling them when I think a practice might not achieve a goal and why. I want the lessons to be their lessons (not mine) and I also want them to be successful so we are using class time well and so they feel accomplished in front of their peers. Emily's group shared with me an ambitious, original, and creative plan when we met. We fine tuned some elements and I offered some suggestions but ultimately all decisions were left in their hands.

A few weeks later, Emily and her group presented their lesson. It seemed to be going smoothly and the class was engaged. Directions had just been given when

suddenly Emily interrupted, “No. No. No. Hold on. Can I make a change, Professor Furman? This isn’t going to work the way we planned.”

“Ok, Emily,” I said with some trepidation. As it played out, it was revealed that Emily had identified an element of the lesson that was cumbersome--the challenges only becoming clear when, as often happens in teaching, she could suddenly truly imagine her classmates doing it now that they were in front of her.

Immediately, Emily switched gears, “I think it would work better like this.” She then gave a set of clear directions and the lesson, as she anticipated, went smoothly with her suggestions. After each lesson, students are asked to describe the “teaching moves” they saw the leaders of the lesson implementing and relay elements they felt worked. The leaders of a given lesson also send me a recording in which they reflect on how their lesson went and whether it fit with what they were trying to accomplish. Students are graded on completion of the activity and capacity to reflect on it-- not adherence to the original plan nor even the quality of the lesson itself.

Both Emily and her peers commented that seeing the power of making changes on the spot was transformative--demonstrating the challenges and nuance of teaching. One must know what one is trying to accomplish and have a range of ideas for how to accomplish this.

So what is at stake? In reviewing these stories, I want to emphasize a few points and then I will close with one more teaching moment. First, it is often stated that we want teachers to be reflective educators. To do so, teachers need to be able to connect what they believe to what they’ve done and they can only do so if they have the language and familiarity for considering what it is they actually value. When I contemplated filling out the assessment form not entirely accurately--I was weighing my value of helping children find books that fit their developmental level over what I saw as a smaller value -- filling out a form entirely accurately. When Emily stopped her classmates, she drew on what she had stated as her purpose with this lesson and, grounded in that purpose, made a change on the spot to better achieve it. In doing so, she also showed a commitment to creating a meaningful experience as opposed to adhering to a pre-established plan.

Second, in her work with first generation college students, Jennifer Morton (2019) cites studies that students who are able to reflect upon their values tend to navigate the challenges of a new cultural context and financial stresses more smoothly. Studying teachers who consider leaving the profession because of what they perceive

as moral injustices, Doris Santoro (2018) similarly finds that those who reflect on their values are better able to stay teaching and advocate in a manner that feels just.

My early childhood and elementary education students tend to be exceedingly polite, often quiet, and tentative about voicing concerns, questioning my practice outloud, and outwardly disagreeing. A striking theme of each of these interactions was the students assertiveness--Katie's offering a possible challenge in the form of a question, her classmates' admitting they did not know curriculum could be modified, and Emily bravely stopping her own lesson delivery, thinking on the spot in front of a watching set of peers and professor, and coming up with a new plan. If Morton and Santoro are correct, reflecting on values as we do in class may make it easier for students to be assertive--bolstering their clarity and confidence about their purpose.

Third, in his study of times of crises, Jonathan Lear (2006) argues that the capacity to survive in radically changed and difficult contexts is enabled by being able to adapt one's practices in alignment with a clear sense of one's values. Which brings me to my final story.

In March of 2020 I found myself, like my colleagues across the country, faced with a massive and abrupt upheaval. With just a few days to prepare, I had to turn my in-person classes entirely on-line, my students had to leave the campus, and we all had to find a way to do school in an entirely new way from our homes (many of which posed severe limitations on our capacity to engage with class). Even before students faced illness and death, this series of shifts and losses brought by the changes left many grieving and struggling.

As I mulled over what to do, I found myself turning to my core values: what did I need students to get from this class? In answer, I settled on the following key values: a sense of connection and community; the ability to feel seen and heard and cared for; the coverage of content that would enable them to support the children they would someday work with--we would need to find a way to learn phonics remotely; stability amidst chaos and change. In confirming these values, the next question became what methods would work for delivery? I ultimately went from teaching a course full of experiential activities on campus twice a week to sending weekly letters with places to comment and activities to try.

Though I initially felt nervous as I penned my asynchronous delivery of weekly letters while other faculty planned synchronous zoom classes, I kept checking back in on my key values. Was this version of the class meeting those intentions? Over time, a number of students expressed that asynchronous activities and sharing in writing kept

them feeling some semblance of community. Students wrote me detailed emails, communicated in assignments, and met with me one-on-one on zoom. I could still see them and hoped, in writing back detailed comments, they still felt seen. Reading their on-going and final work, it was clear the content was still being mastered. The simplicity of the medium (letter-writing) and the familiarity (we had already been communicating in writing through google docs once a week prior to moving remote) created a sense of routine and stability amidst some chaos.

Finally, in sharing my values in class from the start and reiterating them in the letters I wrote--I could communicate with students both what I was doing and why I was doing it in a language in which they were becoming increasingly fluent. The values serve as my compass, a way of calibrating and recalibrating what I do as a teacher. While I bring a lot of tools with me into my teaching, a set of reflected upon and refined values is one tool I find essential, especially whenever I must navigate new terrain. As I make connections between values and practice with increasing intentionality and ask my students to do the same, I hope I am equipping students with a tool that will help them find their way even--and especially when--the path is uncharted.

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The Art of BECOMING: Lessons from the Stage

Jayne Decker

A cigarette is a magnificent prop. The character grips a filter between thumb and second finger, drags to his mouth and smokes. A neck could turn with the exhale. The cigarette might dangle from a lower lip, perched on the edge of a monologue, lit on the final line. *It stays in his mouth while he speaks. How familiar does the character need to be with an unlit cigarette on his lip?* A minute might be an eternity of stage time. A cigarette placed in a holder defines a decade. Or an attitude. The character might wear gloves. Perhaps the cigarette comes in a case which opens like a compact, words inscribed in the silver. Blanche Dubois doesn't need a holder; the cigarette should be comfortable in her fingers. Blanche knows how to smoke. She does not wear gloves in this scene. When Mitch leans in with his match, her hand covers his, and she takes time--*perhaps three beats or four*-- to pull the smoke into her mouth. We believe he will fall where she tells him. The moment happens over a cigarette.

Details define a character. Actors study people. Characters, like the humans who portray them, have their own rhythm, handle objects, sit in a chair, sip from a glass. Actors consider the art of conversation, the way someone places elbows on a table, turns a fork, becomes distracted by a window. How an actor crosses through scenes depends on the relationship between character and object, space and physical presence. Motivation and intent drive the movement. Directors call this blocking. Crossing or taking a step begins with the feet, and shoes complicate the process. Worn sneakers. Tight leather. Heavy boots. *What do you feel through your feet?* We do not move across sand in the way we walk on a concrete sidewalk. *Will you step on that cigarette or grind it out with your heel?* Actors have choices.

For those of us with the great fortune to teach what we also love to do, the lessons in the art of becoming a character come from the perspective of standing on a stage. Our classroom is the theatre, and lessons emerge from this working space of performance. Students often begin their studies with the notion that the play happens directly in front of an audience in a space that is fixed. But then they begin work in a building that is quite alive with possibilities. We start with the actor on a stage. There is an audience, which may eventually be on a stage as well, on one side of it, or perhaps they surround an actor. *You may turn your back to the audience. Break that old habit of never looking away. If you don't turn your back, you lose a significant part of the character's body and a powerful stage picture.* The physicality of character includes shoulders. Weariness can be portrayed when actors turn away with arms that release the weight of a long day. *We don't always need to see your face.*

Actors discover they have hands. Sometimes they pay too much attention to their hands, and what they should do. Part of the art of becoming a character means to gesture in the moment. The character might reach from shoulders that are heavy with age or hard

work. Hands will follow and go where they need to in that moment. We discuss Stanley Kowalski in Act II. He eats meat with his hands, an indelicate consumption, nothing like the small bites Blanche takes from the edge of her fork. She tells a story about a parrot. She talks with her hands. She is uncomfortable and glances at her sister. *Look at the script and note the pauses. The other characters are silent. Except for the sound of eating.* Stanley's elbows brace the fingers that hold the food he puts in his mouth, turning the bone as he chews. The actor must eat this prop because he needs to speak with food in his mouth. Stella tells us his hands and face "are disgustingly greasy." He takes a beat and then clears the table with one sweep of his arm; plates break on the floor. The action is deliberate. And cruel.

Define the silence. Words are easier to manage. They are the gifts a playwright gives us. Lines are infused with meaning that a director and actor determine. We have beats and pauses within the dialogue. Punctuation. But what do we do with the silence that sometimes falls at the end of a scene or inside it, a moment when an actor holds the stage, and the audience leans forward, almost in unison--though they don't know that--and waits. The actor takes time, needs to own that time, define it for *us*, the ones who wait in the audience. We hold our collective breath. The actor might be alone, absent of even the smallest prop, left to define the silence with empty fingertips, with feet on the stage floor, a space that can become anything, a city park or a room or the stuff of a dream.

Actors often play characters that are nothing like the way they see themselves. Characters take actions that we would never take. Hamlet contemplates murder. Medea commits it. Sometimes the script requires us to say lines that don't fall easily from our mouths. As a director, as one who teaches students to think deeply about intent, to dig inside the characters they play, part of that lesson is giving them permission. Theatre students learn that sometimes crawling around in another pair of boots is awkward. Uncomfortable. And possibly frightening. Some plays demand this lesson because not all characters are "good". Actors may tell us that they are afraid of the characters they play. Directors need to listen. We need to be sensitive in teaching how to become, to understand that characters, like humans, are often complicated, flawed creatures. *Those words have context and meaning. They are terrible words, but they belong to this character you are playing.*

Directors, like actors, have choices. Part of teaching from the stage involves knowing when to choose the right play for the current time. Theatre is often a medium to respond to the world, and sometimes we just need the release of laughter. Comedy also requires students to be physically engaged, to stretch their limbs, learn to take a fall or throw a punch that misses. Everyone plies. In a commedia dell'arte class, we watch a series of film clips with no introduction and the sound muted. Nothing that identifies the story with dialogue we can hear. *You say this is comedy? How do you know? What defines the visual context as a comedic scene? How do you determine tone?* There is no laugh-track, no obvious set-up for the next line. What these

scenes and plays give us is the eloquence of expression, often broad physicality or the nimble gesture of pantomime. *We learn the weight of objects. A rock and a rose take different shape in our hands.* Characters respond beyond a visual and tactile sense. *What is the scent of that rose? Tell us without using words.* Pierrot must use the whole face to convey meaning. The character is frequently sad, moody in the moonlight. Stock characters give us comedy by repetition. We know what they will do. Pantalone falls. Harlequin woos. Columbine stomps and frets. El Capitano runs away. *Don't fall off the edge of the stage.*

Plays establish an environment. Actors inhabit the physical setting, an environment of story, the telling of place through a visual scene. A bare stage under blue light might be a space between mountains or the calm after a ship is tossed. A dark stage is its own place. Sound may be added to establish the tone of setting. *Actors. Begin here.* We start by listening and crawling inside the sensory experience of learning a character. *The stage is black. For several moments, there is no sound. Pause. A character breathes. And another. And another. Pause. Their breathing is distinctive. These are three different characters. What does each breath tell us?* This is the moment a character begins. Breath, as a basic life force, has a rhythm, and a history of being human. A child tumbles in the snow. An old woman climbs the stairs. A soldier hides in a field. For each, there is a breath, held or exhaled, rapid or steady. The soldier might feel the heart beating inside a chest in the way a child playing in snow does not. Characters, whether in dramatic moments or comedic dance, must breathe. Actors need to find the breath of the characters they play to start the rhythm of becoming. Performance changes with the intimacy of a small house when subtle details matter even more. Actors pull the audience in with a nod or a wrist that curls against an arm, a shiver. There might be a safety pin at the edge of a desk. The clasp might be unlatched. We watch. The stage business of handling the pin becomes intimate in its very smallness.

Acting includes giving and receiving. One of the most significant lessons from the stage is to teach actors the discipline of performance. The text tells us what we need to discover in rehearsals. Some actors have the tendency to paraphrase lines as they begin the process. But in the end, we miss something if there isn't adherence to the script. We lose a word or a dash or a question that the playwright asks us. A single beat can change the cadence. We might miss Elephant Trainer's tear. Juliet's taste of poison. Cripple Billy's sigh. The giving is the discipline to learn lines and movement, so the actor receiving knows the dialogue that follows. This does not mean that lines are never lost. Even the most practiced actor stumbles, loses a moment, reverses words. A scene partner can catch the fallen words and continue or respond with meaning when both actors know the lines. The great lesson follows when an actor works respectfully with text, has a comfort in knowing the words rather than searching for them in performance. *To be fully present, know your lines.* The choreography in a scene comes with blocking, rehearsing the movement with lines,

sometimes trying what doesn't work until actors find what does. The match is lit on the dark stage when Roat crosses to the table on *that line*. We only see part of his face for a moment, but it is enough. We are afraid for Suzy, a character who is blind, whose lit match is a weapon. The two actors must move in a precise choreography of dialogue and steps. The scene continues to play on a dark stage. The fight sequence goes on for several pages in the script. Each step is counted in rehearsals. The two actors need to know each other's breath as deeply as their own.

The art of becoming involves moving, staying still, handling a cigarette, taking off a jacket, knowing when to hold a beat or when a moment becomes a pause, breathing life into a character to play someone else. The immediacy of live theatre asks actors to trust what emerges in the process of becoming, to know when they get there, and to be ready to catch if needed for their ensemble. Thus in teaching theatre, we must also talk about letting go. *The play must move from my hands to yours.*

We are sentimental creatures, those of us who love the stage, the language of a play, the scent of old curtains. I often tell my students in acting and directing classes, or a cast on opening night, that the experience of performing a play is powerful in the transitory nature of what we create. A village. Verona. A family seated in a parlor. Ephemeral fog that hovers and disappears. The cast comes together for the rehearsals and the run, holds this certain and fleeting life until the final curtain call. The set is struck. The lights go off. Props are put away. Costumes are sorted in piles for mending and cleaning. We are left with the remnants of experience, the sentiment of a place that becomes most precious as the set disappears. If we have done our work well, the audience came along, watched our curragh pulled from the rocks, heard the clang of metal on iron bars, feared for the life of a character who held silence at the edge of a stage. And we take off our character's shoes. *End scene.*

Plays mentioned or alluded to in this essay include *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *Medea* by Euripides, *Elephant's Graveyard* by George Brant, *Wait Until Dark*, by Frederick Knott, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, by Martin McDonagh and *Coyote on a Fence* by Bruce Graham.

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Truth, Lies, and BS

Jonathan Cohen

Most of my teaching concerns the classic texts of the history of philosophy. My pitch to the students is that these classics convey timeless wisdom: though they were written long ago, they were written by people just like us, who just like us had to figure out how to find meaning in life, how to deal with our freedom, how to do right by our fellow humans, and so on. What I try to do in discussion, and what I want to see from them in their papers, is not only direct analysis of the text, but also application of this timeless wisdom to their own lives, or to the news, or to cultural artifacts, or whatever, from our own time.

Several years ago, however, I began to focus on a contemporary problem, the problem of truth in the age of the Internet. In my opinion, the problem of truth is THE political problem of our age. It's an old problem, of course, but cast in a new form with the rise of the Internet: The relatively few sources of information authority which prevailed in the 20th Century have been replaced with a plethora of webpages whose authority and accuracy are difficult to compare, some of them the work of irresponsible or even deliberately malicious creators. How can you tell, then, which information is true and which not? The result is a distressing degree of uncertainty. The way different segments of the population have responded to this uncertainty has left society deeply divided. Disagreements about how to deal with issues have always been with us, but the specter of being unable to find agreement even on what the facts are represents a whole new level of schism. And it seemed to me that the resources of philosophy could possibly be of some help.

My other route to this course came via the course I have taught most often at UMF, Critical Thinking. This is a course in informal logic focused primarily on the concept of argument. One of the most important points made in that course is that for an argument to be a good one, it needs not only for its premises to genuinely support its conclusion, but also for those premises to be true. What I used to tell students is that it's hard to know whether the premises in a given argument are true

unless you know the matter being discussed or are an expert in that field – not to mention the fact that truth is a difficult concept in its own right – and so we don't say much about truth in the course. Instead, we focus on implication, i.e. the relationship between premises and conclusion. The idea is to equip students to apply what they've learned about argument to material in their other, more specialized courses, as well as other facets of their lives. The course examples, then, treat only the simplest matters: All beagles are dogs, All dogs are mammals, Therefore all beagles are mammals; etc.

However, the rise of the Internet, and the splintering of the media landscape, has made it clear that this isn't good enough. Critical Thinking students are as puzzled and troubled by the problem of truth in the age of the Internet as the rest of us. And so most Critical Thinking textbooks now include a chapter on media literacy, as well as discussions throughout the book related to the problem of truth. In support of this new textbook chapter, as well as to impress students with the importance of critical thinking as a solution to this problem, I began to clip news articles that dramatized the issue and from time to time shared them with the class: "Americans Struggle to Identify Facts," "How Fiction Becomes Fact on Social Media," "News Literacy – The Seven News Habits You Need to Develop," etc. This too is a matter of finding philosophy in everyday life, as I've always done, but now focused on this one pressing issue. Before long, my "clippings" folder, along with my pdf "folder," grew too big for one class, and the need for philosophical intervention became too large to fit in alongside the nuts-and-bolts work of learning the techniques of argument analysis that remain the bread and butter for that course. I realized that this material, and the problem on which it shines a light, deserved a stand-alone course.

The triggering mechanism was a small display at the cash register of our town bookstore: a hardbound edition of an essay by philosopher Harry Frankfurt entitled, "On Bullshit." It was meant to be an impulse buy while waiting for your credit card to be authorized, and it worked on me. The essay is brilliant, and it inspired me to build that new course, and thus was born "Truth, Lies, and BS."

Why not "Truth, Lies, and Bullshit"? The reason is that the course is open to first-year students, and at UMF entering students register via an online system that they get access to while still living at home, at the end of high school. I didn't want a vulgar word to appear on the screen with their parents looking over their shoulders (or possibly even doing the clicking through the course listings themselves). Because Frankfurt's work has made "bullshit" a technical term in my field, I tell the students on the first day that it's fine to use it in class discussion and in their papers, and most

of them revel in the opportunity to do so. In case there are others for whom the term remains uncomfortably vulgar, I myself often say or write “BS” to avoid putting them off (and because it’s conveniently shorter).

The three terms in the course title are not parallel. “Truth” refers to the accuracy of statements; the opposite term is neither “lies” nor “bullshit” but rather “falsehood.” The word “lies”, meanwhile, is a moral term whose opposite is not “truth” but rather “honesty.” Note that a person who is lying might well say something true by mistake, yet still be culpable for meaning to lie. By the same token, a person trying to be honest might be innocently misinformed, and even the latest, most well-attested science might turn out to be mistaken. There’s even what we might call honest lying, i.e. lying quite deliberately and openly so as to make a point – this is what happens in fiction, or sarcasm. There are more variants than can be listed in a course title limited to thirty characters in length.

What, then, is bullshit? Frankfurt defines it in terms of the person who speaks or writes it: the bullshitter. He points out that liars still care about the truth, since liars are concerned that the rest of us not find out (what they believe to be) the truth. Bullshitters, however, don’t care about truth or falsity at all. If they say something true, fine. On the other hand, if they say something false, that’s fine too, as long as they get what they’re after. Liars are misleading their listeners as to what the truth of a situation is; bullshitters are misleading their listeners as to what their intentions are. Their statements are not necessarily false – they’re phony.

What is it that bullshitters are seeking? All kinds of different things: Maybe they are trying to strike a certain pose, or give an impression of themselves as knowledgeable, caring, or patriotic. Maybe they are trying to get something from the person listening: win a vote, make a sale, score a sexual conquest, or earn a passing grade (students do not miss the irony here). Whatever their goal, the truth or falsity of what they say is of no concern to them so long as what they say succeeds in accomplishing its purpose.

Frankfurt begins his essay, “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share.” He notes that in general people tolerate bullshit more than lying, even expect it in many situations, and thus lots of people regularly get away with it: advertisers, seducers, students, politicians, etc. As a student named Julia admitted, “[I]t was because [my friend] didn’t care enough to fabricate the lie that I didn’t care enough to be angry with them when I caught them bullshitting.”

During the course of the semester, my students came up with many wonderful examples of bullshit. Malcolm spotted it in the way his friend always tacked "or something" onto the end of every sentence, apparently trying to absolve himself of responsibility for the accuracy of his statement. Abriana thought the CDC was bullshitting to cover up the fact that they didn't know very much about the coronavirus. Kiras confessed to having BS-ed as a waitress: She played along with customers' assumptions that she must be heartbroken about the way the pandemic had robbed her of her high school graduation ceremony, even though really she hadn't missed it at all, in order to get sympathy and bigger tips. At one point the class had a lively debate on whether Santa Claus is a lie or bullshit.

The growth of bullshit in politics over the last thirty years has become so severe that the phenomenon has developed a new name: "post-truth." Post-truth refers to a time period, or particular circumstances, during which bullshit has so decayed political discourse that delivery of falsehoods by politicians brings no negative consequences for them. Truth used to matter, the term implies, but no longer. Included in the post-truth phenomenon are other gray-area phenomena: selective honesty (truth, but not the whole story), willful ignorance (not lying, but blithely keeping oneself in the dark), redescriptive spin (the truth, but worded in such a way as to alter its plain intent or place it in a different context), and of course propaganda (e.g. "the big lie"—a lie repeated so often that people come to think of it as true), etc. These are not the same as BS, but they work the same way to promote cynicism about truth.

Two political developments in 2016 generated the development of the term "post-truth" and the attention of philosophers to it. The Trump phenomenon, in which a veteran practitioner of World Wrestling Federation hype won election in November of that year to the most powerful office in the world, was actually the second event. The first was the Brexit vote in June. The Vote Leave organization promulgated a variety of false statements, the most notorious of which was that Britain was sending £350 million every week to the European Union, money that could instead be routed to the National Health Service. Ads featuring this claim—which ignored the fact that Britain was also taking in £350 million every week from the European Union, and that the National Health Service was in perfectly adequate financial condition—were placed on buses all over the country, and these ads had their desired effect. Politicians aligned with Leave admitted right after the election that

they would not have won their narrow victory without that claim, and that the claim was entirely false. And yet they suffered no consequences – one of them became Prime Minister Johnson in July of 2019.

The Trump phenomenon is similar, only without the Brits' nonchalant, after-the-fact vocal admission of having thrown bullshit. To the contrary, Trump and his surrogates have taken the opposite tack by doubling down on his falsehoods, and thus we have "alternative facts" (Kelly Anne Conway), "truth isn't truth," (Rudy Giuliani), and so on. I am not entirely sure what is cause and what is effect, but the result is that American political culture is now rife with the fallacies that are defined and studied in Critical Thinking. For example, many textbooks include a fallacy called "Freshman relativism," alluding to the way first-year students, exposed to differences of opinion between experts in the fields they're studying and between their prior subculture at home and the much wider world they're now exposed to, reduce everything to difference of opinion. Since our whole society seems to commit this fallacy daily, the term really, in my opinion, is tantamount to an ethnic slur against freshmen. "That's just your opinion" is something climate scientists, among other experts, have gotten used to hearing. Another textbook fallacy, "False Equivalence," grows out of this quite naturally: Climate change deniers now point gleefully to "the anti-Greta": "You've got your north European female teenager who thinks climate change is real, but we've got our north European female teenager who thinks it isn't – so there!" And then there's "Poisoning the Well" – fact-checkers are human, therefore they're biased, therefore you can ignore them.

Everyone, it seems, now suffers from first-year relativism: You have your website, and I have mine, so who knows what the truth is? And so people feel licensed to believe what they prefer to believe. Some people think the climate is changing, but "My lilac's never done better." In the time of post-truth, everyone is a bullshitter, whether speaking or listening. Yarrow, in one of her papers, found a pithy way to link bullshit and post-truth: "Bullshit is caused by the speaker's disregard for spreading the truth, while post-truth refers to the consumer's disregard for absorbing the truth." In this cynical environment, people either hold on to whatever belief they prefer, or simply value other things higher than truth, such as their identity: Brexit supporters apparently decided that the importance of leaving outweighed the importance of truth, similar to the way many Republicans have decided that their identity as Trump supporters is more important than the truth about the November

2020 election. “I am a certain kind of person” comes first, and this then entails believing in X, because X is a belief that goes along with that identity.

Having defined post-truth, the course now asks where it came from. Lee McIntyre, in his book *Post-Truth*, traces it to the science denialism fomented by tobacco companies seeking to cast doubt on the research showing that cigarette smoking causes cancer, as well as to the decline of the authority of traditional media, the rise of quality-control-free social media, and even the academic philosophical view known as postmodernism. He concedes that confirmation bias, an underlying feature of human cognition as old as our species, is what drives people through the opening created by post-truth.

Sophia Rosenfeld argues that the problem of post-truth goes back to the founding of the Republic. The rise of democracy was accompanied by the rise of an ideology proclaiming that everyone could equally access the new information provided by science, and so, just as political control in the form of monarchy became obsolete, so too did the knowledge control of the Church and other traditional sources. However, this promise of democratic cognition was never fulfilled, as access to education was highly unequal in the eighteenth century, and the divide was exacerbated by the rise of specialized, technical sciences in the nineteenth century.

Our current problem of post-truth, according to Rosenfeld, results from a sociological split between “the experts” and “the people,” each guilty of disregarding the cognitive expertise of the other and believing itself to have a monopoly. It might seem odd to attribute cognitive expertise to “the people,” but this is one of the most interesting things about Rosenfeld’s analysis. What “the experts” lack, she argues, is the direct life experience that “the people” possess. For example, the European Union regulates fishing from a building in Brussels, unaware of what workers in the fishing community are seeing from their boats. A more recent example might be the disconnect during the early months of the pandemic between the public health experts working from epidemiological data and people in parts of the country not yet affected by COVID-19. As if to bear out Rosenfeld’s contention, one of my students opined in a paper that honest, “normal” people don’t lie the way experts do to cover their asses, and of course I, the professor with a doctorate, bristled at her remark. According to Rosenfeld’s analysis, the sociological split opens the barn door, so that when an ideology comes along telling “the people” that it’s okay to disregard the information conveyed by “the experts” because they’re human and therefore biased too, the result is post-truth.

In his chapter on solutions, McIntyre pushes for aggressively combating falsehood by calling out lies and repeating truths as long as it takes to overcome confirmation bias. In addition, he argues that we must recognize and battle confirmation bias in ourselves and that a large part of this effort can be achieved simply by diversifying our news sources. For her part, Rosenfeld emphasizes the social conditions of knowledge. Free speech does not necessarily emerge from the free market, she argues, since inequality makes some voices louder than others and divides people who should be sharing experiences. In the capitalist world, people do not share lived realities, and so cannot be expected to share the same reference points of truth. She passes along a suggestion from Frederick Schauer that the First Amendment might need to be clarified as applying to advocacy rather than information – that is, the free speech that’s protected is the right to advocate for anything, not the right to generate and disseminate disinformation.

I’m still thinking about these matters, but it does seem to me that McIntyre is more insightful about truth – i.e. the relevance of science denial, confirmation bias, and postmodernism to our current post-truth situation – but Rosenfeld is more insightful about politics: The eighteenth century establishment of American democracy assumed an electorate that might have disagreements, but which would still be living in the same epistemic world. This has turned out to be problematic not only because of media changes but because of underlying divisions of identity, economics, etc. McIntyre identifies the conceptual roots of the problem, Rosenfeld the human roots of the problem. Is the remedy having multiple news sources and a critical thinking attitude? Or is it knowing someone one disagrees with but still respects and feels sympathy for?

At this point the course sets aside its focus on the contemporary situation and opens itself to the resources of philosophy that might help sort things out, as we read *True to Life*, by Michael Lynch. Lynch does a lot to restore students’ faith in the objectivity and importance of truth. “If I know anything,” he says early on, “it is that I don’t know everything and neither does anyone else.” Later, Lynch rephrases this slogan to apply to political society: “[I]f there are two things I know, it is that I don’t know everything, and neither do those in power.” Along the way, Lynch explains the three leading philosophical theories about truth – correspondence, coherence, and pragmatism – and includes chapters on the importance of truth for personal happiness and for liberal democracy, as well as one on lying. Most valuably, Lynch combines his argument for the existence of objective truth with an acknowledgment

that people think differently about things: “Truth is less like money than it is like love: it is objective in its existence, subjective in its appreciation, and able to exist in more than one form.” This is the view that I know as Nietzschean perspectivism, and which I explain to the class (and in several of my other courses) early in the semester, both to honor their sense that someone who insists that their own take on things is objectively true is being a bully (what Nietzsche calls a “dogmatist”), and at the same time to try to keep them from falling into a cynical, self-defeating relativism. There can be more than one way to put the truth, says the perspectivist, but not all ways are equally good.

Our final reading comes from Nelson Goodman, a philosopher who is, I believe, a perspectivist, even if he doesn’t call himself by that name. Goodman argues that works of art convey truth just as much as sentences do. But obviously there can be multiple, equally legitimate “worldversions,” as he terms them, whether from different artists or even from the same artist. Truth is a matter of correspondence to a world, but there is no single world that all versions must be true to. Thus Goodman thinks of truth as subordinate to “rightness of fit”: “Rather than attempting to subsume descriptive and representational rightness under truth, we shall do better, I think, to subsume truth along with these under the general notion of rightness of fit.” In a footnote to this sentence, Goodman denies that “any ready-made world lies waiting to be described or represented,” and also denies that “wrong as well as right versions make worlds they fit.” In this way he blocks the move often made in the post-truth era asserting that the things one wants to believe are simply “alternative facts.” On the contrary, the assertion of a worldversion doesn’t ipso facto create a world where it fits. The big lie that Trump won the 2020 election doesn’t create its own reality, which people are as free to believe as they are the actual reality; it’s simply false.

One of the most fun aspects of the course, for me, is the opportunity to show two movies. Since people in the post-truth era throw around the term “gaslighting” so often - e.g. “Our opponents are gaslighting the American people” - I thought it would be instructive (as well as fun), for the students to find out what that term means in its original context. *Gaslight* (1944) tells the story of a man who wages a campaign of relentless lying and bullshit in order to entrap in marriage a woman whose ancestral home contains jewels he once tried and failed to steal; after marrying her and moving into the house, he continues the campaign in order to convince her that she has lost her mind and so must be committed and leave the house to him. The students get the

point right away, and enjoy trying to distinguish his various stratagems as lying or bullshit. The way he sets up a social situation in which the woman is isolated, and thus helpless, reflects Rosenfeld's attention to the social features of our grasp of truth (as well as transparently matches the way sexual predators isolate and entrap their prey – I must admit that I show the students this film in part so they will be alert for predators trying to do this to them). In the end, it is a human connection the woman makes with a detective – cemented by a crucial material proof of his probity – that saves her from the abyss.

Our other film is *Rashomon* (1950), to which Lynch makes reference in his Epilogue. *Rashomon* depicts perspectivism gone horribly wrong: Four people tell the story of a samurai's death in a forest clearing, each telling the story in such a way as to put themselves in the best light. However, the stories conflict with each other in such a way that none of them can be fully true, and the movie ends with this tension unresolved. The message is powerful: There must be a truth of the matter, but with only human worldversions to go on, we must accept that our knowing has limits.

The movie opens with a famous image of the sun obscured by haze and treetops, and I chose a similar image to be the banner of the electronic platform where course documents were stored and to which students uploaded their writing assignments. The image says to me that truth is there, and it is hard for us to see, but we must nevertheless try. Blackburn argues that truth is not in danger from post-truth, since the former is required for the latter's definition, and is at any rate necessary for life. As Lydia said, "We would rather know we have spinach in our teeth than go the whole day having spinach in our teeth." My hope is that my students will be able to resist the cynicism about truth all around them and continue to pursue it, in their classes and in their lives after graduation. A liberal arts education, everyone agrees, is supposed to prepare students for engaged citizenship, and I would contend that *Truth, Lies, and BS*, despite its semi-vulgar title, is very much a contributor to that goal.

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The Stream of Life: Rethinking Experiential Education at a Public Liberal Arts College

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In this age of buzzwords and best practices, we would do well to return to a simple question: *What does it mean to be a good teacher at a public liberal arts college?* Lectures, we are warned, reinforce a passive -- even conformist -- learning style. In the traditional college classroom, students listen to extended monologues, take notes, and go through the motions of documenting their knowledge on midterms and final exams. We would do better, this story goes, if we could find ways to get students *actively involved* in their own education, through internships, independent research projects, discussion-based classroom exercises, and other meaningful experiential learning activities.

While we sympathize with this narrative, we fear that a preoccupation with the activities of students will lead us to downplay the qualities that *teachers* bring to the educational table. For example, lectures are typically considered among the least “experiential” modes of education. Yet we have all experienced the raw power of a life-changing lecture. In the right hands, lectures inspire us to think about ourselves and our world in new ways, and these effects extend well beyond the classroom. Consider here the viral status of certain Ted Talks (e.g., Chimamanda Adichie’s *The Danger of A Single Story*), as well as the continued profitability of *The Teaching Company* (also known as *The Great Courses*), a company that is solely focused on packaging and selling lectures.

As teachers at a public liberal arts college, we recognize the importance of providing our students with immersive educational experiences. But experience *as such* is not the path to wisdom. The contemporary experiential learning literature also highlights the critical role played by reflection, and Kolb and Kolb (2017) take care to remind us that “the learning cycle is driven by the integration of action and reflection and experience and concept” (p. 14). But this raises more questions than it answers. Why should students want to *reflect* on their experience? And why should their musings resemble anything we’d like to see emerge from a liberal arts education?

These questions cannot be answered if we limit our focus to instructional technique. A full understanding of the developmental implications of a liberal arts education requires a consideration of the *relational context* in which students freely assume the roles of committed professionals and lifelong learners. Our primary question thus becomes: What sort of *teacher* is especially likely to promote a student's intellectual, professional, and personal development?

To shed light on these matters, we would like to return to the writings of an early proponent of experiential education: Carl Rogers. For Rogers (1967), a distinction is appropriately made between a purely cognitive form of learning (narrowly focused on content mastery) and a "significant" or "experiential" form of learning that involves "the whole person, in both his cognitive and affective aspects" (p. 42). Such experiential learning makes a difference -- in the individual's behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes, and in his personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence. (Rogers, 1967, p. 42)

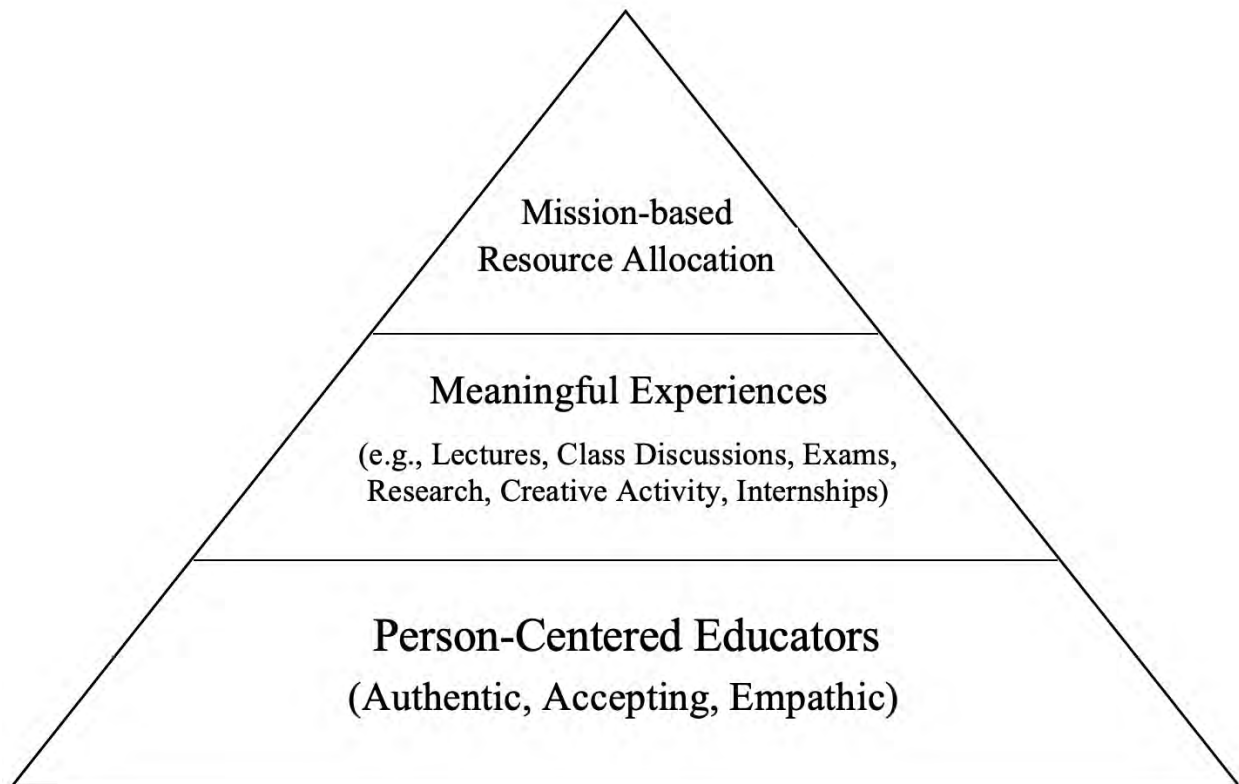
If the value of experiential learning seems obvious to us, we should remind ourselves that teachers have no special claim on the personhood of their students. Simply put, there is no guarantee that activities that seem important to us will be valued by anyone else. Indeed, higher education is as marred by pointless experiential learning activities as it is by boring lectures. The first task of a liberal arts college, then, is to foster a climate in which students can discover the need for what we have to offer.

In the remainder of this essay, we would like to share an imaginative re-interpretation of Rogers' account of the conditions that facilitate experiential learning. From a Rogerian perspective, experiential learning is not limited to activities organized by teachers or sponsored by institutions. It includes every facet of the student's life outside of an educational setting (e.g., work, family). There is certainly value in crafting educational experiences that promote social, intellectual, and professional development (e.g., internships, research opportunities). But students are no less active when they reflect on their own lived experience. So considered, experiential learning is not limited by place or activity. It can happen inside or outside the classroom. It can take the form of an original research project or a well-crafted poem. It might involve a trip to a local museum, or sitting on the couch contemplating yesterday's lecture in *Contemporary Moral Problems*.

Rogers identifies three facilitative conditions for experiential learning: (a) a confrontation with a meaningful problem, (b) an authentic, accepting, and empathic teacher, and (c) the availability of relevant resources (e.g., laboratory equipment). Our re-interpretation of Rogerian theory is schematized in Figure 1. We consider qualities of the teacher as primary, and these qualities shape the teacher's ability to provide students with meaningful educational experiences (inside and outside the classroom). Resource allocation,

in turn, should be guided by the mission of the university in concert with the communal wisdom that emerges out of the teacher-student relationship.

Figure 1 Experiential Learning: Facilitative Conditions



Facilitative Condition #1: Person-Centered Educators

One lesson that might be taken from the “best practices” literature is the recognition that faculty are more-or-less interchangeable. It hardly matters *who* is teaching the course, as long as the instructor employs appropriate techniques. But Rogerian theory reminds us that the personal qualities of the teacher (beyond subject matter expertise) are critical to the educational mission of a liberal arts college. Specifically, Rogers identifies three “essential attitudes” of teachers that facilitate experiential learning: authenticity (or “realness”), acceptance, and empathy.

Authenticity. According to Rogers, “when the facilitator is a real person, being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a facade, he is much more likely to be effective” (p. 43). Such a teacher “is a *person* to his students, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement” (p. 44).

At a surface level, this implies that the teacher is comfortable with their own fallibility. It is easy enough to recognize that good teachers are willing to admit that they do

not have “all the answers.” But this sense of fallibility should extend to one’s very personhood. For example, one of the present authors recalls an incident when they publicly critiqued a student’s presentation a little too harshly. Bothered by this incident for the next few days, they eventually wrote an email to the student, and to the class, apologizing for what was said and noting that certain recent episodes in their life might explain their harsh response to a student’s work. This was an authentic expression of personal fallibility. In effect, students in the class had the opportunity to participate in an experiential learning exercise that accented the difficulty of maintaining sharp boundaries between our personal and professional lives.

Another example of such genuineness comes from a class on death and dying, in which one of the present authors invites students to face mortality, their own and those that they love. In the first few years of teaching the class, the professor felt somewhat of a hypocrite because she had avoided writing her will, despite knowing (and teaching) the importance of death preparation. The following year, while lecturing about a theory on ways to alleviate death anxiety, she shared with the class that she had not written a will, and assigned herself this task as a final project. She further shared that part of her block was choosing someone to care for her son, a guardian who would raise him with the values important to her and her husband. A student who sometimes made abrasive comments raised his hand and asked, “Isn’t what’s most important that they love your son?” It was an eye-opening moment that brought her closer to achieving her goal, and though she missed the final project deadline, students attempted to keep her accountable both during and after the class.

The next year, during a guest speaker’s lecture, she discovered that if both she and her partner died, her children would be placed in foster care in the United States rather than with family members in her country of citizenship. The shock and fear associated with this realization re-ignited her motivation to write a will. , And yet by the following fall, she still had not done so, and again, in front of the class, she assigned herself the project of writing a will. In sharing her experience openly with multiple cohorts of students, she modeled that even people who have studied the topic extensively struggle with issues surrounding their mortality. When finally she succeeded in writing her will, she chose to sign it in front of that year’s class of students. When students in the class insisted it be notarized (not required according to Maine law), she consented and two students acted as witnesses in front of a university notary. Although unique, this example highlights a professor’s role as an authentic co-learner.

A less obvious corollary of embracing authenticity as a value is the importance of aligning our pedagogy with our personhood. We each have unique talents. Some of us are at our best facilitating discussion and constructing knowledge with students. Others thrive in the lecture hall. Still others realize their potential out in the field. If there were a “best

practices” literature for conductors, Leonard Bernstein would be entitled to ignore it. So too, authentic teachers must be *their own* best practices. And, as students come to appreciate the diversity of their teachers, they find reason to embrace their own individuality.

Acceptance. As a counselor, Rogers recognizes the critical importance of providing clients with unconditional positive regard. Regardless of what the counselor might think about specific behaviors, the client needs to feel valued as a person for meaningful change to occur. Rogers (1967) makes a similar claim about acceptance as an essential attitude on the part of teachers:

When the facilitator values the individual learner as having worth and this prizing extends to each and all the facets of this individual, then the likelihood of experiential learning taking place is greatly increased....Such a teacher can accept the student's occasional apathy, his desire to explore by-roads of knowledge, as well as his disciplined effort to achieve major goals...What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities. It means that the facilitator cares for the learner in a nonpossessive way, willing for him to be a separate person. His prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of his essential confidence in the capacity of the human organism. (p. 44)

Rogsonian acceptance should not be read as an endorsement of all behaviors. On the contrary, students are accepted as imperfect beings who occasionally make the wrong choices. If we want our students to take responsibility for their education, it matters that their personhood is respected by authentic, supportive mentors who, for their part, continue to make their own mistakes.

This attitude of acceptance, it should be clear, can never be formalized on a syllabus. Rather, it is reflected in the 1001 ways that teachers relate to their students: lectures, in-class discussions, conversations outside of class, email correspondence, formal exams, etc. Students should feel free, for example, to entertain ideas in class discussions that are reflective of their personhood, even if they fail to align with the values that inspired the course. Well-constructed exams can similarly be considered as opportunities for self-expression. For instance, a final exam in General Psychology asks students to reflect on five theories (or research domains) that they consider to be their personal “greatest hits” of the course (e.g., Attachment Theory, the “Big 5” Personality Theory; Operant Conditioning, the malleability of memory). Students are also asked to provide (1) a description that demonstrates their understanding of the theory, (2) a real world example from their own experiences or observations, (3) an explanation of why they found the theory meaningful, and (4) why they expect that the theory will continue to be personally relevant in subsequent years. In effect, the exam is as much a personal statement as it is a documentation of learning.

Of course, the expression of personal values is not appropriate on every exam. Yet any open-ended question provides opportunities for self-expression insofar as there are countless ways to craft a high-scoring response. A Rogerian approach to constructing exams is predicated on the assumption that students do not merely want to learn. Rather, they are seeking opportunities to express what they know to an *appreciative, informed, and constructively critical* audience. As such, assessment is not simply an opportunity for the teacher to determine whether students have met specific learning goals. It is also an important episode in the *ongoing dialogue* between teacher and student, and this dialogue is ultimately integrated into a narrative of acceptance.

This acceptance is not blind to a student's faults and limitations. Yet, regardless of academic performance, the effective instructor displays unconditional positive regard for the student *as a fellow learner*. One corollary of this attitude is that they are willing to entertain questions that don't have clear answers. For example, one of the present authors was once sitting in a lecture hall with hundreds of her undergraduate peers. The class was Abnormal Psychology and the professor asked students to consider "What is the lobotomy of our times?" This question elicited considerable reflection on the part of the author, then and for decades to come. What will we realize, 25 years from now, that we are doing that is harmful to people with mental disorders? What will future generations critique about our approach to mental health? She now asks the same question of her students and hopes that it will haunt them, yet encourage them to think in a deep and complex manner about the field of clinical psychology, just as it did for her.

Empathy. For Rogers, an effective teacher is not simply accepting of their students. The teacher also needs to see the world from the student's point of view. According to Rogers (1967), "when the teacher has the ability to understand a student's reaction from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of experiential learning is increased" (pp. 44-45).

The importance of empathy comes into sharp focus when we consider exams, term papers, and other class assignments. As we review our students' work, we come to better understand their unique ways of thinking and being. Our empathy is further displayed in our willingness to work closely with students as they struggle to prepare for exams and complete assignments. One of the present authors provides students with an opportunity to participate in a "question and answer" session the evening before every exam. These are not review sessions, as the instructor has no intention of providing additional clues regarding the likelihood of specific material appearing on the exam. Rather, they are opportunities for students to ask questions about anything for as long as they want. Typically, these Q&A sessions last 30 minutes to an hour, but the record to date is approximately five hours. Such sessions make it clear that we are willing to *suffer with* our students and consider how the class might be experienced from their point of view.

Empathy is also key to realizing two other conditions of experiential learning: (a) the determination of what students are likely to experience as meaningful, and (b) the effective coordination of educational resources. In other words, good teachers are keenly aware of the interests and challenges confronted by students, whether considered as individuals or groups (e.g., athletes, 1st generation college students).

Facilitative Condition #2: An Encounter with a Meaningful Problem

According to Rogers (1967), “there is no doubt that...[experiential] learning takes place most effectively when the individual is face-to-face with a problem which is meaningful to him, a problem to which he desires to find a solution” (p. 43). As such, effective teachers have mastered the art of *making material meaningful*, whether presented in the form of a lecture, an assignment, or an activity. For example, to clarify the importance of the encoding specific principle in a cognitive psychology class (which stipulates that information is more likely to be recalled if we can re-establish the conditions in which it was learned), one of the present authors tells the story about how a specific song has the power to bring back sad memories from the distant past -- not because the song itself is sad (quite the contrary), but because they frequently heard it on the radio during a sad time. Students are invited to reflect on their own experience of memories that might be triggered by re-encountering stimuli present at the time of encoding. Though the instructor did not deviate from “lecture mode” for a single moment, this experiential learning activity encouraged students to think about memory and the autobiographical self in new ways.

Another example of a meaningful experiential learning activity is the psychobiography project assigned by one of the present authors in a course entitled “Personality Theory and Research”. This project requires that students apply ideas explored in the course as expository tools to better understand the life and works of a notable artist, writer, politician or public figure. The professor uses this activity to introduce students to her own psychobiography work (on aviation pioneer Beryl Markham) and then asks students to choose a biographical figure that they find compelling (past favorites have included Jackson Pollock, John Muir, Stephen Colbert and Mother Theresa). The students read extensively on their selected figure, and then consider their life in relation to attachment theory, Murray’s account of human motivation, Horney’s psychoanalytic theory, the “Big 5” model of personality traits, and numerous other theoretical systems. In effect, the theories cease to be mere abstractions. Rather, they are *brought to life* in the personhood of an historical figure.

But what are we to do when the material appears to be of little relevance to our students’ lives? For starters, we doubt that there is any material that falls into this category. Whether we are discussing mitochondria or linear algebra, there’s always a way to tie it back (directly or indirectly) to issues that matter to students. Sometimes, it is necessary for students to have completed certain prerequisites before they can fully appreciate the content

of specific courses, and a central challenge of curricular design is to arrange programs in such a fashion that students are *primed* to recognize the significance of material in upper-level courses before this significance is ever made explicit. To this we might add that educators can help students recognize the “realness” of specific problems by authentically *living* these problems as members of an academic community. For example, environmental sustainability is not simply a theme to be integrated into a college curriculum. Rather, it is a problem *lived* by authentic educators who fear for the future of the planet and are concerned about the many communities already impacted by climate change. If students must ultimately decide for themselves whether to embrace an ethics of sustainability, they can hardly fail to recognize -- indeed *feel* -- the existential weight of the issue.

Facilitative Condition #3: Educational Resources

As important as relationships may be to shaping the liberal arts experience, a Rogerian account of experiential learning also implies that students are actively involved in their own education. Such experiential learning is all the more meaningful when institutions can provide access to relevant resources, whether material (e.g., lab equipment) or personal (e.g., “contact with individuals whose work or experience can contribute to the learning”; Rogers, 1967, p. 45). But Rogers also recognizes that resources -- no matter how plentiful -- must be put to good use. According to Rogers (1967), “much of the effectiveness of the facilitator depends upon his imaginative organization of resources and his ability to make these resources easily and psychologically available to the learner” (p. 45).

The effective teacher is thus akin to an orchestra conductor. It is not enough to have instruments at one’s disposal (e.g., document cameras, or funding to support travel to conferences). It is critical to know *when* and *how* to let them play, and the musical score (or the “best practices” literature) is never quite enough. A quality performance is rooted in the wisdom of authentic, accepting, and empathic teachers sufficiently “in tune” with their students as to meaningfully deploy educational resources.

Coda

Experiential learning is not an internship. It is not a class discussion. It is not a research project. Rather, experiential learning is simply *life considered as an unfinished story*. As part of this story takes place in a college setting, we all have an opportunity to participate in the act of narration.

Rogers’ conception of experiential learning may be most vividly on display in his extensive writings on person-centered counseling. Indeed, it would be difficult to separate his philosophy of education from his account of psychological well-being. In *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy*, Rogers (1956) observes that:

adjectives such as happy, contented, blissful, enjoyable, do not seem quite appropriate to any general description of this process I have called the good life, even though the person in this process would experience each one of these at the appropriate times. But the adjectives which seem more generally fitting are adjectives such as enriching, exciting, rewarding, challenging, meaningful. This process of the good life is not, I am convinced, a life for the fainthearted...It means *launching oneself fully into the stream of life*. Yet the deeply exciting thing about human beings is that when the individual is inwardly free, he chooses as the good life this process of becoming. (pp. 195-196; emphasis added)

Experiential learning, as we understand it, is consubstantial with the Rogerian “stream of life”. If we have anything to add to Rogers’ insights, it’s that “launching” oneself into this experiential stream must be narrated, and never simply lived. In our view, authentic, accepting, and empathic teachers are fully immersed in the project of experiential learning, whether they are assisting students with an independent research project or delivering an engaging lecture. Such teachers have the power to help students *become better stories* by providing the support and resources necessary to open up new narrative possibilities.

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Using the Campus Environment as a Classroom

Jesse Minor

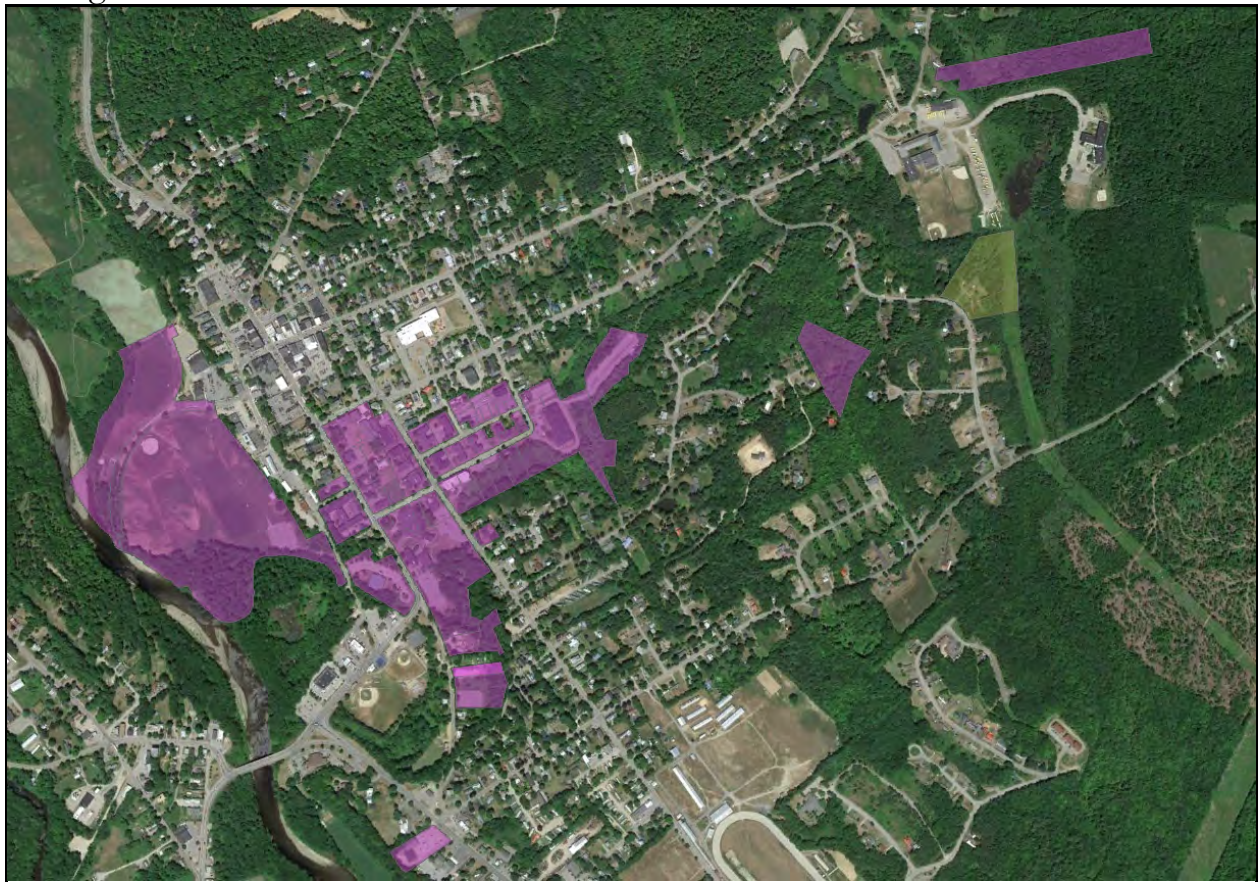
University campuses are multi-purpose spaces, hosting events ranging from athletic competitions to art installations, and with durations ranging from mere minutes to days, weeks, or longer, with some uses of campus space achieving permanence. Historically, some campuses have been cloisters while others have been open to public visitation. At public institutions, campuses typically host a suite of functions serving local communities, including access to libraries and scholarship, adult learning programs, and episodic events such as public health campaigns and tax preparation support.

University campuses also provide excellent spaces for a suite of activities that enhance and support their educational mission. Campuses, to greater and lesser degrees, often feature outdoor classrooms and outdoor instructional space, but even in the absence of such specialized amenities, classes often meet outdoors during good weather regardless of the course topic or content. Many university campuses contain open space that can be used for course-based research, inquiry-led projects, methods training in the social and natural sciences, and artistic work.

Environmental research methods and course content are easily and inexpensively accomplished by using the campus as an outdoor classroom. The environmental variables found on and in the campus landscape provide a nearly infinite number of things that can be studied in field-based, environment-themed, or project-based classes in any discipline. In this essay, I describe successful undergraduate-based research conducted using the UMaine Farmington campus forest and the UMF Campus Garden.

The UMaine Farmington campus is located very close to downtown Farmington, with Main Street also sharing designations as Route 4 to Rangeley and Lewiston and Route 27 to Kingfield and Augusta (Figure 1). As a result, the campus has a more “urban” feel than one might suspect for a town of Farmington’s size. Consequently, the campus is characterized by lawns, shrubs, and landscaping trees around the various buildings, with sharp ecotones between wooded and grassy areas. A newly

built campus community garden is located on South St, between the Olsen Student Center and the Fusion Center. The campus contains several small forests: one along Beaver Brook and adjacent to the Fitness and Recreation center, and another in Abbott Park, the location of a former school and gardens designed by landscape architect Horace Cleveland in 1852. UMaine Farmington also owns a forested 4.25 acre lot at the top of Johnson Heights containing a hilltop peat bog, and an 8 acre lot just north of Mount Blue Middle School (Figure 1). In addition, some of the Sandy River floodplain at Prescott Field is forested. These groves, coupled with the nearby conservation lands within walking distance of campus (Bonney Woods, Clifford Woods, Flint/Village/Horn Woods), provide a diverse set of locations, forest types, and environmental variables that can be used for course-based teaching or research involving undergraduates.



In my teaching, I have used the UMF campus in a variety of ways to add value to courses. This ranges from on-off experiential learning sessions with Summer Experience students in which we take tree core samples, up through multi-week inquiry projects that involve multiple-method data collection and analysis. In First Year Seminar courses called “*Making Change in Maine*,” we have studied transportation

flows on and near campus through a series of social science methods used to survey public life.

The UMF campus, throughout the stark seasonal changes that define our semesters, provides a number of things that can be measured, studied, and productively linked to course themes. For example, students in a spring semester version of *Physical Geography* collected snow from snowplow banks as well as water samples from Beaver Brook to analyze salinity changes corresponding to thawing events. Students in a fall semester iteration of *Physical Geography*, meanwhile, collected microclimate measurements in and under different vegetation canopies to see how the loss of deciduous plant cover affected incoming sunlight and ground surface temperatures. No matter the time of year, one or more environmental factors will be changing on our campus, and those changes can be observed, measured, and productively analyzed in the context of various courses and academic disciplines.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused some stark disruptions to the normal academic programming on campuses nationwide, including use of campus environments. In the UMaine System, courses were abruptly shifted into remotely-delivered mode in March 2020, which put a rapid end to any campus-based field research for the semester. We had more opportunity to plan for Fall 2020, in which courses were offered as either fully in-person, hybrid in-person/online, or fully online (synchronous and asynchronous) web-delivered classes, with all courses converting to online delivery after Thanksgiving break. The UMaine System retained limitations on university travel, including restrictions on how many students (2) could ride in a 15-passenger van. This, coupled with concerns about potential exposure of our students and community partners to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, meant that nearly all course activities in Fall 2020 were limited to the UMF campus. As a result, the physical campus hosted a much wider array of course-based uses, and despite a decreased number of residential students in the dorms and a smaller pool of people taking in-person courses, outdoor spaces on campus saw a great number of class meetings, office hours, and other functions.

In this context, I offered *Environmental Field Methods*, a course that teaches the fundamentals of fieldwork-based research methods and scientific report writing. The class focuses on concepts, techniques, and equipment pertinent to physical and environmental geography and related fields. Students develop a toolkit of basic skills for fieldwork, data analysis and interpretation, data visualization, and presentation of results through oral, poster, and digital media. Students work on group research projects that conclude with a final report and presentation based on fieldwork and data that they have planned, collected, and analyzed. The course is offered in the Fall semester to take best advantage of weather for field-based lab activities and student-led research. In the first half of the semester, outdoor lab activities teach a variety of

tools and techniques for field-based work, with additional labs providing background in map reading, analysis, and orienteering, data types and scales of analysis, and how to plan and implement a field study. Lectures and activities introduce the content and background necessary to understand and successfully conduct the lab assignments. As a class, we design and conduct a pilot research project using the campus environment, which provides additional practice with data collection and field techniques, and introduces data analysis, visualization, and reporting. In the second half of the semester, students identify and plan their own field-based research projects, which they carry out in small groups. A series of assignments provides structure to the group research projects, supporting students as they conduct a literature review, make maps of their field site, collect and analyze data, and accomplish the challenging tasks of reporting their results. Lab assignments in the latter portion of the semester stress scientific reporting in the form of poster, oral, and PowerPoint presentations. Finally, a series of iterative writing assignments incorporate peer editing and revisions of the sections of the research reports as the various groups conclude their projects.

Environmental Field Methods was unusually well situated to adjust to COVID-19 restrictions. The course under normal circumstances involves a lot of outdoor activities, and that structure was easily adapted for physical distancing and delivery that was almost entirely outdoors. I posted my lecture slides to the course website, which facilitated giving shorter lectures outdoors, thus providing more opportunities for hands-on practice with the field equipment and data collection techniques. An unexpected positive result of these instructional adjustments was that I had to move more slowly through content and concepts, and students reported greater comfort and familiarity with the field tools and data collection techniques.

Another major alteration to the course was that the entire class worked together on two campus-based research projects on overlapping timeframes. The first project investigated the microclimate conditions in the brand-new UMF Campus Community Garden, which had been designed and built by students in summer 2020. This project sampled microclimate variables (air and soil temperature, relative humidity, wind speed and direction) in relation to features of the garden and the campus built environment that could create heat island effects or otherwise alter growing conditions for plants. This project was supplemented by a 5-week campaign of automated data collection in which students installed dime-sized iButton thermometers in various features of the garden to capture time series data on the important microclimate features. Because the UMF Community Garden is a new feature of the campus environment, understanding how built-environment features and microclimate variability might affect plant growth is useful for the upcoming growing seasons, and supports the important work of improving this vital space. *Environmental Field Methods* was one of several classes that used the campus garden as an outdoor meeting space and an object of study, but this was the only course in Fall

2020 that applied scientific research methods to the garden. In future semesters, my courses will expand on this relationship, providing data and results in support of the campus community garden project.

The second campus-based research project was a study of carbon sequestered in the UMF campus forest. Students conducted plot- and transect-based measurements of trees, shrubs, forbs (herbaceous flowering plants), grasses, and ground cover. In these plots and transects, students measured tree diameters, tree heights and crown heights, and the proportion of canopy cover versus open sky, while also tallying the numbers of seedlings and saplings. This allowed the students to characterize the current forest in terms of structure and species composition, and also to make projections about future species compositions based on regeneration patterns. Students then designed a study in which tree diameters were measured within belt transects. The diameter measurements were entered into allometric equations that convert diameter into standing biomass, and from there, the amount of carbon contained in each tree. Finally, students calculated the total amount of above-ground carbon sequestered in the UMF campus forest, and broke down the estimates according to species, tree type, and across biomass components such as foliage and coarse roots. This project is ongoing and is being expanded to include the remainder of the UMF campus, including the off-campus forests on Johnson Heights and Middle Street (Figure 1).

The UMF-owned forest patch on Johnson Heights contains a small peat bog, which provides us with the opportunity to compare aboveground and subsurface carbon storage in the campus environment. In February 2021, we mapped the peat bog using ground-penetrating radar, and once the radar data are processed and volumetric calculations are completed, we will have a better estimate of the carbon storage of this unusual feature. Transects of carbon sequestered in the Johnson Heights forest are planned for fall 2021, and represent a multi-semester research project involving undergraduates that uses features of the campus environment.

University campuses typically contain a range of physical, environmental, and social features and factors that can be productively used in course-based learning, in undergraduate research, and in authentic inquiry projects spanning nearly all disciplines. My own training and methodological focus is in environmental science and coupled natural-human systems, but campus environments are so multivariate and multifunctional that an endless amount of projects or course-based uses can be conducted, with time frames that can range from minutes to multi-year engagements. I would argue that even something as seemingly prosaic as holding class meetings outdoors during beautiful weather strengthens the connections between university courses and the environment in which they are held. Although in this essay I have focused on university campuses, the features and factors described above frequently

occur on and near school grounds serving pre-K through high school. I urge my colleagues at every level of education to make use of the benefits and resources that outdoor campus environments offer.

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Acts of Courage

Leigh Ann Fish

Driving away from my first “real job” after college, with Tom Petty’s “Free Fallin’” blasting from the open windows, watching the town and that job disappear forever in the rearview mirror.

Nine grade levels, 278 students, and a windowless classroom... I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I couldn’t say no.

“I mean, that’s the hope: that they’ll become crap detectors and change the system from within...”

“OMG. I teach in 4 minutes, and I just dropped my necklace in the toilet!”

“Those that can’t do, teach.”

.....

Teaching is a complicated matter in any setting. As a teacher educator, I “prepare” others to go out and teach by sharing both discipline-specific content knowledge and pedagogy. Within that process, there is something that is harder to define, something not easily reduced to methods or techniques. Teaching is a very human endeavor. Yet many of my students have participated in a schooling process that isn’t humanizing or personal.

In the United States, the process of education has become increasingly depersonalized. K-12 education is particularly rife with evidence of this (e.g., curriculum standards, learning objectives, outcome statements, “scripted” curricula, etc.), but it is also found in many corners of higher education, including those that focus on preparing professionals to teach within these systems. Popular narratives have positioned education as a commodity based on an economic or business model that emphasizes techniques and efficiency. This view of education ignores human differences, individual rates of development, and individual interests. It resists active and social ways of learning. The result is a form of education that for many doesn’t feel particularly interesting or engaging, is not relevant to them, and is divorced from real life. The lived experiences students and teachers bring with them are not considered. The experience of teaching and learning is unrewarding and unsatisfying for all involved. Despite this, excellent teachers and committed students find ways of overcoming these obstacles every day.

Courage is required, daily, on the part of all teachers and students simply to show up, be present, and take risks, but this is especially true for students who may be struggling to overcome barriers or obstacles to education. First-generation college students, like a good number of those who make up my classes, attest that at times they feel left out and overwhelmed by what are viewed as unspoken or “insider” rules of the college experience

(Nadworny, 2019). We ask students to show academic courage when asking questions, putting forward new ideas, or otherwise taking intellectual risks, despite fear of making a mistake or appearing less competent than others (Beghetto, 2009). We, as teachers, demonstrate a similar courage when we try new instructional strategies or open class discussion to a direction we weren't planning on taking. Being okay with not having all the answers to our students' questions or with not always being the "expert" in the room—letting go of some "responsibility" over learning in order to allow students to share in it—can be operose. The challenges of teaching during unknown times and the strength it takes to engage in "pandemic teaching"—trying new methods while also holding things together emotionally for ourselves, our families, and our students—are significant added complications. Heck, just mustering enough courage to walk through the door when we're having a bad day, unafraid to show students we're human, is a notably courageous act.

These acts of courage occupy the human dimension of teaching and learning as both an aspect of "good" teaching and a concept of space.¹ It includes creating a space that intentionally recognizes and values the humanity of all those in the room. It considers how we center individuals—their identities, experiences, interests, needs, and desires—within our curricula, pedagogy, and interactions. At times, it means "re-viewing" ourselves and our students, questioning our actions, and pushing back against rituals of schooling that dehumanize.² Within the human dimension, we make visible our humanity and make it safe for our students to do the same. Although not physically measurable, the magnitude of the human dimension can be felt most keenly when it is absent. This human dimension is a space we need to occupy in our classrooms, regardless of the setting and age of our students, and it is not always easy.

On the topic of why teaching matters and what about it matters most to me, I offer a montage of sorts—that is, a succession of snapshots and scenes that illustrate an association of ideas—some funny, some frustrating, but all true. Alone, they may be little more than discrete, unrelated anecdotes that at times in my life have made little sense. But taken together and upon further reflection, this heterogeneous mixture collectively has meaning: they represent acts of courage that recognize and advocate for the human dimension in teaching and learning. The decision to use a technique inspired by cinematography as a literary and heuristic device may be a risk in itself, but so too are many conversations about teaching and learning that push boundaries or challenge the status quo. Taken more literally, the choice of montage also is a nod to my extraordinarily brief time in multimedia production, a career path I left to pursue teaching.

Throughout the anecdotes and vignettes that follow, I attempt to humanize the processes of "becoming educated" and "educating others" because the human dimension is vital to both. The scenes span K-12 and higher education because those have been my

¹ Good teaching, Parker Palmer (1990) reminds us in *The Courage to Teach*, attends to that human dimension by requiring courage or "heart" to explore "one's ignorance as well as insight, to yield some control in order to empower the group, to evoke other people's lives as well as reveal one's own" (p. 16).

² In her work with educators and families, Patricia Carini (1993; see also Cushman, 1997) advocated for descriptive review of children as a mode of inquiry—a "re-viewing" to make the whole child visible.

experiences as a K-12 teacher and administrator and as a college professor in teacher education and early childhood education. And they offer glimpses of universal experiences of teaching and learning that are not unique to me, but are applicable to a variety of educational contexts (for my colleagues and to you, the reader).

Free Falling

My own journey as an educator began as I sped down one road toward another ... literally. After working a brief stint in multimedia production, I gave notice and left for graduate school a few weeks later to pursue a new career in education. Contributing to a corporate bottom line didn't feel personally fulfilling. With Tom Petty's "Free Fallin'" blasting from the open windows and dust rolling off my tires as I opened it up on a long, flat stretch of country road, I watched the town and that job disappear forever in the rearview mirror. Teaching felt like a way to make an impact, to change the world in some way, yet in many ways I was in a freefall. I was unsure where I would land as I drove away, unrestrained, toward something more noble—a chance to give back to society or, more precisely, to contribute to a better one. Although I remember it almost as a scene from a movie—my own "Jerry McGuire" moment—even without the Hollywood filter, the act stands out as a pivotal event in my life and career in education. Without recognizing it at the time, this was my first act of courage in teaching.

In part, it was a decision based on an idealized view of teaching, not dissimilar from how many educators orient their desire to enter the field. Among the most frequently cited "attractors" are a fondness for working with children and young people, adequate income and job security, favorable working conditions (yes, summers off), interest in lifelong learning, and opportunity for service to society (Daniel & Ferrell, 1991; Joseph & Green, 1986; Lortie, 1975). These career motivations remain largely unchanged today despite not always being realized.³ Many of these reasons touch upon a human connection: the interpersonal and service-orientation, a desire to work with people, or, more altruistically, a desire to serve society, and even the positioning of the work as creative and stimulating suggests a certain human need for self-actualization.

A brief survey of film and television reveals a human connection in portrayals of teachers in media and popular culture. Enter flashes of Robin Williams's performance as John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* or Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*... Tropes of teaching are ubiquitous and can be found in many films and television shows, without further examination of other forms of media, news headlines, or our own experiences. The website TV Tropes (n.d.) currently lists over two dozen teacher tropes ranging from "misplaced kindergarten teacher" to "badass teacher" and "apathetic teacher." The tropes reflect the

³ The eight Lortie (1975) and Joseph and Green (1986) themes describing orientations for teaching have remained largely unchanged over 35 years despite a decline in working conditions and wages. It is widely estimated that educators in the U.S. make on average 20% less than other professionals with similar education and experience, and in many states, do not earn a living wage. (Oh, and the summers off thing isn't exactly true either.)

importance of human relationships: one may not be a “good” teacher, but it’s excusable if you mean well and have rapport with kids. “Stern teacher” is only hard on students because they care and genuinely want the best for their students. Even “apathetic teacher” is in some ways a criticism of the reverse: a failure to relate to young people or communicate a desire to be “in it” for them. Although tropes can be flawed, if not dangerous, in their incomplete representation of teaching and in reducing teachers to stereotypes,⁴ inspirational teacher tropes have some root in the human dimension of teaching. Whether in Hollywood or in real life, I have yet to hear anyone claim that they became a teacher to raise test scores.

These tropes contribute to a complicated societal relationship with teaching in the United States. They reproduce, add to, and reify discourse around education at all levels (preschool, K-12, post-secondary) through messages about what it means to be a teacher. What is “good” teaching and what isn’t? What counts as curriculum and who decides? When we teach in certain ways, who benefits and who is left out? The answers to these questions also illuminate: What is the role of the teacher? How much do we value educators and the work that they do? Implicitly caught up in these questions about teachers are questions about learners. How do we view children and young people? As “whole” people, capable, worthy of a “good” life,⁵ or just as producers, as human capital for an economic/nationalist end? If these questions feel uncomfortable, it is because their subjects are human beings and not machines, cogs, or widgets.

It takes courage to enter a field that is often complicated and complex, particularly one that may not be universally valued by everyone. Continuing that pursuit is equally courageous, because students often have an incomplete view of the teacher’s roles and responsibilities, having seen only the “frontstage” or “on-screen” performance.⁶

“Robots Teaching Other Little Robots”

Fast-forward: a few years into teaching, I received a call from the superintendent’s office. My work with students who had been identified as “gifted and talented” had been noticed, and they wanted to know if I could replicate or “scale it up,” as they put it. It was the chance to create a new program for the district, one that would span K-8: nine grade levels, 278 students, and—as I later discovered—a windowless classroom. I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I couldn’t say no.

This was an opportunity for me to teach in a philosophically different way, free from what I viewed as constraining norms or expectations of the typical school classroom. The

⁴ In his book, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y’all Too*, Chris Emdin (2017) describes how the “white savior” teacher narrative falsely positions the white teacher as hero while exoticizing urban youth as automatically broken.

⁵ I refer to considerations of what constitutes a “good” life, a “good” society, and a “good” person explicated in the conversations of Ralph Tyler and John Goodlad (1974) in their *Dialogue on American Education* series.

⁶ Dan Lortie coined the term “apprenticeship of observation” to describe the preconceptions student teachers have of teaching based largely on their own time as students in schools. This “partial view” results from seeing “frontstage” behaviors (e.g., instructing, monitoring, grading) as opposed to other crucial “backstage” processes.

realities of my experiences as an elementary teacher hadn't been aligning with my vision for why I entered teaching. What I was being asked to do at times didn't feel particularly human-centric. There were efforts to put students at the center of curricular and pedagogical choices, but which parts of the child?—certainly not always the “whole” child.

I became a teacher in the early 2000s, a time when school practices were drastically changing, reflecting a paradigm shift toward a vision of schooling grounded in U.S. economic success (Mehta, 2013a, 2013b). The release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 had fueled a “failing schools” narrative that evolved into a mission of schooling as a means to an economic end, preparing children to contribute to an adult workforce (Endacott et al., 2015). The answer to the so-called problem of failing schools was a push for standardizing educational experiences and greater accountability (i.e., standards-based education reform). The reality of many of the initiatives was a system of “educating” students that was overly-technicized, technocratic, and at times autocratic. While predetermined standards suggest a scope and sequence of “what” students should know or be able to do, they were never meant to indicate the curriculum or materials used—the “how” of learning—yet many school districts took that approach. The narrow interpretation of standards felt formulaic and impersonal, like discrete skills taught in isolation, rather than linking classroom learning to real-world connections and students' lived experiences. There were pre-packaged and purchased curricula and scripted lessons. Even the language of schooling had changed to reflect corporate values and ideas from business (e.g., external measures, accountability, performance outcomes, value-added). I became increasingly uncomfortable with perpetuating a “mile-wide, inch-deep” curriculum and the practices of “teaching to the test.” Were we educating people or little robots?⁷ Worse still, had we become “robots teaching other little robots” (Endacott et al., 2015, p. 433)?

No matter how well-meaning, efforts like this remove the human side from teaching and learning. Educating in this manner is fraught with tension, because in students' early years (infancy through preschool), it's about a process of *becoming*—about growth and development of the “whole” child—and then we up the stakes beginning in kindergarten, focusing on sorting, ranking, and rating them academically. We ignore their social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Even the means of assessing learning feel somewhat mechanical, nonhuman, and driven by efficiency: responses recorded in bubbles scored by a machine. This wasn't exactly a new phenomenon, the idea of efficiency and using technology to assist with aspects of teaching had been around for decades, but this was different—it removed teachers' agency in making those decisions, taking time away from knowing their students, and requiring them to teach in certain ways. Schools already had facets that dehumanized

⁷ Endacott et al. (2015) discusses how narrow interpretation and autocratic implementation of standards-based education reform impacts teachers' sense of agency in caring for the well-being of their students, leaving them feeling like automatons. “These mandates are taking all of the joy out of teaching. Give us the big ideas of a subject, and let us do our jobs! I don't need standards for every action I take. Learning is more than having some robot feed standards to other little robots!” (p. 414).

students, surveilling and policing their activities and, in some cases, their physical bodies and individual identities.⁸

Contrast this with a vision of education rooted in a humanist approach, one that is concerned with students as whole beings, that considers their affective needs (i.e., thoughts, feelings, emotions, values) in equal measure with the cognitive.⁹ Humanistic education makes various assumptions: learners have an innate desire to learn; curriculum should be relevant to their lives; learning should be student-led with teachers acting as facilitators; and outcomes should be evaluated through self-reflection. This type of schooling, as Louise Berman (1968) suggested in the 1960s, prioritizes what and how schools should teach based on fundamental assumptions about human beings, with the goal of education including the individual as a person both *in process* and *of process*; helping individuals harness their energies and talents for the betterment of self and society. It honors and respects the teachers' humanity as well, giving them autonomy as professionals to make decisions, to exercise both the art and science of teaching (pedagogy) as they see fit, and contributing to their sense of agency.

Creating a new gifted and talented program allowed me the opportunity to explore more humanist curricula and practices, as gifted education was not bound by the same rigid adherence to standardization. Traditionally speaking, accepted hallmarks of gifted education are social-emotional development/affective curriculum, in addition to cognitive, emergent curriculum based on students' interests, an emphasis on habits of mind, promoting intellectual pursuits, inquiry, and higher order thinking, as well creative and critical thinking.¹⁰ Advocates for these types of experiences point to how standardization and a "one size fits all" approach to schooling hold back bright and outlying students.

It takes courage to teach in ways that honor and respect students as human beings, especially when the pendulum of educational reform has swung in the opposite direction, away from humanistic or even constructivist approaches. (This is true in college teaching as much as in earlier years.) We see evidence of this in both qualitative and quantitative research showing record numbers of job dissatisfaction among educators, coinciding with implementation of Common Core Teaching Standards (Matlock Cole et al., 2015). I chose to leave the regular classroom to pursue the academic freedom to teach where different norms existed; others choose to stay in the daily struggle within a dehumanizing system. Both are acts of courage.

Teaching as a Subversive Act

"But that's really what we're doing here, right? I mean, that's the hope: that they'll become 'crap detectors' and change the system from within..."

⁸ Gallagher (2010) discusses how schools function as Foucauldian panoptic spaces and as sites of power and surveillance that go beyond the panopticon.

⁹ A humanist approach drawing from the work of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rudolf Steiner.

¹⁰ I am not advocating that this type of education solely be the domain of the gifted, but rather acknowledging gifted classrooms are currently afforded freedom to operate "under the radar."

“Exactly. They can always choose to do otherwise. If they get that, they can change the world.”

This was part of a philosophical conversation that took place with a colleague at another teaching institution. It was sort of a revelation and affirmation for us both that the work we do matters for our own students, preservice educators, and thus for their future students. Despite being at colleges on opposite sides of the country, we both share a common commitment to transformative teaching. The work we do is layered—it’s not always easy to see; it’s slow and takes time. But it’s necessary if schools are to be places of hope and transformation for young people, especially as many continue to be dehumanized, marginalized, and oppressed within their walls.

How do we stop the cycle of teachers being robots who teach other little robots, cyclically becoming generational machines? How do we get the college students we are teaching right now in teacher education programs to consider the human dimension in their own teaching? They are the first to have experienced the standards-based education reform movement as the only form of schooling they have known. They are the “guinea pigs” of the accountability era and of “teaching to the test.” As students, they were likely exposed to a highly technicized form of education that too narrowly interpreted standards, and focused on pre-scripted lessons and test preparation at the expense of richer curricula and methods. They may be unaware that education and schooling can be so much more. They may need help recognizing the human dimension of teaching, how to cultivate it within their classrooms, and how to advocate for it in their schools.

I begin this process in my classroom by introducing them to the concept of “crap-detecting,” a term I borrowed from Postman and Weingartner (1969), who, in turn, borrowed it from Ernest Hemingway.¹¹ In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, they argued that “crap-detecting” should be an essential function of schools in a democratic society. Students must learn how to identify and challenge “misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and even outright lies” (p. 3). By developing and fine-tuning this way of thinking, students learn to detect deeper meanings, discern fact from opinion or bias, and question “commonsense” narratives.¹² The goal is for each student to become “an actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, liberal personality who can face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation, who can formulate viable new meanings to meet changes in the environment which threaten individual and mutual survival” (p. 219). Crap-detection allows us to break down the arguments for technicizing education so that the teacher and learners can fully occupy the human dimension.

¹¹ “A built-in, shock-proof, crap detector” was Hemingway’s reply when asked what one needed to be a good writer. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) expanded on this idea in their book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. A delightful, abridged version (Postman, 1969) was delivered at the National Convention for the Teachers of English (NCTE) on November 28, 1969 in Washington, D.C.—it has much to recommend it.

¹² I borrow the term “commonsense” from Richard Quantz who clarifies: when common sense is written as two words, it refers to beliefs held in common by all sensible people. Written as one word, it refers to beliefs manufactured by some and claimed to be held in common by all sensible people, but, in fact, not all sensible people agree with the belief.

Students who can embrace and internalize this type of thinking can also turn that lens inward on themselves, evaluating their own ideas and practices—a process that takes practice, guidance, and courage. Helping students become accurate crap detectors includes helping them explore and understand their own values and upbringings. For preservice teachers, it often means becoming conscious of racial, ethnic, and class identities, and considering how those identities affect their teaching. It also means examining how power and privilege create and perpetuate injustice in our schools and, more broadly, in society. For many students, these are “Aha!” moments. They start to see how certain school practices have historically been and still are dehumanizing, marginalizing, and oppressive. By examining these practices through multiple perspectives, we question who is being considered and who is being left out.

As they begin to apply those new understandings to their current and future practice, students begin to filter decisions through that lens. They see subtle biases they didn’t know existed, and courageously find ways to challenge the status quo. They start to question whether common school events such as “Donuts for Dads” or “Muffins for Moms” are too narrowly defined and how they could be made more inclusive. They wonder how children might be affected differently by trendy “Pajama Days,” when not every child has fancy or matching pajama sets. They intentionally seek out books with positive representations of diversity so that children and families can “see themselves” reflected in the pages. Most importantly, they recognize their own agency in choosing to “do otherwise,” despite a practice having “always been done that way.” These examples of doing otherwise consider the human impact of their decisions as teachers.

When we view children as human beings like ourselves, we cannot marginalize them (or their families) or contribute to schooling practices that do. Learning how to critically analyze information and go against the grain is especially important in this age of “alternative facts” and “post truth” when facing ever-increasing technocratic and dehumanizing demands.¹³ It takes courage to think beyond the harmful traditions and rituals of schooling, to teach in a different way, to disrupt the status quo and do otherwise.

“OMG. I teach in 4 minutes, and I just dropped my necklace in the toilet.”

The Academic “Job Talk” often comes with its own unique anxieties, being a significant part of the job interview process. For teacher educators, this talk is typically paired with a teaching demonstration. The process can feel like a scene from a Jane Austen novel, coming out for the season in a whirlwind of social activity, being presented at court, going from ball to ball . . . although maybe with less pomp and circumstance. On one such occasion, I was wearing my antique sterling locket (Victorian, not Regency period)—a piece with pictures of my daughters that reminds me of two reasons why I teach. With less than five minutes before

¹³ “Alternative facts” was a phrase used by Kellyanne Conway during a *Meet the Press* interview on January 22, 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s false statement about the number of attendees at Donald Trump’s inauguration. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “post truth” is “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

teaching a lesson to 20 students I'd never met, in front of half a dozen spectators—a lesson that might very well decide my career trajectory—I thought it wise to use the restroom... There really are no words to describe dropping a cherished heirloom in the toilet. That moment of icy terror when you realize that someone has to fish it out (and Mr. Darcy [played by Colin Firth] is not coming to your rescue). After swallowing my pride and plunging in, I tried to dry it as best I could, stuffed it into my bag, and played cool like nothing had happened. Despite being obviously thrown off my game, I had to salvage the moment and gain composure to teach. It's what I do, what many of us do, everyday.

Teaching has been documented as a stressful occupation (Vardi, 2009) despite the intrinsic rewards we may feel. K-12 teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers due in part to emotional stress.¹⁴ The perils of balancing teaching, scholarship, and service in academia are also well known. Our teaching contexts place demands on us. The relationship between those job demands (e.g., advising, hiring, curriculum development, assessment, and reaccreditation, job security, etc.) and available job resources (e.g., time, funding, autonomy, administrative support, social support, mentoring/professional networks, etc.) impact our mental well-being and, if left unchecked, our physical health (Han et al., 2020). Female academics in particular have historically faced gender gaps in status and pay, in addition to other forms of overt, subtle, and institutional discrimination within academia (Monroe et al., 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 hit female academics particularly hard, especially those trying to meet the demands of tenure track positions while juggling childcare (Van Dam, 2021). Even within “normal” years, it can be difficult to find balance just within the teaching component itself. For many of us, our teaching and personal selves are intertwined, and it's difficult to separate the two. Aside from the self-conscious pain of an occasional flat or lackluster “lesson” delivery, we feel genuine anguish when our students struggle and disappointment when we have failed to reach them.

Though it may feel we are expected to perform as though we are machines without needs, the reality is, we have our own struggles, emotions, and anxieties. On these days it takes courage, sometimes requiring an internal St. Crispin's Day speech to get through the door. Do we give ourselves permission to acknowledge our humanity, to let our students see how we cope with issues that may interrupt our teaching? It seems unreasonable to expect my students, as preservice teachers, to view their future students as “whole” people, as human beings, if I don't feel I can take that view of myself. Parker Palmer (1998) urges us to face our own fears and to help students face theirs in the spirit of human connection rather than avoidance: “To avoid a live encounter with teachers, students can hide behind their notebooks and their silence. To avoid a live encounter with students, teachers can hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power” (Palmer, 1998, p. 38). For me,

¹⁴ Recent polls suggest 38% of full- and part-time public school teachers and 55% of college faculty have seriously considered changing careers or retiring early due to demands of teaching during the pandemic (Dickler, 2021).

connection includes creating a classroom that serves as a “safe” space for us all to acknowledge limitations, learn from our mistakes, and engage in self-care when needed.

Sometimes I start my classes with “check-ins,” brief opportunities to share the good, bad, and the ugly, so we can acknowledge what we may be feeling, as a way of clearing our minds so we can be fully present. (This practice is as much for me as it is for them.) At other times, students bring so much emotional trauma that we have to pause and process before moving on: those who have entered my creative arts class believing they “aren’t good at art”; the student who never felt confident planning reading lessons because she herself struggled with reading as a student and was told she shouldn’t be a teacher; the student who, when asked to reflect on a positive memory from her own schooling, matter-of-factly announced, “I didn’t have any good teachers; they were all assholes.” We have to spend time unpacking these transgressions, acknowledging the pain and harm caused, before students can move beyond them. There are times when the trauma genuinely surprises me in real time, as it did when arriving at a K-12 classroom to observe a student teacher.

Student: “My last teaching observation didn’t go so well. It felt like my supervisor was staring right through me, judging everything I did.”

Me: “I don’t want to make you hate teaching; if that’s what we’re doing, I feel terrible... This isn’t meant as a ‘gotcha,’ and I’m not here to judge. It’s an opportunity for conversation about your teaching—it’s formative. I know this seems huge to you right now, but it’s not a moment that decides the rest of your life. Sometimes it feels like this piece of paper decides whether you go on or not. It doesn’t.”

These split-second interactions are loaded with meaningful and potential impact. We need to stop and take an emotional time out before proceeding. Whether it’s job demands, outside stressors, past experiences, or a bad day, there are many reasons why it’s not always easy to just show up and teach. On the days when it’s hard to step over the threshold, what is it that helps us find the courage to do so? The same is true for students. Do we expect them to just show up and learn, despite whatever challenges they may be facing? It takes courage for our students to share their struggles and challenges with us, just as it takes courage for us to meet them with humanity in our responses.

Concluding Thoughts: “Those that can’t do, teach”?

These are just some of the daily acts of courage I have seen. There undoubtedly are many more. Recognizing acts of courage I have engaged in, as well as those my colleagues and students do daily, is a humbling experience and a necessary reminder of why teaching matters. I suspect many of us here at UMF can relate, because I see many of my colleagues doing similar things, even if they haven’t named it.

True to the use of montage, I have shared these images to have an effect on you, to affirm the choices you have made, to encourage you to continue celebrating and leaning into those moments, or to exhort you to find or recover your teaching “heart” or courage. I am reminded of a final scene from my past, something a family member jokingly said when I decided to pursue teaching: *“Those that can’t do, teach.”* I remember how the words rang in my ears and how my face flushed with the heat of indignation and determination. Two decades later, students still report hearing these words as they enter the profession. Rather than hearing them as a negative—as a signal that teaching isn’t valued or valuable—I now hear the words as an affirmation that the complicated, definition-defying, often misunderstood and misrepresented human work of teaching matters now more than ever.

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