

Teaching Remarks: Words for New Faculty

Mary Beth Pringle, Professor of English and Women's Studies has put together some valuable wisdom both for new and experienced teachers alike. In these four short vignettes, she shares ideas, experiences, and practical advice for how to tackle the often daunting task of teaching at university level, and specifically at Wright State University. -tf.

You see, I have this recurrent nightmare. Other people's bad dreams involve falling off a cliff, crawling through an endless tunnel, suffocating, drowning. Mine is worse. In my nightmare, over and over again, I resign my teaching job in the English department at Wright State - my tenured job teaching women's studies and modern period literature - and I take, for no reason I can think of, an adjunct job teaching composition at my personal hell, the University of Nevada/Reno. Why Reno is my personal hell - that's a separate story. Another separate story is that in the nightmare my teaching contract at Reno stipulates I assume custody of an infant who's being passed around the English department. I must tend to the baby even in the classroom. Why do I tell you about a strange dream? Because it reminds me every time I have it of a terrible fear: of not being able to visit about literature, not being able to do the work I love so much.

Important Point #1: *No matter what happens to you as your quarter gets under way keep foremost in your mind how much you really do love to teach.*

I taught a class this summer that's not my favorite. It's a general education course called Great Books. Students are required to take it. None of them, it seems, are English majors and while they see plenty of movies, they don't read books. This summer I decided to teach to my audience and for myself. I defined literature as "short"; I defined "great" as my favorites. I located a text book I hoped my students would love as much as I did, and we started to talk, really talk. Stories by Jane Smiley, Ralph Ellison, Sarah Orne Jewett, Alice Walker, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Bobby Anne Mason, Zora Hurston, John

Updike, Sherwood Anderson, and Tiilie Olsen got us going. These writers told us about literary characters but also about ourselves. They made us rethink the value of literature. They enabled us to confide in each other about our lives: the joys, the pains, the decisions we face. A young man told us about how hard it is to reveal his feelings to his girlfriend who resents him when he doesn't or can't. A young mother who'd hoped the father of her child would take care of the baby while she attended class talked about her struggle to get not just an education but a really good one, one that mattered. As she spoke she held her squalling baby on her lap. On the day we discussed parental guilt, every parent in the room acknowledged feeling guilty for deeds done and undone. One father, a military man, tried to speak but couldn't. Later he wrote about "spanking and spanking and spanking" his toddler son more than twenty years earlier and the cloud that has darkened their relationship ever since. A woman shared the story of her depression and her discovery that keeping a journal might save her life. A man in a wheelchair recounted how his girlfriend came to the hospital after he had had his accident: she pushed him in his chair, lay on his bed with him to watch TV, and after she left he never heard from her again. Several students admitted their fear of non-sexual touching and of being touched. They reflected the cultural significance of their fear.

I marveled at my students this summer because they so thoroughly put themselves into that class. It couldn't have been easy, given everything else they had going on. Nothing is easy for so many Wright State students. They work full time. Some at more than one job. They are in the midst of raising families, or suffering from having lost loved ones. They often have disabilities. Many of them do not think of themselves as good students even though they are. They've

lost confidence somewhere along the line, confidence in them-selves and confidence in their ability to do well in a classroom. So many are not young or, if they are young, they're still not traditional students. Life has kicked them around. This summer as I watched my students in Great Books, I recalled my own privileged undergraduate years. I did not hold a job at first. I had no family to worry about and plenty of family worrying about me.

Important Point #2.: Wright State students often deserve special respect and compassion.

Not many quarters ago, I decided to start my modern period literature classes by asking students to discuss what they knew about their families' modern period history. How did these students find themselves in Dayton? Had their families emigrated north from Kentucky or Tennessee? Had their families come from eastern Europe? How much of their family histories had been obliterated by slavery or, in some cases, the holocaust? What were their families' myth and jokes? What was their families' American Dream? What values had been passed down through the generations? Students responded so enthusiastically to this personal, nonliterary introduction to literary study, I have since tried to incorporate the lessons of those classes into all the courses I teach. Often I ask myself while planning class sessions, how can I best draw my students into the material we're studying? How can I show them the importance of literature and the significance of literature in their own lives?

Important Point #3: Only by repeatedly tying classroom lessons to personal experience, as well as to values and credos, do we successfully show our students what "learning" means.

Nuts and bolts: Thirty years of teaching have taught me that students do their best work when I simultaneously demand a great deal from them and offer them something in return. Three illustrations:

First. I require that my students attend classes and be on time. Three absences in a class that meets twenty times means a student has failed the course. Two

tardies equal an absence. Both of these policies I hope I administer with grace. In exchange, students who attend every class and are never late receive a grade advantage at the end of the term.

Second. I'm told students think I'm a tough grader. I certainly try to write all over anything they hand in. In exchange for being a demanding grader, I let students rewrite any assignment one time. While I don't change the original grade, I note whether the rewrite would have earned an A as a first draft. If their work continues to improve during the quarter and they are doing A work at the end, I allow the excellent rewrites to count as A grades.

Finally. I require that all assignments be handed in, in class, on the date they are due. If an assignment is late it does not get commented on, nor does it receive a grade, although that fact doesn't penalize a student's final grade. In exchange I pledge to each class that whatever students have handed in to me will be returned at the next class period. So far, with only an exception or two, I've been lucky enough to be able to keep that promise and my students seem generally eager to keep their end of the bargain.

Important Point #4: Students often appreciate boundaries that offer rewards as well as penalties.

And now to you who are just getting started and who will no doubt quickly develop your own teaching values and strategies ... Good luck and enjoy!

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