
Insights & Ideas *for Teaching & Learning*

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Teaching & Learning Committee

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Ed Note: Brian Murphy won the teaching excellence award for last academic year, 1994-95. We asked him to publish his teaching philosophy so that it could be widely shared.

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

by Brian Murphy

Miranda: O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are
there here!
How beauteous mankind is!
O brave new world,
That has such people in 't!

Prospero: 'Tis new to thee.

--Shakespeare: *The Tempest*

I have what might be called a Miranda Complex; teaching continues to feel like a brave new world: it's always new, every school year, every course, each class, always regenerating, endlessly fascinating.

Writing about teaching is, however, quite another matter. First, there is a labyrinth of distinctions to be negotiated: Is it an art or a craft? Does one teach subjects or students? Materials or skills? Can one

teach experiences -- from, say, counseling or theatre practicums to works of art? How does one find standards? Are low grades and high failure rates evidence of rigorous standards? And, if one "teaches" the English language, English-language literature, and literature translated into English, what exactly is being taught? Compositional skills seem relatively clear as desirable ends, but in teaching literature both the actual material and the purpose are debatable.

One argument is that "teaching literature" is really literary *criticism*. A botanist, the argument goes, does not teach petunias: a botanist teaches classifications, analyses, methods, history, and so forth-- and all the elements of that thing so beloved by the social scientists, The Scientific Method. Therefore, a teacher of literature should do likewise: the discipline is the body of criticism which (occasionally) uses a literary text as an example. So, one does not "teach" Hamlet. One teaches tragedy and uses a Shakespeare's play as an example of tragedy. Some teach not only various critical approaches but *the* critical approach, the gospel according to Northrop Frye or Stephen Greenblatt.

After 26 years of teaching at Oakland University, I have concluded at last that I know the answer to all of the foregoing questions. The answer is Yes. The answer is that, while no one individual can do all this, a good department (such as Oakland's English Department) does do all of this. My own

particular contribution is something I have arrived at after years of experimenting and reflecting. In my early years at Oakland, at a meeting of the College English Association, I delivered a paper on "Teaching English in the Department of Literary Science: Some Premises and Problems," a paper which helped me define myself as a teacher: in addition to criticism and the currently neglected history of literature, I argued, simply, that one of the ways an English teacher could work was, in effect, to use whatever was needed--from New Critical close reading to the sweep of history to the newly emerging French theories--to make the work of art happen in the student's mind. Mine was one of three papers, and a respondent summarized my approach as "performing" the work. It was meant, I think, as a criticism; but I have held to it proudly ever since as mine own.

My Miranda Complex began almost with my first professional experience at Oakland. On a warm day near the end of August, in 1969, I attended a meeting at which all faculty were to be greeted by Chancellor Varner. The legendary Woody exuded charisma, charm, and conviction. I have never forgotten his saying that all this--the buildings, the structures, the vice-presidents and deans he was about to introduce--the entire structure existed for one thing: so that you can stand in a classroom in front of a group of students. I have, in fact, always felt honored to stand in a classroom in front of a group of students.

Most of us were nonplussed to hear Chancellor Varner then go on to explain the university-approved procedure to be followed when (when, not if!) our classes were disrupted by student protestors. My reaction was: this stuff is important! important things go on in these classrooms! (I still think this way: who taught Timothy McVeigh, an alleged bomber in the Oklahoma City catastrophe? Who taught him history, who gave him a sense of what the world is like, of what a society means? Who had the chance to give him a glimpse of beauty or the feel of real intelligence? And who taught his teachers? Could it have been us? Asking such questions implies neither exoneration nor guilt. It implies connectedness and a sense of the ultimate purposes of education.)

My own "performing" approach began about the

same time that I began reading everything I could find about the conductor Arturo Toscanini: what I admired about this maniacal perfectionist was his energy, his dedication to, and utter absorption in, the work. *Mutatis mutandis*, I thought I could do that. My audience would be in the hundreds rather than millions; but what of that? In 20,000 years, I'll be as famous as Toscanini. In any case, and in the meanwhile, "the play's the thing," and from then to this to time I have never worried about audience-size. (I once gave a lecture on "The Genius of Shakespeare" at the Fisher Mansion in Detroit on a cold winter's night to three people--one of whom worked there, I tried to make it my best.) And here, of course, virtue proves to be its own reward: by throwing myself as completely as I can into the work or the author I am teaching. I occasionally achieve the sort of rapture that comes only by losing oneself utterly in a great and beautiful work of art.

"Make it
come to life."

Varner, Toscanini, and one more: I had a conversation in the middle 1970's with a colleague in Modern Languages, Bob Simmons. He remarked that there were two theories of command in military thinking: one is DO THAT. The other--the American Army's--is FOLLOW ME. I don't know why that struck me so forcibly, but it totally changed my way of thinking about my students. Obviously, there is an inescapable element of DO THAT in teaching: papers and exams and grades are realities, and I try to be as clear about the "orders" as possible. But, in a more general way, instead of representing a sort of

intellectual level to which the students must raise themselves, I tried to act like the platoon leaders Bob Simmons described so well: I'd forge ahead; I'd have read the work--or seen the film or play--itself over and over; I had one goal--or, rather, I had several goals which merged in one--and that, as it happens, is the same goal I have always had as a writer: make it come to life.

Obviously, there are many different kinds of works, and there are many different kinds of ways to achieve this goal. By "performing" a work I do not mean simply reading it aloud or acting out all the parts (tempting as that sometimes is). As an English professor, my usual approach would fall into the category of what is broadly called "cultural studies." I am interested in history, especially intellectual history, and in the history of all the arts, especially music, literature, and film. I try to communicate something of the fascinating circle of cause and effect as a great work of art reflects the spirit and concerns of its age and in turn produces cultural changes for the next generation. "What is now fact was once only imagined," said William Blake. I try to show as clearly as I can the relationship between that "fact" and that imagined world of the art work.

If, for example, I am teaching a play by Oscar Wilde, I would try to show the flow and counter-flow of the ideas and values associated with such concepts as Classicism and Romanticism, and the branches of Romanticism into Aestheticism and Decadance. But, no matter how much I dig into the aesthetic roots, I am always concerned to show, one might say, what's in it for us. That means only sometimes a flat-out autobiographical statement but more usually it means--and here is where a knowledge of history and cultural studies is so important in avoiding a suffocating subjectivism--laying out the intellectual possibilities.

Do I teach subjects or students? As a university professor standing in a classroom, I teach subjects. But I don't always stand in a classroom, and in my office am able to concern myself with student's individual problems and accomplishments. Naturally, in the ten years I have been Director of the Honors College, I have had a specially satisfying way to balance this subjects-or-students choice.

Ten years ago, it all came together for me. I taught English 100-Masterpieces of World Literature--to a large class in 156 North Foundation Hall. It was the summer term, and I simply threw myself into that course. I did nothing else. I read and re-read, and stayed up late into the night (in the manner of the Maestro himself) soaking myself in Homer, The Bible, Virgil, St. Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, and on to Thomas Mann. I was on a roll: the lectures and discussions went by in a flash. Bored students came to life. Interested

An extraordinary day!

students became English majors. I was finding a sort of philosophy or vision of life myself, and the students were following my own sense of discovery, beauty, and excitement. I had come to love literature in the way musicians love music--always raving about it, unable to get enough of it. At the conclusion of the final class, a thing happened which never happened before and has not happened since: there was a standing ovation. Later that day, after my wife and I took our newborn baby for her first trip to see her doctor, I came home and found a message on my answering machine from Dean Brian Copenhaver offering me the job as Honors College Director. A standing ovation, a great educational opportunity, and a new baby: nobody gets too many days like that!

Since then, I have tried to build on everything that

day represented. I have been able to know students much more individually in the Honors College, and I have created many more courses: I organize my introductory film courses around themes (Couples in Film; the Femme Fatale; next Fall's theme is Race, Class and Gender) which make the study of the films all the more immediate and--in the exact sense of that old Sixties-ism--relevant. Bob Eberwein, Kevin Early and I have been collaborating in an effort to create a new course (perhaps even a concentration) in Diversity, Discrimination and Difference.

I have also had the unusual experience of teaching Shakespeare to a group of seriously disadvantaged middle school students in Pontiac: for the past five years or so, a special program called Visions Unlimited has brought out 40 youngsters from a housing project to live on campus for two weeks; we study a Shakespeare play together (while they have other special courses as well) and then go to Stratford to see a performance of that play. It is an unusually challenging--how many of my colleagues have had to break up a fight in a classroom?--and yet deeply rewarding teaching experience.

Oakland gives me the opportunity to create courses afresh: this past term I taught a 600-level graduate seminar devoted exclusively to Hamlet. At the same time, I took over an Honors College course in "Women, Power and Politics"--and, so curious and enlightening was this male English teacher's wandering into the world of Womens Studies, that I plan to give a paper on the experience at next Fall's annual meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Conference.

My 26 years at Oakland have been productive, exciting, and increasingly happy--even joyful. Small wonder my only complaint is that I suffer from a Miranda Complex.



Ed Note: Bob Wiggins reports in this issue for the Assessment Committee. Bob is assistant professor and Coordinator of Elementary Education. Among his other responsibilities, he teaches undergraduate courses in assessment to elementary education majors.

Assessing the Elementary Education Major

by

Bob Wiggins

A good assessment plan should provide information in at least two important areas: (1) caliber of students the program produces, and (2) the ability of the program to meet the needs of the students and the goals of the department. The close connection between these two areas explains the circular nature of the assessment process. Assessing student capabilities leads to clearer goal definition, which leads to program refinement and improved instruction which should, in turn, result in a more capable student. The Dept of Curriculum, Instruction and Leadership has been engaging in such a process for some time, using quantitative and qualitative measures to assess both the teaching proficiency of the students and the quality of the program in elementary education.

“We do not rely solely
on course grades.”

To assess student proficiency we do not rely solely on course grades. We also look at independent measures from outside sources. Our majors take the Michigan Test for Teacher Competency at three points during the program. These test scores indicate whether our

students are adequately prepared to meet the Entry Level Proficiencies for Michigan Teachers designated by the State Education Department. However, since test scores give a limited picture our students, we confirm this assessment with feedback from public school teachers who work with our students during early field experiences and internships. We are pleased that cooperating teachers consistently give our students high ratings on their mid-term assessments (a numerical instrument) and on their final assessments (a narrative instrument).

Cooperating teachers are also an important part of our program improvement process. Last fall, we arranged a symposium for local teachers and administrators to elicit input on how we can better prepare our students for the challenge they will face. There were two substantial outcomes from this meeting. First, we strengthened our relationship with surrounding school districts and established new partnerships with individual schools. We now have a number of courses taught on-site in local elementary schools. Second, we are attempting to provide further assistance and information that will help cooperating teachers work with interns. Through a grant from the Meadowbrook Foundation, the department is sponsoring a conference for cooperating teachers addressing the research on working with student teachers in the classroom.

Undoubtedly, the most important source of data for program improvement comes from our annual survey of graduating seniors. Overwhelmingly, the students felt they were well or adequately prepared. Three areas - music, art and physical education - proved an exception to this trend. When it became clear that this was a consistent concern, the department began looking at options to address this need, including working with the Department of Music Theater and Dance to design an appropriate course, or series of courses.

Our survey also asks for student comments, providing additional insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the program. For example, one strength students mentioned was the early field experiences. This confirmed the department's commitment to extensive practical experiences. However, other comments on the student survey, as well as informal comments from other students, raised a concern about the impact of the urban field experiences. Because of this feedback, two members of the department have undertaken a study examining the department's efforts to prepare students to teach in multicultural classrooms. This work is supported by a grant from the University Senate Assessment Committee with matching funds from the

School of Education and Human Services.

Students also mentioned the need for more instruction in classroom management, less reception in reading methods courses and more information on special education. We have brought the reading concern to the attention of the Department of Reading and Language Arts and they have formed a committee to reexamine the methods coursework. We have also begun to work more closely with the Department of Human Development and Child Services in coordinating the classes provided by each department.

The outcomes of our fall symposium combined with the results of the diversity study and our meetings with other departments will be used to determine any changes in program that might be needed to prepare our students to be more capable teachers.

Thus, we come full circle, returning to the quality of our graduates as our ultimate concern. Yet, we recognize that we can enter the circle at any point. Assessment is the link that connects our departmental goals to instruction and to program improvement. In the Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Leadership, assessment is not an abstract exercise, but rather an very concrete aspect of our work.



Senate Teaching and Learning Committee Luncheon

by

Margaret B. Pigott
Chair of Teaching and Learning

The luncheon was organized by Monifa Jumanne and Ananda Sen, of the Teaching and Learning Committee Sub-Committee and Sandra Pelfrey of the Assessment Committee.

After she read the results of a survey on the importance of writing in the curriculum, mailed the previous month to the faculty, Sandra Pelfrey introduced Brian Murphy and Barbara Hamilton, each of whom spoke on a different aspect of writing across the curriculum at Oakland University.

Brian spoke engagingly on the history and development of writing in the curriculum from its beginning to the present. In the early '60s and '70s, according to Brian, the university sponsored the so called "Exploratories," writing classes in their own disciplines. Faculty across the university created these courses based on interests in their own discipline, or frequently in multidisciplines, and required students to write papers within those disciplines, that is to say, the students in each of these classes had to focus their writings on the subject limitations of the course. In addition to these general Exploratories, the University offered Special Exploratories of either one or two semesters serving students who needed more help in writing. These courses were supplemented by a Writing Center housed first in the Department of English and later in the Department of Learning Skills. The Learning Skills Department, created in 1972 to place more emphasis on a greater variety of skills students needed to survive in the academic world, formed the first Department of Composition. Since learning skills other than writing never were fully developed in the Department of Learning Skills, in 1980 the Department was more aptly renamed the Department of Rhetoric, in which various kinds of composition courses to suit not only freshmen, but sophomores and juniors, have been designed, established, and taught by a faculty especially trained in the discipline of composition.

As an introduction to her talk on writing across the curriculum, Barbara stimulated her audience by asking a number of sometimes perplexing, but always provocative, questions. Challenging the faculty on their beliefs concerning the importance of language and writing in college, she asked: Is language central to teaching and learning? Do we believe the more we write the better writer we are? In what ways are we responsible for developing students' language competencies? What kind of writing should be integrated into various classes like Engineering, Chemistry, Business, and Nursing? What are other universities doing? And finally, should we institute required junior-level writing courses for all students?

Some faculty whose departments do require a junior-level writing course--Art History and Business, for example -- were surprised that all departments do not

have a required junior-level writing course. Some faculty, who firmly believe in the concept of a junior-level writing course, asked who should propose it. Other faculty, however, expressed skepticism because, they warned, it was a "money issue", rendering fewer credits for smaller classes in writing as opposed to the larger classes in the disciplines. After a spirited exchange, all the faculty present concurred that on the junior-level more teaching of writing was sorely needed, and more emphasis should be placed on *cogently and clearly* written content, combining development of ideas with expression. Again and again, faculty asked, "why not institute a junior-level writing class in each department?" Some faculty, in disciplines in which the curriculum is jammed with required courses leaving little room for writing courses, suggested as an alternative that the writing requirement on the upper division level be integrated into a senior project which focused on writing, but admitted that department administrators habitually disparage the value of that kind of effort. "We have done just that on a team-taught basis," Barbara announced, "in courses linking education and writing, counseling and writing, and reading and writing, to name a few, but of late have not yet been able to acquire funding for such courses." By the end of the meeting, despite the disparate views, the objections, the cautions, all faculty agreed firmly and wholeheartedly that something must be done not only to bring writing courses to the disciplines on the junior level, but to provide students with language competence in their field of study as well.

Ms. Jumanne and Mr. Sen thanked Professors Murphy and Hamilton and closed the meeting at 1:30PM.



Ed Note: One of the opportunities as well as difficulties in teaching is to keep up with rapidly changing instructional technology. We asked George Preisinger to survey the possibilities.

Instructional Technology: Paradigm Shifting At Oakland University

by

George Preisinger

The pace of change in technology at Oakland University is picking up speed. This is especially true in the area of instructional technology. Distance learning, multimedia, and electronic media distribution are current elements of instructional technology, in which a great deal of energy and resources are being directed. The technology enhancements, currently being developed, will empower the entire university community with new opportunities and abilities to meet the needs of our constituencies. From improving teaching methods to reaching out to students who were previously beyond our bounds, technology is advancing OUs mission.

Campus Wiring

Connecting the campus electronically has been a key element in the ability to move forward with most of the instructional technology initiatives. This began in the mid 80s with the development of a campus wiring plan. The first phase was to connect the buildings with a campus fiber optic backbone, providing a path for high quality voice, video, and data communications between buildings. The backbone has been in use for over five years now.

The wiring backbone was the first piece of the puzzle. All of this high speed communications capacity is great, but you still need to wire the rooms within the buildings in order to begin offering better and new services. This need was known and so a Network Modeling Committee, chaired by Ron Srowawa, was formed to develop the specifications on how the campus buildings would be wired. A Network Vision for Oakland University is the result of the committees

hard work. A copy can be acquired by contacting the office of Academic Affairs.

All of the previous planning for wiring the campus is rapidly coming to a climax. Plans are underway to wire all remaining academic buildings. This means the capability to utilize the high speed voice, video, and data communications are close at hand for all wired buildings.

Distance Learning

Distance learning resources are currently available to offer high quality, face-to-face instruction to students at locations outside our campus. A Distance Learning Commission, chaired by William Connellan, submitted a paper titled Report and Recommendations of the Distance Learning Commission in February of 1995. A copy of the report can be acquired by contacting the office of Academic Affairs or by browsing the Oakland University Web site under Distance Learning.

Distance learning officially began in August of 1995 with the development of a permanent distance learning classroom, located in room 214 Odowd Hall. A two-day workshop was offered in August and a six-week follow up course began in mid September. The purpose of the training was to introduce OU's faculty and staff to the technology and to provide a hands-on experience to those who were interested. There were almost 50 Oakland University faculty and staff who participated in these opening programs.

Shea Howell was our first faculty member to teach a distance learning class to Northwest Michigan College in Traverse City during the Fall 95 semester. During the Winter 96 semester the DL class load grew to two, with Shea teaching one class and Carlo Coppola teaching the other. Currently, there are four courses scheduled for the Fall 96 semester. Anyone interested in finding out, first-hand, about the transition of teaching in the traditional classroom to a distance learning should talk to Shea or Carlo. It has been a personal pleasure for me to work with Shea and Carlo on the operation of the classroom technology.

Professor Jack Nachman is on special assignment by the Vice President for Academic Administration as a facilitator and administrator of distance learning initiatives. An on-going Distance Learning Committee, chaired by Jack, was recently activated to provide guidance for the many issues which will need to be addressed. Please feel free to contact Jack or myself for questions on OUs distance learning initiatives.

Computer Multimedia

Going hand-in-hand with the distance learning classroom technology is the development of multimedia services in the Instructional Technology Center (ITC). Computer multimedia is an excellent tool to support classroom instruction. This is especially true in a distance learning environment where all information and communications is conducted electronically.

Faculty working in a distance learning environment must rethink and develop their presentation utilizing the many multimedia instructional tools available.

ITCs Presentation Development Center is available to assist faculty and staff with their multimedia projects. Mark Santa Maria is the coordinator of the center and in just one year has led the development of many enhanced services. Some of the kinds of multimedia services supported by Mark and his student staff include: scanning flat images, scanning 35mm slides, recording digital audio and video files, editing digital files, and converting digital files from one format to another. The ITC staff can then assist with the development of electronic presentations after the media elements are in digital form. One goal of the Presentation Development Center is to support both Mac and PC computer environments.

Mark has also started a multimedia user group of interested employees. The forum is a monthly, two hour meeting where people get together and share ideas and information. Anyone interested in becoming involved with this user group should contact Mark by calling 2460 or send e-mail to Marksm@oakland.edu.

Electronic Media Distribution

A current project underway in ITC, which will enrich the teaching and learning environment, is the development of an electronic media distribution system. This system, when fully developed, will provide the resources to electronically link the classroom with virtually limitless digital and analog media information/instruction elements. The system will utilize the campus voice/video/data network to provide the connection. The plan is to equip a number of classrooms with permanent computer/video display equipment and develop the resources that will allow the classroom users full control and access of various media and source equipment devices located outside the classroom or building. Faculty will be in full control of the system. Each classroom will also have

local input capability to offer faculty the option of using the local VCR or computer. Some examples of the media elements the system will support include: videos (both tape and laser discs), live satellite programs, cable TV, CD-ROM, computer data bases, and Internet files. A secondary benefit of the system will eliminate the current paper, work order system used by the entire University community. All users of the campus network will be able to place their service requests with ITC electronically and receive immediate feedback on resource availability.

There are many exciting and new things happening in the Instructional Technology Center. We are going to have a very busy spring and summer and look forward to promoting the new and improved services to all our users this coming fall. Please call me at 2127 or e-mail me at preising@oakland.edu with your comments.



Editorial Information:

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--Sherman Folland, Editor