
Insights & Ideas for Teaching & Learning

a publication of the Oakland University Senate
Teaching & Learning Committee

Winter 1995

Vol. 7, No. 2

Editor's Note: Ron Cramer was one of two winners of the Teaching Excellence Award for 1993/94. We asked him, as an outstanding Oakland teacher, to tell about teachers who had most strongly influenced him. Ron came up with three of his own teachers plus one story from Isaac Beshavis Singer.

First Encouragements: How Good Teachers Influence Their Students' Lives

Ron Cramer

Teachers have a lasting influence on their students and thus are a potential force for good or ill. Most of us have had teachers who exemplified one of these traits or the other. But, I am not interested in what makes for poor teaching, although God knows there is plenty of it. I am, however, keenly interested in good teaching, and my experience tells me there are more good teachers than is commonly believed. I have known a few good teachers; they were both model and mentor to me. This essay is about teachers who influenced my life and my career. I owe them a debt which I repay by striving to become a good teacher myself.

Ms. Fuller, my sixth grade teacher, thought I showed promise when all others considered me hopeless. I've wondered these many years what redeeming qualities she saw in me, a troubled kid who took little interest in school, and delighted in disrupting her classroom. Ms. Fuller saw through my tough facade. She arranged a special responsibility for me -- tender of the Victory Garden. Every day I left the class for a few precious minutes of freedom to tend the garden. Little did I know that Ms. Fuller expected to reap her own harvest. She demanded that I work hard and cause less trouble. And I did. Well, not always. When I strayed from the path of righteousness, she punished me -- sometimes forcefully. I did not mind that, under extreme provocation, she sometimes pulled me around by the ear. I knew, as I know night from day, that she cared about me. For some inexplicable reason, she thought I was worth caring about.

"Ron, you have wonderful ideas." Thirty-five years have passed since these five words first appeared on a short story I had written for Ms. Anderson, my English Composition teacher. I was a college freshman. I had no idea I

could write anything worthy of such generous words. Writing was unexplored territory for me; I had no interest in it; I assumed I had no talent for it. Still Ms. Anderson had this odd idea that I had wonderful ideas. Wonderful ideas! The having of them. Powerful stuff. Instinctively, I understood that writing was about ideas -- not punctuation and grammar -- of which I knew virtually nothing. Ms. Anderson gently reminded me of this deficiency without crushing the fragile confidence endemic among young writers.

I'm sure I made Ms. Anderson's words mean more than she intended. I was ecstatic. I had wonderful ideas! I was also fearful -- fearful that she had made a mistake. And I did not want her to be mistaken. Ms. Anderson had announced a birthright, and I wasn't about to relinquish it, no matter how undeserved. I spent the rest of that year desperately striving to elicit another equally powerful comment from Ms. Anderson. And while other generous comments followed, none ever contained the magic of her first encouraging words. I see now that first encouragements only occur once, but once is enough. So, here I am, thirty-five years later, celebrating the remembrance of words past -- five generous words that helped determine the course of my life. I sometimes feel that every word I have written since had its ancestors in Ms. Anderson's five encouraging words. I cannot forget them. They have sunk too deeply; they resonate too strongly. They were my first encouragement to write. Teachers ought never forget just how powerful their words can be. A teacher's words weave their way into the fabric of a student's life. Ms. Anderson never knew

the effect her words had on me, and I am sorry to say I never told her. I was a freshman, still in the midst of discovering that I had a brain. I had no manners, no words for expressing appreciation. And, in truth, I had no idea then of the effect her words would have in my life.

For a long time, I believed I was Professor Edmund Henderson's most brilliant graduate student. He told me so, more than once and in more than one way. In my heart of hearts, I suppose I still believe it. Later, I realized that damn near all of Ed's graduate students thought they were his most brilliant graduate student. Ed left his mark on me just as surely as if he had branded his initials on my forehead. He is and will always be my model of what a university professor ought to be. Sure, he had a touch of the blarney stone in him. He knew how to tell a story, and how to draw you into his stories. He made you think that he was the fortunate one -- fortunate to have you as his student. Imagine the power of such undeserved bounty. A theologian might call it unmerited grace, but I call it good teaching. Ed's students worked hard and accomplished more than other similarly situated students. These days, when Ed's students are together at conferences, the conversation inevitably leads to an exchange of "Ed" stories. Long after Ed's death, his influence lives on in our lives and careers.

Isaac Bashevis Singer tells a story about a librarian who loaned Singer his first books. Singer enters the library and is bedazzled by the stacks of books and high ceilings. He spots the librarian behind the counter: corpulent, bareheaded, beardless, "I want to know the secret of life. I want to read a book on philosophy." The librarian questions

Singer about his interests, climbs a ladder and brings down two books, "I have something for you, but if your father should see them, he'd tear them to pieces." Recounting the story years later Singer recalls, "I barely restrained myself from kissing his hand. A great surge of affection swept over me toward this good person along with the desperate urge to read what was written in these books" (Gilban, 1989, p. 76).

I see this good librarian as exhibiting the traits of the good teacher. *Intuition*: he sensed in young Singer a desperate desire to learn; *knowledge*: he quickly found two appropriate books for Singer to read; *compassion*: he knew Singer had no money, so he broke the library's rules requiring a monetary deposit; *wisdom*: he urged Singer to return for more books when he had finished; *iconoclasm*: he loaned forbidden literature to an orthodox Jew; *humor*: tongue in cheek he says, "If a boy wants to know the secrets of life, you have to accommodate him."

For me, teaching is a continuing struggle to achieve a few simple goals. I aim to instill a desire to learn. I want my students to learn what I am teaching, but I also want them to acquire an attitude toward learning that will enable them to grow into lifelong learners. I intend to convey a well structured body of knowledge related to literacy research. Teachers must know much more than the latest methodology. I strive to impart a desire to explore alternatives. I want my students to approach issues with an open mind. I seek to strengthen self-confidence. Uncertainty paralyzes the use of one's native talents. I undertake to instill a readiness to take risks. Timidity is the enemy of innovation. I endeavor to convince students of the nobleness of the teaching

profession. Teachers are often pilloried in the media, and this can result in a debilitating inferiority complex. Finally, I try to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Learning is fostered in a climate where teacher and student can rely on the integrity and trustworthiness of one another.

Since teaching is an art and not a science, every good teacher will have their own version of the goals I have described, and must carry them out in their own unique style within the constraints of their own personality.

Steven Gilban (1989). The Open Door: When Writers First Learned to Read. Boston: Gordine Publishers.

News From the Senate Assessment Committee

Implementation issues have occupied the Assessment Committee this year. Many academic units have indicated they are interested in conducting alumni and employer surveys. The Committee is working on plans to coordinate this survey activity. In addition, we have established guidelines for the disbursement of the limited resources available to support the assessment endeavor at Oakland. We have held two brown bag workshops on assessment for faculty, and have sent several Assessment Committee members to assessment conferences.

Assessment, as a formal activity, is relatively new to Oakland University. The purpose of assessment is to evaluate student academic achievement and to use this information to improve the quality of the educational experience at Oakland. Faculty in every academic unit developed an assessment plan for each of its major programs. These plans are

faculty owned, individualized and flow from the goals of Oakland University. Typically, the plans use multiple, objective measures to assess student achievement.

Every year, beginning in October, 1995, each academic unit will report to their Dean, and the Assessment Committee, findings regarding student academic achievement in their unit, along with proposed changes to academic programs based on assessment. Assessment, on the campus, has been strengthened by the creation of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (formerly O.I.R.). Laura Schartman is the Acting Director of this newly created office. Laura's office provides administrative support for assessment, assists with data gathering, and provides a central repository of assessment materials.

Interim assessment reports have been written, and following are some results that were reported in the first interim assessment reports for the 1994-95 year:

- The Sociology Department expects to recommend an increase in credit hours for its computer methods course.
 - The Computer Science and Engineering Department is currently working on ways to improve thinking, lab and communication skills.
 - Mathematics, which has utilized assessment for many years, has recently introduced new materials into its calculus courses and increased its emphasis on using graphing calculators.
 - Linguistics is improving the presentation of material in its general education courses.
 - Accounting, another department with a strong background in assessment, is reviewing its method of teaching the two introductory accounting courses.
- The School of Nursing, which also has had extensive experience in assessment, routinely uses assessment data to make decisions about curriculum revisions.
 - The Physics Department plans to use the results of student and alumni surveys to evaluate the need for instructional equipment.

The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) is compiling a reference library of assessment literature and materials which are available to the university community. The material covers a range of assessment topics, including general education assessment, assessment of the major, assessment plans, portfolio assessment, assessment instruments, classroom assessment, and state approaches to assessment.

In addition, there are available annotated assessment literature bibliographies from various publishers, assessment conference materials, and samples of assessment instruments.

This material is available in the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 511 O'Dowd Hall. Call OIRA for a bibliography of assessment literature available. In the near future, the OIRA Assessment Bibliography will be accessible by the Oakland University Gopher. Please contact OIRA at 370-2387 for further information.

Editorial Information:

Insights & Ideas is published twice a year by the Oakland University faculty Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, Office of Academic Affairs, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309-4401. The newsletter is distributed free of charge to Oakland University faculty.

—Sherman Folland, Editor