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# REACHING THROUGH TEACHING

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A NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTING CLASSROOM PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE AMONG KENNESAW FACULTY

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 1

FALL 1992

THE EDITOR CONSIDERS . . .

## WIGS, MORTARBOARDS AND OTHER TRADITIONS

Don Forrester, Ed  
Director of CETL

A British professor invited his lawyer friend to lunch primarily to have some fun at his expense over an article he had just read in the newspaper.

"I say, Neville," said the waiter had taken their orders, "I just read that you barristers are considering leaving off those silly white wigs you wear in court. It's about time, I'd say! How many centuries have you persisted in that ridiculous custom?"

Nearly choking on a sip of water, the barrister replaced his glass, and carefully composed himself as he wiped his mouth on the white linen napkin.

"I must say, Percy, that I am somewhat taken aback that one of your profession would be of such an opinion, steeped as you are in tradition. Those caps and gowns you academics wear don't exactly serve any useful purpose now, do they?"

"Quite true," replied the professor, "but most of us don't lecture in them anymore, we only use them for ceremonial occasions.



Besides, academic regalia once had a useful purpose—to keep the wearer warm in unheated lecture halls—which is more than can be said of your artificial looking wigs."

"But," Neville countered, "court is a ceremonial and solemn occasion. The wigs set us apart from the other participants in the courtroom and give us a sense of dignity."

Percy, regretfully, could not restrain his laughter.

"My dear friend, forgive me, but if you fancy that you look dignified in that ludicrous hairpiece, I must tell you..." His sentence was interrupted by more laughter which he pretended to try to stifle with his napkin.

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Now Neville was clearly miffed.

"You have attacked a practice which some of us hold almost sacred," he spoke icily. "I value tradition very highly until it becomes destructive. It is my belief that wigs in court bestow honor upon the wearer and upon the occasion; but at worst, donning white wigs—or, for that matter, academic regalia—is a harmless practice. Let's talk about one of academe's prized traditions which I do not consider to be so benign."

The professor became immediately cautious.

"And what tradition is that?"

"You've mentioned the word twice since we sat down," replied Neville. "It's the *lecture*. It is your profession's sacred cow, the tradition you preserve at any cost, even when better ways of teaching are available to you. And all the while, Percy, your students are bored comatose."

"What?" answered Percy, loudly enough to attract the attention of nearby diners. "The lecture is a venerated and, I might add, *proven* means of disseminating knowledge. Our whole system is built around it. We have *lecture* halls; some of our faculty even have the title, *Lecturer*. Neville, old boy, you're meddling with something you know nothing about!"

"Oh don't I, indeed? Let me remind you that I have two university degrees, which means that I've heard enough lectures to qualify me as an expert on the subject. In all my years of study, I can only recall two or three professors who inspired and stimulated me through the lecture. It certainly has its place in the classroom, but the fact is that very few of you chaps are any good at it."

"Well, I never!" sputtered Percy. "I invite you to lunch to congratulate you on abandoning your anachronistic legal wigs, and you transform it into an occasion to criticize the way I practice my profession!"

By now Neville regretted having attacked his professor friend quite so strongly, and began trying to make amends.

"Percy, old friend, don't take what I said personally. You're probably an exceptional lecturer. I just meant that most of the others...well, they fall short somehow. They could inspire their students to learn so much more effectively using other approaches."

Though this helped to salve his ego somewhat, Percy was still defensive.

"What would you suggest, Neville?" he asked with more than a tinge of sarcasm.

"Oh, I'll not presume to be prescriptive where academe is concerned," Neville answered. "I just think it is sad when one walks down the halls of one's alma mater, as I did a few weeks ago at my twentieth reunion, and sees nothing in the classrooms but the tops of students' heads as they bend over their desks writing furiously as the professor drones on and on from yellowed notes."

"Well, Neville, at least they were absorbing information. Can you think of a more efficient way of covering vast amounts of material than lecturing?"

"As a matter of fact, I can. How about reading? The word, 'lecture,' means to read, you know; and lecturing came about in a day when there were few books, and people depended on the most educated to read to them. Today, students can very efficiently read for themselves, they can view videotapes and they can use the computer to learn. If the professor serves as no more than a reader of information, this is an inefficient state of affairs, indeed."

Percy's blood pressure was starting to rise again.

"Next you'll tell me that I am superfluous—that computers and videotapes can take my place. Well, I'll have you to know..."

"Quite the contrary, Percy, you miss my point," interrupted Neville. "Books and computers, and such, simply free the professor to promote learning on a different level. Let me give you an example from the visit to my campus I mentioned earlier. After all that dullness I described, we finally passed this one rather large class where a young woman professor had broken them into small groups, each of which was engaged in lively discussion. The din was unbelievable, but they were involved and interested. And they were *learning*, Percy! Learning more than cold facts. The dean, who was guiding the tour, pulled the door shut and looked embarrassed by the whole thing. Ironic, what?"

"Oh, I've heard all of this before," scowled Percy. "My brother-in-law who teaches in America has tried some alternatives to the lecture, I must say with mixed results. On the one hand, he claims his students' marks improved rather significantly, probably because he watered down the course. But even he admits—you know how frightfully democratic they are in the colonies; they even allow the students to evaluate their professors—even he admits that his student evaluations are sometimes lower."

"It wouldn't surprise me if they were lower initially," said Neville. "The students' entire academic experience has conditioned them to prefer passivity and predictability to involvement and challenge. Of course they're uncomfortable at first with being made more responsible for their own learning."

"Neville," sighed the professor, "be a good chap, and drop this whole conversation, can we? Here comes our lunch, and I do want to enjoy it."

"It would be my pleasure," said the barrister with a shrug. "Remember, you started it all by poking fun at my courtroom attire, which, by the way, I shall resist abandoning vigorously to the bitter end."

"And I," said Percy resolutely, "shall give up my trusty lecture notes when they pry them from my cold, dead fingers!" 🍎

