

Teacher Training Along the Flightline

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My most stunning performance evaluation in fifteen years of teaching was a rather informal one conducted over a standard-issue trashcan common to classrooms across our nation. That particular classroom was a portable building located along one of the flight lines of Randolph Air Force Base (RAFB), Texas. The evaluation refocused my perspective and changed the manner in which I engage my students in the classroom. Though I changed my teaching style and expectations to accommodate students with military careers, I have experienced its effectiveness with all students.

In the five years that I taught at RAFB, I became as used to the shrill whine of the Boeing-built USAF T-43's and the flyovers of the Cessna T-37's as to the announcements of temporary duty commitments (TDY's) that could interrupt a student's class attendance from a day to several weeks. The portable buildings, the flight line noises perpetually accompanying my lectures, and the TDY's were some of the indications of my students' mobile lifestyle. Over time, my syllabus came to accommodate for that mobility, addressing such matters as how to complete course work in the event of a TDY. The syllabus also became a much more detailed document, almost a contract. Knowing that their lives were filled with interruptions and unanticipated obligations, the students wanted to know their schedule of assignments and what I expected. With a detailed course outline, they could work ahead or remain caught up even though they were thousands of miles away.

World-wide mobility tasking and duty assignments given on short notice are not all that Air Force personnel have in common. Whether first year recruits or career persons with families, my RAFB students had reasons for doing well in their studies. What I didn't know was that their motivation, strong as it was, came from and was directed toward intentions far different from my own which had always been grounded in curiosity and the pleasure of learning.

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bright and determined, if sometimes compulsive. Their motivation, whatever its source, made my teaching enjoyable and a great deal easier. A sign of my inexperience and presumptuousness is that I never asked them or myself what motivated them.

Not being aware of my students' motivations made me equally unaware of how they approached their acquisition of knowledge. Consequently, I could not have anticipated the demerit I received during that informal evaluation. But sure enough, that evening after finishing her world literature final, one of my most diligent, most engaging students, dressed me down for having given an exam that, for all practical purposes, was a comprehensive one. Having never known anything other than comprehensive finals, I was rather confused by her unbrading. In retrospect, I have come to understand that my students' military training is two-pronged—instruction and application—and is presented unit by self-contained unit. In such an approach, once the body of material has been presented and studied and a performance review indicates mastery, that material need no longer be addressed. Only the skills need to remain. Quite naturally, then, my students would come to their college classes with the assumption that each assignment and test are a complete unit and serve as a means to earn a grade. Each unit has its own purpose and no purpose exists beyond it.

After turning in her exam, the student indicated that she wanted to talk to me. I followed her to the back of the room. As she spoke, she opened her three ring binder and proceeded to deposit her class and study notes into the gray trashcan that stood between us. She explained in whispered, yet emphatic tones that she was most distressed about her answers on the test. Her questionable performance, however, was not the result of being unprepared, but rather because that instrument (she meant my laboriously fashioned exam) evaluating her knowledge was invalid. She hadn't studied the material that had been covered earlier in the semester and therefore could not include various literary examples I had requested the students use to illustrate their points. Having made her own point abundantly clear, she delivered

her crowning blow: "How can I recall information from three previous tests when I have already done an information dump on those units of study? I didn't think we needed that information."

I was crushed. Any notion that I had ever fostered of my teaching, such as making a permanent impression on my students, crumpled and dropped on top of that pile of discarded notes in the trashcan. I thanked her for her participation in class and assured her that I would review my approach to testing. My response to her evaluation was polite, and in Air Force tradition, a way of maintaining my military bearing. I could not possibly let my expression or demeanor reflect the utter loss of purpose I was feeling at that moment. I watched the remaining students finish taking their exam. Rather than anticipating circumspect responses, I was envisioning answers that were desperate attempts at retrieving information out of various "dump files." I gathered the exams one by one, bade my students farewell and good luck in their endeavors and closed the portable for the semester.

By the time I finished my twenty minute trip from the base to my house, I had dissolved into tears. Angrily I shouted into the Texas darkness: "I don't teach people only to watch them dump their knowledge any more than I go to the trouble of baking a loaf of bread only to dump it."

Over the semester break I had to determine what wasn't working with my approach. I had made allowances for their interruptions in class attendance, for the frequent changes in duty stations and thus the variety of ability levels. I had adjusted the length and number of reading and essay assignments. What else was I to consider? Whatever I might have to change to be a more effective teacher, I knew I would not change my desire for my students to use the ideas I had presented in my lectures. I felt that I could not change the bottom line of my purpose in teaching: to teach life and the lifelong value of critical thinking, the study of literature, and the development of writing skills. Clearly, I had not been emphatic enough about my own belief that literature is mirror and mentor for our lives. I had hoped to convince them that all this literary "stuff" was good for something greater than promotions and a raise in salary. Information dumps at the end of the semester do not indicate that lives have been enriched. My student had proven to me that even with an A average on her reading quizzes, she had not been engaged with the topics in the course—rather she had gathered information for a purpose and dumped it just as purposefully in order to make "disk space" for the next set of instructions and tasks. What was it I was missing?

I became convinced that I had lost something between the time that I had been a fifth grade teacher and the time I

became a college professor. As a fifth grade teacher, I had been told that my teaching effectiveness stemmed from my excitement about learning and my desire to share that excitement. Fifth grade students still have a natural curiosity which I was able to engage. Infecting my students with excitement was easy because of their curiosity and because of their love for playing. I, too, liked playing and activity. Being a kinesthetic learner, I taught through the hands-on approach. I delighted in thinking up projects and learning units that would give my students the opportunity to discover concepts and ideas on their own. Each six-week unit was self-contained, but I made the topics interdisciplinary. That meant that reading, writing, math, art, music, and science were incorporated in each unit. By the end of the school year, the various disciplines' inter-relationships had become clear to the students. Such a self-contained and interdisciplinary approach sometimes made for a noisy and disorganized learning environment, but students were always busy and having fun with their discoveries, and I had the fun of learning along with them.

Unfortunately I did not transfer that hands-on approach to the college classroom. Instead, I strove to emulate the "hallowed" example of my professors who artfully lectured and on occasion engaged in some Socratic exchanges. In my quest to become a professor, I overcame my terrors of standing in front of a group of people and learned to lecture. I did the research necessary for each presentation; each class preparation enlarged my repertoire of anecdotes and interesting tidbits of information. I was so engrossed in becoming an exemplary professor that I forgot that sharing my own

excitement and having students engage in learning cannot be exclusive of one another. True, they are two different functions, but they must go hand-in-hand to assure learning. I forgot that excitement must be shared without giving away the answers or appearing that one has the answers. I failed to make clear that the challenge of education is students finding the answers for themselves.

What I was missing was learning: student learning. Learning means that a change in behavior or attitude takes place. To be sure, I was learning, and all that research helped me as I pursued my graduate degree. Indeed, the manner in which I was going about the business of teaching, was quite in keeping with the original model of a university education. But I had to remember that the students in my classes at RAFB were not medieval scholars. First they were persons with military missions to fulfill, then parents and finally students. If I wanted them to see literature as mirror and mentor, I had to give them the opportunity to make that discovery during our class time. If I believed that learning is students discovering truths and relationships as they interact with peers, I must facilitate group discussion. If I

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believe that self-revelation, in part, comes from within as ideas burst upon students in the process of writing, I must allow time for reflective writing: additionally, I must provide questions for group discussions and journal responses that lead to formal papers. I could not hope to lecture for several weeks and then present an exam that asks the students to respond using comparisons and making evaluations. If I want students to weigh and to judge a text's validity and ultimately dare to question the authority of authors, cultural systems, or their professor, then I have to give them the opportunity to do so first in the company of their peers in order that they can be prepared to do so with confidence on a test.

But this conclusion did not offer as much comfort as I had hoped. Truly, I could easily return to and modify methods honed in my fifth grade classroom. But I was teaching military personnel who were taught that there is a correct way to go about a procedure and that procedure is not open to debate or review unless initiated by a commanding officer. Military training aside, many adult students, for the sake of efficiency, would prefer being told how to do something rather than bothering with inventing a scheme of their own.

Still, having found no other way of improving my chances against information dumps, I resolved to go back to the method of what is now called "active" learning. So, the now "stagewise" performer, the polished lecturer took a seat in the back row. Like in my fifth grade classroom, I gave way to my students and made my place among them. Despite crowded conditions in the portables, I requested that students arrange themselves in small groups. Still the avid researcher, I now used my discoveries to develop hand-outs with discussion questions. Each group had its own set of questions to work through and report its conclusions to the entire class before the evening's end. I forced them to read and re-read if they disagreed and to wrangle among themselves about ideas and themes. I sent them to the library to locate background information and made them discuss what it meant and its significance to a particular literary text. I made them find news releases that could be modern day sequels to stories they held bizarre and unrealistic. So, they discovered that mothers kill their children more often than they had believed. Medea, for one, no longer appeared as demented and demonic as they first perceived her, Dido was no longer the stupid dame who committed suicide. King Lear has his counterparts in many a modern father and the confessional Rousseau is not so pornographic in his discussions of intimacies.

Finally, even I came under scrutiny and the students questioned my own assumptions. My own pet theories had to go out the window. I was challenged to re-read texts. Interestingly

enough, such challenges came when I wanted to ground myself in my own graduate professor's ideas rather than risking expressing my own perspective. Classes began with the students already arguing among themselves. Heated exchanges continued as students walked to the parking lots.

Eventually, I had to resort to driving home by myself since my carpool riders got tired of my long "after class" stoop discussions. Once more, I could say that my students were engaged in learning. I needed not to have worried about the matter of military discipline and obedience. It was not long that they made the separation between their military classroom demeanor and that of the college classroom. They were discovering excitement in literature and ultimately values to take into their personal lives. Admittedly, I never again covered the amount of material I once managed to cram into a semester, and my students could not impress scholars with a discussion of literary critical theories. But the energy that my students invested in the weekly discussions far exceeds those measures of evaluating learning.

I had achieved my goal of teaching the relevance of literature and writing in my students' lives. Moreover, I was able to do this using discrete units which came to their own closures. Interestingly enough, the confluence of ideas and comparisons among literary pieces that I always wanted to test for in those comprehensive finals, spontaneously emerged during class discussions. As the students bantered about their ideas, they quite naturally fell back on examples to illustrate their points and to make their supports for arguments. The students' need to have closure at the ends of thematic or literary units was satisfied and so was my need to see higher level thinking skills being applied to their reading of texts.

The demerit and consequent refocusing of my college teaching has become the pivotal event of my teaching career. It is pivotal because subsequent to my teaching at RAFB, I have taught many other students who are equally as non-traditional as are students who are also military personnel. Similarly, those students may have motivations other than curiosity and the pleasure of learning. They may be attending college out of desperation to save a job or the desperation of having lost one. They may be attending college as a result of programs such as those offered in our Georgia system. Similarly, they work under the challenges of unexpected duty assignments, i.e. the single parent who must deal with sick children or loss of daycare, the caregiver who must rush to the aid of an ailing spouse or elderly parent. Similarly, they bring to the classroom a wide range of life experience and academic abilities. These students, like those in my RAFB classes benefit from having the opportunity to be learners in their classes and to leave the day's studies having been challenged and energized by their peers, not overawed by the knowledge of their professor. As they engage in conversation about their reading, they discover that the battle scenes, family and marital tensions, personal dreams and terrors in the literary works are like their own. Making that discovery, they invariably go one step further and discover that learning is not a country beyond their kenning, it is rather the path that uses the motivations and challenges of their lives to make a whole and purposeful human being. That outcome is one that no test, however carefully crafted, can measure or assure. •