ALL ABOUT

MENTORING

A Publication of the Empire State College Mentoring Institute

EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Issue 8 • Spring 1996

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From the Editors
Xenia Coulter and Chris Rounds

The "Rethinking SUNY" project has had just about everybody nervous for the last couple of months, and it has prompted us to think about essential things. Over the years we've experienced pressure from every angle: student load has been increased and redefined, Accessory Instruction support has declined and support services of all sorts have been whittled away. At the same time, access to other SUNY institutions has effectively declined while the cost of Center for Distance Learning (CDL) access has gone up sharply. And now we hear that SUNY institutions will receive financial rewards for increasing faculty productivity. So we can be assured that relief is not in sight.

Questions inevitably arise: Where will it stop? When will it end? From the perspective of the Mentoring Institute, that issue might be translated as: At what point can mentors no longer call themselves mentors? The institute is committed to the idea that, in mentoring as in the lives of adult learners, there is no "one right way." Across the College we approach the job of mentoring, and define it, in many ways. As a result, defining an outer limit, a point beyond which we cannot go and still claim the title of mentor, must necessarily be difficult. And yet, incidents in our lives provide hints about where that limit might be in each of our contexts.

Late on a recent Friday afternoon, the phone rang. It was a former unit student who had gone on to complete a master's at Oneonta State in Elementary Education. She wanted to talk about what it would take to get certified in Early Childhood Education. Following a heartfelt profession of perfect ignorance on our part, we went on to explore how she might investigate this topic... between us, we outlined what amounted to some educational planning exercises. After about 15 minutes, she rang off with the following comment: "I knew that if I called Empire State College somebody would talk to me! "

That, in the end, is what mentors are: someone to talk to. They are people who have the time and recognize the value inherent in dealing with those they encounter as whole people. When we no longer have the time to get to know each new student as a whole person, we're in trouble. When we, consciously or otherwise, send students the message that we don't have time to hear their stories, we're reaching the limits. When we find ourselves driven to give students answers because it's easier and takes less time than pushing them to make their own discoveries, we're in trouble.

Someone who has never experienced mentoring might well ask: "What's so important about listening to our students' stories? Isn't this a luxury that we can no longer afford?" These questions deserve to be responded to on several levels. First, we might point out that the acknowledgement and valuing of individualism is the heart of the College mission... the knowledge and experience adults bring with them are at the core of educational planning and credit for experiential learning. And mentors can only learn about that experience through conversation in one form or another. A second dimension of our "whole-person" approach relates to how our students view their education and themselves as learners. Advisers in other colleges help students choose a curriculum and make sure they fulfill requirements. In addition to helping people design their own curriculum, we work with them to explore how they learn, to develop their skills as independent learners, to design or select individual studies and to, in the end, free them of dependence on us and on curricula generally. Helping people through this process begins with listening and respecting. It is rooted in our

acknowledging them as whole people, worthy of our attention and caring. So when we begin to feel that we can't afford the time to get to know our students as whole people, the fabric which is mentoring begins to unravel.

Does this mean that there is no room for efficiency or compromise? Not at all. Most students recognize that this is not a perfect world, and that compromises have to be made. And our experience is that students who are well oriented, who have a clear sense of their own activist role as learners, and who have developed a strong set of independent learning skills can learn a lot in circumstances that would destroy a less well-prepared student. But it does mean that we need to protect the time and energy required to help students become effective independent learners. And for a great many of our students, especially those poorly served by more traditional institutions, a precondition for becoming an independent learner is trust in a mentor: someone who cares enough to get to know them, and who knows enough to care about them. When we do not have the time for that kind of contact, then we have stepped beyond the limit and seriously challenge our identity as mentors.

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MI NEWS - February 1996

MI Board Meeting

The board met at the All Area of Study meeting in Albany on November 9. We discussed the possibility of sponsoring a summer institute, perhaps in collaboration with the ACE/Alliance, a possible 25th anniversary edition of *All About Mentoring* (with Lee Herman as special editor), the development of a new *Mentoring Handbook*, and a codified set of bylaws for the institute. Mostly we discussed possible developmental activities across the College and the ways in which the institute can support, facilitate, initiate, or disseminate information about these projects. One project of obvious concern to everyone at the meeting is the need to better understand the processes of and requirements for mentoring at a distance (see below).

Ongoing projects

Things That Work. The board will meet on January 19 to collate and organize the materials each center has collected in order to create a handbook of materials for all mentors.

Distance Mentoring. Each center is requested to organize one meeting in which mentors share their successes, failures, questions, and other comments about their experiences of mentoring students by phone, computer or mail. These responses should be recorded, and we hope that they can then be forwarded to a panel of "experts" who will respond to them at the All College Conference.

Educational Planning. The Mentoring Institute in conjunction with APLPC hopes to offer a workshop at the All College Conference in which we explore the purpose and process of educational planning, share "things that work," and discuss ways by which we can help new mentors learn to value and work successfully with students in educational planning contracts.

Standing invitation. The co-chairs would be thrilled to be invited to help facilitate, support or offer workshops on topics of interest to the centers.

Comments on this issue

Again, we have tried something new -we have published a student paper that was submitted by a mentor. We have also published a series of articles that we believe ought to generate some reactions by you: a paper praising the virtues of the "Batavia" model of mentoring; a report which distinguishes among different types of field experience; an opinion piece which presents features of "face-to-face" mentoring that the author believes are unavailable in other modalities, and a statement about the marginalization of the humanities (from the All Area of Study meeting). Please let us hear from you! Let us know what you think of *All About Mentoring* (authors report that they typically receive no feedback at all) and let us know what you think of the ideas presented here. We would value your comments and reactions.

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A Message From Israel

Martha Jean Schecter, Israel, Center for International Programs

Mentoring, as one of my students reinforced for me last week, involves the personal development not only of the student, but also of the mentor.

Today marks the end of the 30-day mourning period, recognized under Jewish law, for the death of Prime Minister Itzchak Rabin. The Prime Minister's assassination has had a profound influence on all of us in the Israel program, as it has shaken the very foundations of this society.

I have been in Israel for little more than three months. I arrived just after the suicide bombing of a bus in the midst of Jerusalem. On my way from the airport I drove through heated demonstrations against the government which continued in my neighborhood for three days. While there is a surface normalcy to life here, there is the strong underlying tension of a nation still at war. I ask myself how much of the tension between Jew and Jew exists because of the tension between Jew and Arab and the need for a nation conditioned by war to dehumanize the enemy. I also ask myself other questions focusing on the relation- ship of church and state, the limits of civil disobedience and free speech, the fragile nature of a democracy and its ability to survive in a truly pluralistic society. These are questions I have been asking in the United States. Their importance has been heightened by my Israel experience. Some of my students, both religious and nonreligious, are asking the questions with me.

I could speak more personally about the effect of the Rabin Assassination upon me; however, just before I was to fax this letter to you, David Starr Glass, our adjunct faculty member in business, submitted the attached poem which captures, far more eloquently than I ever could, the feelings of this last month. As he states in his covering note, "the assassination has had a profound effect on the current mood of Israel and -without doubt -will be seen as marking the beginning of a significant shift in the future Israeli perception of self." We are just recovering from the initial numbness and shock of this experience. The effect of the soul searching it has engendered at all levels will become clearer in the months ahead.

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Itzchak Rabin z'l: 1922 - 1995

David Starr-Glass, Israel, Center for International Programs

I make no pretense about it: I am walking in a fog.
There is no destination only the solace of movement,
Of not stopping too long or remembering too much.
We all seem to be wandering in that collective fog
Among the garlands of swaying children,
Beside the banks of flickering candle flames.
We sense a compassion in each other's presence
And dare not leave the huddled groups too long,
For in distance is exclusion, in exclusion bitterness.

The breeze has chased the flame from the candle's wick.
The wax cascades as icicles from wall and rail.
Who would have thought to see icicles hanging here?
Who would have thought to see children sitting here?

Fanciful thoughts which condense from my mist
Making little sense and giving even less comfort.
I make no pretense about it: I am walking in a fog.

We are all hung with sorrow and with shame
Only the children have been able to find a voice.
They sit on the sidewalk among the candles and flowers
Singing the song he sang last night,
The bloodstained words he had never sung before.

And in the singing - in their singing - they purify the words
Connecting them to an unextinguished flame of peace.
And in the eyes -in their eyes - I see a vision of hope
Connecting us to the insubstantial dream of peace.

It's so easy to extinguish the flame
Spilling wax over railing and flower strewn way.
It's so easy to lose the flame and to be left alone
In the chill and desolate emptiness of the street.

I light my candle and set it on the wall.
Let me cup my hands around the feeble flame

Allowing it to gather strength and embrace the wick.
Let me sit on the sidewalk and hear them sing
For I no longer have a separate place to sit
Nor a noble song to sing.

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Individualized Mentoring and Distance Learning: An Experiment that Works

a paper presented at the Alliance/ACE meeting, October 1995

Thomas Rocco, Western Region
Anne Cobb, Niagara Frontier Center

Introduction and Historical Note

For the past 25 years, Empire State College has used at least two quite different models to provide alternatives in higher education for a rather large number of students in New York State and beyond. Through the Center for Distance Learning about 1200 students per term are provided with correspondence courses, cable TV-supported courses, interactive computer-based courses, and occasionally other mediated learning experiences. At the same time, the College provides about 10,000 students per year with individualized degree program development with the assistance of mentors, direct tutoring and assessment of prior college-level learning.

Not infrequently, students have used both methods of studying with varying degrees of satisfaction and academic success, depending on a great variety of factors. For those who complete their studies, student satisfaction tends to be fairly high in regard to both formats, but a rather large number of students tend not to finish particular studies. Over the years, the College's rate of non-completion of studies and attrition (or non-reenrollment) has tended to be in the 25-50 percent range. This is not much different from national norms, but in recent years the retention rate has been improving rather markedly. Nevertheless, it seemed to be possible to achieve better than average completion and retention rates by using a combination of distance learning and direct mentoring (which is intensively immediate). Hence the experiment which we here describe was initiated in the fall of 1993.

There were of course other factors involved in the history of the experiment than just the desire to see if marrying mentoring with mediated learning would work well. Locating a unit of the College in a particular small city surrounded by a rural, agricultural area seemed desirable to the administrators of the Western New York Region. Severe budget cuts had rendered earlier plans to do this impossible. These same budget cuts provided a stimulus to create or find highly satisfactory academic programs which were at the same time highly productive. More efficient uses of the delivery system of the Center for Distance Learning could provide the desired level of productivity without losing the proven effectiveness of primary mentoring.

There was considerable skepticism and some keen opposition within the College about this idea. Nevertheless, circumstances in 1993 allowed the dean to assign a full-time administrator with concurrent academic rank to the location in question. The precise objective was to implement a new program in the College, but one which had all recognized and tested components, with student learning as the central concern and faculty mentors using mediated delivery of content for at least 50 percent of the students' studies as the primary focus of the experiment. A full-time tenure track faculty member has provided the leadership for the second full year of operation.

Basic Principles of the Model of the Experiment

There are a few fundamental principles which underlie the educational model in question, and all of them seem to have been already subject to extensive testing within Empire State College or in similar institutions such as the British Open University, or there were good "intuitive" reasons to employ them because they are analogous to existing program components within the College.

1. Primary mentoring is an excellent keystone for college education, particularly for mature adult students who can effectively interact with an expert faculty member;

2. Distance education delivery models can provide good to excellent course content in highly desirable degree programs (although there may be limitations due to practical or historical considerations, such as there are in the Empire State College program);

3. Predictable, periodic, direct personal contact by a mentor or tutor will improve students' completion of studies, academic progress, retention, graduation, and overall satisfaction with a distance learning program (this is an hypothesis as well as a principle);

4. Assessment of prior learning, which has been limited in the historical CDL model in Empire State College, would be available to the students in this unit as for all other students in the College's typical programs;

5. The "CDL with Mentor" model could be more productive (in credit generation) than other Empire State College units and be more successful than the CDL program has been in regard to retention and the other objectives mentioned in #3 above (this also may be regarded as an hypothesis, but in difficult fiscal circumstances, it may be the deciding factor in making this project worth doing in the minds of many).

Projected Program Components

1. Primary mentoring for degree program planning (4 credits)
a. introductory group sessions, whenever possible;
b. group orientation, whenever possible;
c. individualized advisement, whenever needed;
d. asynchronous contact available at all times for trouble shooting.

2. Students' studies
a. CDL courses available three to five terms per year on a predictable 50-100 percent schedule;
b. video-based, computer-based and satellite courses used on an as-needed, as-desired basis;
c. "early registration" to assure best course selection in CDL sections;
d. tutor and mentor contact in small group sessions at least twice per term for reinforcement, trouble- shooting, advisement, and peer support - strongly encouraged but optional.

3. Tutoring for additional studies, depending on students' degree programs.

4. Assessment of prior learning, including experiential learning (0 -96 credits requiring expert evaluation).

Predicted Outcomes

1. Improved retention, course completion, satisfactory academic progress, graduation rates, and student satisfaction. At the end of each year, an extended student survey will be conducted and the other noted factors will be tracked to compare the results with both CDL's matriculated students and other students in the College.

2. Increased productivity over other unit locations in the College: It was predicted that, with the use of CDL content for much of the students' learning needs, each FTE faculty line would be able to generate 1350-1700 credits per annum. The variances were allowed depending on how many individual contracts would be needed. which might be significantly

different for some students, how much time would be spent by faculty in doing assessment of prior learning, how much trouble shooting is needed, how effective CDL is in offering the courses most needed/desired by students.

An Evaluation of the "CDL with Mentor" Model of Learning at Empire State College

The CDL with Mentor Model (also called "the Batavia Model") is a combination of distance learning with a local support staff made up of at least three persons: a primary mentor/advisor who is on call to answer student questions, solve problems, and intervene when appropriate with the distance learning tutor; another mentor who is available to meet at least monthly with students on a "drop in" basis on a scheduled date; and the local secretary who is a source of information and reassurance to students in the distance learning studies.

The distance learning courses are well developed programs consisting of a detailed syllabus or course guide and one or more textbooks and reading lists. Students have a predetermined list of assignments and due dates. They also are provided the names, phone numbers and conference times of their tutors. They and the tutors are instructed to contact one another at least every two weeks and whenever there are problems or questions.

Student Satisfaction

From the two surveys conducted near the end of the spring term in each of the two years since the program began, we have learned that students generally like the printed materials provided by the distance learning program. The students like the detailed instructions, the precise dates on which assignments are due, and the clearly stated methods by which their work will be assessed. These matters are sometimes spelled out in less detail in learning contracts with individual mentors. Students very much like contact with the tutors; some wish it were more frequent. Some few students have had difficulty reaching their tutors; these students tend to be less satisfied with their studies than those students who sought intervention. This had seemed intuitively to be the case; the surveys confirmed our expectations. One of the most important roles of the local staff is to maintain frequent contact with students and to intervene on their behalf when appropriate. Those small acts provided just the personal touch necessary to keep students satisfied with learning at a distance.

Our students, just as is the case with all adult students returning to college, sometimes have problems -financial problems, unexpected additional work load, loss of job, marital problems, or health problems. They appreciate our concern and willingness to keep their files active. They like the fact that we understand real-world problems of adults and do not "punish" them for failing to complete their studies as originally agreed upon. They are uncomfortable enough having to drop out or to ask for an extension of time. The fact that we treat it matter-of-factly reduces their discomfort.

We provide the local "face" that keeps their distance learning from becoming totally impersonal and mechanical. We hold "open hours" one afternoon and evening each month. Not many students take advantage of it, but they are glad that it is available if needed. Generally, they prefer to talk with fellow students -commiserate, perhaps.

Measures of Success

How well have we succeeded? Our retention rate has varied between 86.4 and 96.2 percent -outstanding by any measure.

Term by term this has been our experience: 86.5 percent or 55 out of 66 students in the first term (fall 1993) reenrolled; 90.1 percent or 73 out of 81 in the spring 1994 term reenrolled; 88.9 percent or 40 out of 45 in the summer 1994 term reenrolled; 96.3 percent or 77 out of 80 in the fall 1994 term reenrolled; and 91 percent or 65 out of 71 in the spring 1995 term reenrolled. We had 40 students in the summer 1995 term; we will not have complete records to indicate how many may have dropped out until after the end of the fall term. We know of only one so far: she has determined that a nursing degree is more appropriate for her needs than a degree in community and human services. We do not offer a BSN.

To put these numbers into perspective, the retention rate for the entire College for students who complete their first learning contract is 70 percent. For the Genesee Valley Center, it is approximately 66 percent. There are no separate data for the Center for Distance Learning students.

We have carefully studied those who have dropped out and have tried to learn how and why we were unable to continue serving them. Most of those who have chosen not to continue with us were either nonmatriculated students who had enrolled with us for one or more specific studies rather than for a degree or were ill-prepared students who had difficulty working alone at a distance. For example, two were students who had some degree of learning disability for which we were unable to compensate. Two were unable to secure financial aid. Two took medical leaves of absence. Two moved out of state. We believe that had our "new and improved" model of service been in practice from the beginning, we might have been able to retain those students who were inadequately prepared for working alone at a distance. We believe that our frequent telephoning and offering encouragement and support should make it easier for less well prepared students to complete their work than if they are left to negotiate the course primarily on their own.

We had expected to find that more students fail to complete their distance learning studies than their local studies. In some terms this is the case; in other terms the reverse is true. There does not seem to be a clear explanation or a clear trend. It may be that over the long run there is no significant difference between the experiences in the two kinds of studies. The differences which exist may be attributable to the personalities and preparation of the individual students rather than to the types of study in which they are enrolled. One note of caution should be raised: the evaluations for students in the spring 1995 term are not all recorded yet. There is a lag of two to three months between completion of studies and final entry of outcomes into the official records. Because the spring term runs from January through April for CDL (and for 16 weeks beginning any day between January 2 and April 9), we do not have all of the spring 1995 final reports. Therefore, to be conservative we recorded "Not Completed" for all studies for which there was no official record on file. Once all of the records are filed, we anticipate that the actual completion rates will be somewhat higher than those shown in the following table.

At least two things account for the fact that the completion rate of distance learning studies typically is somewhat lower than that of locally mentored or group studies: with distance learning as with classroom and other term-based programs there is a somewhat rigid calendar. The student's work must be completed by a stated date. With local one-to-one mentoring we tend to be flexible (possibly too much so). We are also available, so that they can drop by unannounced and talk. Sometimes this is easier than telephoning a relative stranger and explaining a personal problem. Sometimes there is a real problem making contact with the distance learning tutor. Students do not tell us in all cases. Sometimes when they do tell us, it is too late. We are beginning to take the initiative in calling students to determine whether they have been in contact with their tutors and whether there is any way we can help. We have had several requests to intervene on their behalf. We are hoping that even more frequent contact with students will reduce still further the rate of failure to complete distance learning studies. We believe that the evidence supports our contention that frequent contact has kept the rate of drop-out from the program much lower than is typical of such programs. Now we are seeking to improve the rate of completion of individual studies.

From our two-year experience we have determined that beginning this term we will not wait for the students to seek our help. We will begin telephoning them at the end of the second week and at the end of each month during the 16- week term. We will follow up with phone calls and notes to their distance learning tutors. We will ask their tutors how we may help them to serve their students better.

We have asked students to tell us of their satisfactory experiences and their unsatisfactory experiences so that we can improve service to them. The comments are shared with the director of the Center for Distance Learning who assures us that he shares our goals.

Our Interpretation of the Model

What does this model offer other schools and other centers within our own College? For the school or the center with a widely dispersed population this model can prove educationally effective and economical, and for the students it can prove convenient. If the geographic territory is also subject to seasonally rough weather, as ours is, students may find this format of distance study particularly attractive. From the school's perspective, it is more economical to have a central staff of tutors working by correspondence and telephone with a reasonable number of students who are geographically dispersed than having several underutilized staffs in multiple locations. One local mentor/advisor can offer counsel in curriculum design and general academics to a fairly large number of students in a wide range of disciplines. Populations which could not otherwise be served can be reached: the geographically remote, the disabled, the housebound, and those

whose schedules prohibit regular school attendance. There are definite economies of scale possible.

There are dangers, however. The quality of the distance learning tutorial staff must be maintained at a high level. The contributions of the tutors must be appreciated; they must be trained well and given adequate support and compensation. If part-time, poorly paid, inadequately trained tutorial staff are substituted for full-time, well trained, decently paid and highly motivated mentors, the quality of the educational program will suffer. The student will be poorly served; the reputation of the institution will be tarnished.

Because the future is likely to require continuous learning and adjustment from everyone, the combination of distance learning and personalized local advice and support can provide a guided independent approach to learning that will prepare the student for a lifetime of successful learning experiences.

Table I. The Batavia Unit Completion Data Fall 1993 - Spring 1995

	Fall '93	Spring '94	Summer '94	Fall '94	Spring '95
Number CDL Studies Completed	50	69	28	45	37
Number CDL Studies Attempted	63	78	33	61	57
Percentage CDL Studies Completed	79.4%	93.2%	84.8%	73.8%	64.9%
Number Mentored Studied Completed	73	103	51	72	54
Number Mentored Studies Attempted	83	117	53	93	90
Percentage Mentored Studies Completed	88.0%	88.0%	96.2%	77.4%	60.0%
Number Other Studies* Completed	12	17	14	23	14
Number Other Studies* Attempted	12	20	14	26	16
Percentage Other Studies* Completed	100.0%	85.0%	100.0%	88.5%	87.5%
Total Number Studies Completed	135	189	93	140	105
Total Number Studies Attempted	158	211	100	180	163
Total Percentage Studies Completed	85.4%	89.6%	93.0%	77.8%	64.4%

*SUNY by Satellite, Group Studies, or Cross Registrations with Other Colleges

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Presentation of a Concern from the Cultural Studies Area of Study

Position Paper Presented at the All Areas of Study Meeting, November 9-10, 1995.

Wayne Ouderkirk, Northeast Center

An issue the cultural studies faculty wish to discuss with our colleagues from other areas of study is this: Are cultural studies, as Empire State College understands them, becoming de facto marginalized within this college? In other words, are topics and fields of inquiry within cultural studies taking a subsidiary or secondary position in relation to more professionally oriented studies, within a college that calls itself a "college of liberal arts and sciences"? The question applies to both the relative number of cultural studies degrees the College awards, as well as to the number and kinds of cultural studies courses our students take. There is a feeling on the part of some cultural studies faculty that the response to this question is yes. In addition, there is the evaluative response that such a development is a negative one.

We are not alone in raising this question. Variants of it have come up in other institutions, as well as in debates about funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in reactions of humanities faculty at research universities to their own institutions' responses to the reduction of funding by Congress. Some humanities faculty felt that such universities were speaking out strongly against cuts in science and technology funds, but not very loudly against cuts in funding relating to the liberal arts. Recently, the national universities in Australia began a multimillion dollar public relations campaign to promote liberal arts degrees, which have declined dramatically in numbers there as well. So the problem we are looking at extends well beyond this college.

It is true that Empire State College awards more business, human services and technology degrees than it does degrees in cultural studies. And all mentors are familiar with struggles with students pursuing degrees in those and other professional areas who resist taking courses not related directly to their concentrations. Often compromises are the only resolution, with the students never really developing a liberal arts perspective, either with respect to the world at large or on their own area of specialization. It is true, of course, that many of these students are pressured in their decisions about their education by employer reimbursement programs that pay reduced amounts or not at all for courses unrelated to job expectations. This, and probably many other pressures, influence the decline in cultural studies pursuits by many of our students. In response, some cultural studies faculty wonder how the College might attract more students to pursue concentrations in cultural studies disciplines and how we might more easily convince students to pursue those areas of study that are supposed to be at the heart of the academic program of a college of liberal arts and sciences. This is not a call for unofficial curricular requirements or for a return to traditional approaches to cultural studies. In fact, the cultural studies faculty has, in the recent past, reviewed the so-called new field of cultural studies in the wider academic world.

We concluded that we have no need to change our own area of studies name - "cultural studies" - because Empire State College had in fact been in the forefront of developing new approaches to the study of culture and had already recognized as legitimate many of the new, interdisciplinary approaches to traditional liberal arts subjects that are only now being recognized in the rest of the academic world. What we are asking for is a Collegewide reexamination of the importance of cultural studies and a reaffirmation of not only how they "fit into" professionally oriented degree programs, but also how they are essential components of all Empire State College degrees.

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Tales of the Mentor: Thunderheads
James Robinson, Long Island Center

It is 7:30 p.m. on a Wednesday night at the Midlothian Learning Center. Thunderclouds gather in the distance as a late winter storm sweeps down the valley. Mentor Phillip Angst is waiting for his next-to-last student to appear when there is a persistent knock on the door separating his office from the Xerox. Phillip swallows the last of his Taco Bell fajita in one bite and rises to greet his colleague, Darla Tracer.

Phillip: (Wearily) Oh, it's you.

Darla: Phil, I need to talk to you.

Phillip: Look, Darla, it's kind of late...I wanted to beat this storm. (Wipes his hands on a stray memo).

Darla: Phil, sit down. I have to figure this out and you're the only one I could find. Everybody else has gone home.

Phillip: (Ruffled) That's not exactly flattering.

Darla: Cut it out. I'm in no mood. Listen, do you keep getting portfolios sent back to you? I think Dietrich has it in for me. This is the third one this week!

Phillip: (Picking his teeth). Dietrich sends everybody's portfolios back. That way he doesn't have to look at them.

Darla: I'm sure he's mad at me. Look at this. I forgot to put in the CLEP scores for this student, and Dietrich sent the whole thing back. Why couldn't he just pick up the phone and call me? I could have FAXed it to him. Or he could have called Saratoga and asked them for a copy.

Phillip: Ah! I see you've missed the point. If he called you, that would be work for him. This way it's work for you. Dietrich figures he's swamped, so why should you get off?

Darla: But these are such petty details! And to have to deal with the whole thing all over again! He ought to call me, at least.

Phillip: The details, my dear, are everything. How can he defend himself if he lets your CLEP score slide? The next thing you know, you'll want him to find an evaluator for maritime hydraulics.

Darla: I'm not your dear and that's not funny. I do need one. Do you know anybody?

Phillip: (Kindly) I think we're getting off the track. The point is, you can't be too forgiving with the faculty if you're in assessment. You'd get overrun.

Darla: I see. So it's everybody? All the portfolios? (Lightning flashes in the distance.)

Phillip: Afraid so.

Darla: So what do you do?

Phillip: Honestly? ...I keep them on my desk for awhile, and when the student gets upset, I tell them to call Dietrich and ask what happened to their portfolio. Then he tells Helene to look it up, and they discover he sent it back to me. Then the student comes back to me and I tell them Dietrich is holding it up for the CLEP scores. Then they call Dietrich and get mad at him.

Darla: God. (A crash of nearby thunder.)

Phillip: (Smiling) Neat, huh? He's compulsive with me, and I do the passive-aggressive thing with him, the student goes ballistic...

Darla: But the students... (looking panicked)...

Phillip: I know, it's kind of tough. You do get some flack. But it works most of the time. Darla? (Darla sits staring glassy-eyed at the torrential rain hammering the window.) Hey, it's just rain. Darla? Are you okay?

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What is the Value of Studying Literature?

George Sutherland, Niagara Frontier Center

This student paper was submitted by Regina Grol-Prokopczyk

My first thoughts in trying to come up with an answer to this one went something like this -dirty question! What's literature? What's value? Subjective, trap doors abound. It depends upon whom you ask. A truck driver, a surgeon, an artist, and a stock broker will each have different answers. At best, the value of studying "a body of written work" is personal and circumstantial. It may be to satisfy a requirement for school, a job or a career. It may be to learn personally, not professionally. Or it may only be for entertainment, to satisfy the imagination. It can be a means to an end, or an end in itself- it all depends...

But on second thought, I had a better answer: one dollar. A greenback. One single slice of the magic, minted, pocket-paper pie. The value of literature is equal to a buck.

In an essay called "The Written Word," Marshall McLuhan identified what to me represents the fundamental nature of recorded ideas. He quotes a Prince Modupe of West Africa for his insight: "I gradually came to understand that the marks on the pages were trapped words. Anyone could learn to decipher the symbols and turn the trapped words loose again into speech. The ink of the print trapped the thoughts; they could no more get away than a doomboo could get out of a pit."

The Prince's doomboo may not bring George Washington's enigmatic portrait rushing to your mind, but they share a quality -stored value. Words store the ideas of other people. Writing, books, literature, and now tapes, videos, CDs and computer disks hold captive the minds of our civilization, freeze-dried, duplicated and distributed broadly - ready for regermination.

Reading is the act of adding water and letting the words out again. "Reading is action," is the first line in the Norton Introduction to Literature. "Texts have the potential for meaning, implication, response and result; but the reader must activate them, give them life and turn them into a lively interplay of ideas and feelings."

This is the definition of a currency. A dollar bill in itself is also nothing more than a piece of paper -but it carries the same notion of a power." In the same way, the value of words lies in the ideas that can be learned from reading. But the idea learned, or the object bought, is personal, circumstantial, and only part of the answer.

There is a second, stronger power in the paper and the ink -choice. People use currency to get what they need. One dollar won't buy all, but it's tradeable for a part of almost everything -necessities and luxuries alike. This is its potential -"Legal Tender for all debts, public and private." In the same way, we use English to communicate. One word cannot say everything, but language is used to exchange most ideas.

The more universally accepted a currency, the greater its potential. If more stores take dollars, more and different things can be bought - variety goes up. If more people write and communicate in their language, the accessible pool of ideas gets

bigger. More variety means more choice. In the minds of others, we can find alternatives that we might never have thought of ourselves, and the freedom to choose among them. This is a potential that is always growing.

The Internet is quickly becoming a vehicle for all stored value. It eliminates barriers of geography, ethnicity, and time; almost anything produced anywhere can be bought; and the thoughts and feelings of any mind recorded can be found. Different currencies and languages are convertible. The choices are the closest we have ever been to infinity. Choices that are the fuel of the imagination.

All stored values share this effect on us. They become symbols that represent both our needs and desires. This is only an analogy -I know few people whose every dollar is not consumed by the cost of living; and few who have the time or energy to read for pleasure alone. But I don't know anybody who would easily let their freedom to dream be taken away.

ALL ABOUT MENTORING
A Publication of Empire State College

Issue 8, Spring 1996

Practically Speaking. ..

Thomas Hodgson, Central New York Center
Judith Gerardi, Metropolitan Center

Field experience was discussed by human development and community & human services faculty at the November All Areas of Study Meeting. Xenia Coulter had stimulated the conversation by asking for clarification about the distinctions between "field work" and "internship", as the terms were commonly used interchangeably. Mentors from both areas of study offered a common perspective about the progression of differing types of student involvement in an applied setting: "Field observation and exploration" were regarded as initial exposures to professional activities, which may inform selections about subsequent theoretical studies; "practica" were identified as contractual relationships between academe and field sites which are structured by specified tasks and learning goals, and which frequently follow the first exposure to a body of theory; "internships", lastly, represented a significant commitment to a more intensive level of training and reflection about professional development in the context of the overall academic program. Frances Mercer presented a community & human services perspective in which fieldwork consisted of practicum and internship. Others used fieldwork to refer to the initial exposure which is limited to observation and exploration.

In search of common elements in a formal definition of field experience, we consulted mentors in different areas of study, the National Society for Experiential Education, CAEL, and Empire State College and other college's documents. Through this research, we were able to identify the following consistent themes in the design of internships: (1) the establishment of intentional learning goals; (2) the active reflection by the student about learning, linking theory and practice throughout the experience; (3) the assignment of significant responsibility; (4) the provision for sufficient intensity and duration of the experience; (5) the synthesis of on-site and faculty supervision; (6) the emphasis on the student's realizing a sense of "wholeness" with respect to involvement in the work on- site and in the field in general; and (7) the recommendation that internships occur at the end of students' programs of study. We found variation in the use and the meaning assigned to other terms within field experience.

In a brief review of related literature, we found that employers value field experience in recent college graduates whom they hire. Further, students typically find employment at businesses where they have had such an experience. The importance of having acquired job specific training has been empirically identified in the career planning literature; for example, a Department of Labor study reported significant employer preference for new workers whose abilities have been tested in a work environment (Nelson, 1995).

Writings in adult development and epistemology have emphasized the importance of structuring experiential learning with theoretical study. One model for examining the role of field experience in an academic program was presented by Philip Burnard (1994), who articulated Heron's three levels of knowledge: propositional, practical, and experiential. Propositional knowledge has its foundation in theory; practical knowledge is associated with the acquisition of skills; and experiential knowledge is obtained through personal connection to an event. Burnard encouraged educators to foster propositional or theoretical knowledge through reflection upon direct experience and the illumination of personal learning.

Interestingly, Empire State College provides several avenues for the synthesis of these epistemologies. As we know, many of our students enroll with the idea of engaging a new discipline and typically use degree program planning activities to explore a field in order to identify and plan contract learning activities where propositional (textbook) knowledge can be introduced and mastered. Subsequently, they can design practical and experiential learning activities which will allow for the interchange between theory and practice. For example, the learning contract section of a musician's degree program in human development began with theoretical studies in psychology and went on to include three field experiences allowing her to observe and explore practice. The student explored services for the visually impaired, counseling for AIDS victims, and creative activity for at-risk youth. These field experiences were analyzed both in terms of the complexity and rewards of service as well as in terms of the focus provided by theory.

In contrast to students who use degree programs to explore new fields are students who come to our college with considerable practical and experiential knowledge and use the degree program planning process to reflect on their practice and experience in order to identify, affirm, and, often, extend the theoretical understandings that they have acquired. The degree program of a student who had teacher training and practice in her native Poland provides an illustration. Among other purposes, contract study was designed to extend her learning to teaching handicapped preschoolers. In her final contract, she engaged in an internship which provided the opportunity for her to identify educational questions. In this case, those questions concerned modifying approaches to teaching and reconsidering the balance between cognitive development, on the one hand, and motor and social development, on the other. The degree programs of each of these students intertwined theory and practice, providing the opportunity for the student to reflect upon direct experience and illuminate personal learning.

Another issue that interested us was the incidence of field experience in degree programs. In the human development and community & human services faculty discussions at the November All Areas of Study meeting, we found considerable consistency of meaning concerning levels of field experience and, in particular, the special elements of an internship, but we found some disagreement concerning the place of an internship in college degree programs. For example, it was argued that as an intense culminating experience in which extensive theoretical knowledge is seen in practice, the internship did not have a place outside of graduate study. For further examination of mentor preference and practice in the labeling of experiential learning, the authors informally reviewed a sample of 1994 degree programs on the VAX to look into the prevalence of the terms "fieldwork," "practicum" and “internship", and found them used as descriptors quite infrequently. We then wondered if the terms would be used more often in professional programs and examined all B.P.S. degrees, again finding little use.

In all, of the several hundred programs selected in this review, two degree programs provided clear indications of the progression of increasingly involved field experience discussed above. For most degree programs where an experiential learning descriptor was used, field activity was cited as a single learning experience.

The limited use of these field experience descriptors may reflect mentor perspective rather than students' lack of actual field experience. For example, we often read CBE titles that would likely include hands-on learning but where the descriptors did not include a term for field experience. (This practice finds support in the State of New Hampshire's School for Lifelong Learning, where all experiential learning is subsumed under academic titles - e.g., Museum Studies). Some mentors may believe that a field experience term is less academic than a course-like descriptor and may prefer to employ the latter. Mentor attitude concerning the validity or utility of field experience also may influence both degree planning and contract design. However, as stated above, current expectations in the workplace argue in favor of including such studies.

We enjoyed our brief examination of field experience and invite discussion of theory-practice links. We hope to engage you in discussion, *All About Mentoring* providing the forum. We welcome comments about the utility and value of thinking about field observation, practicum, and internship, the three levels of field experience. How are field experiences designed and structured in your area of study? What learning opportunities do they provide?

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ALL ABOUT MENTORING
A Publication of Empire State College

Issue 8, Spring 1996

How to Write a Preliminary Learning Contract: Instructions for Students

Fernand Brunschwig, Long Island Center

First, think of a simple, short title to describe what you want to learn.

Then, look over "one or more sample learning contracts. If one of them seems appropriate for you, use as much or as little as you wish in writing your own.

Identify at least one book that seems to be worth studying. Try to pick a book that is reasonably comprehensive and substantive, yet clearly written and understandable. It is a big advantage, especially in math and technical subjects, if the book has some examples, exercises and questions for you to use in learning.

Sit down and study a few pages, and ask yourself how you feel about what you read. If you feel bored or tense, pick another book! (Planning a learning contract should be an interesting, fun experience; if it starts out boring and tense, think how it will be at the end!)

If possible, find other sources of information on the subject: other books, periodicals, TV , video tapes, computer software, individual experts... If you can, visit your local library and consult the reference librarian.

Pick out the specific sections of the main book you want to read, and make a list of any other activities you want to pursue to learn about the subject: review magazine articles, study parts of a second book, interview experts, view TV or video tape programs, take a course at your company, carry through a project at work, play with some microcomputer software...

Write a rough draft of your learning contract. The first section is the "purpose." You can just state the title of the subject you want to study here, or you can describe in a few sentences what you want to learn and why you think it is important.

The second section describes the "learning activities." Here you should list what you will be doing and explain how you go about the learning process. Include what you will actually do -for example, if you will be following a textbook, list the chapters or sections and the titles of the topics you will study.. Include the names of other sources you will use. If you can, give examples of questions you want to think about or specific topics in which you are particularly interested.

The last section of the learning contract is "methods of evaluation." Here you should describe the kinds of benefits you would like to gain from the contract, the outcomes toward which you will be working, and the ways in which you would like to be evaluated.

Write down the specific products you could produce naturally during the learning process; examples are written notes, a journal, solved problems, written summaries, answers to questions, computer source code and print- outs... Finally, write two or three sentences about how you will bring your learning together and demonstrate your achievement at the end of the contract. Many students plan to submit a final written report or a research paper; others solve selected problems as a kind of final examination. Of course, it is important to submit something that shows you can write about what you learned

in your own words. You also should submit something that will show you can do more than simply restate what you learned, for example, that you can apply or use your learning independently. Think of what you really want to get out of the study -the types of knowledge and capabilities you will want to last beyond the end date. If possible, think of a practical way to show that in fact you have gained this knowledge and capability .Some of the most successful contracts involve evaluations in which students actually apply what they learned to their personal or business situations.

While it is not strictly necessary to type the contract, typing makes it easier to read. If you have access to a computer, it is even more helpful if you can bring the document in on a disk, which provides us with a very easy way to edit and finalize it.

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A Publication of Empire State College

Issue 8, Spring 1996

The Fulbright Experience

Marilyn Gwaltney, Niagara Frontier Center

I spent my last sabbatical in India as a Fulbright Senior Scholar in the philosophy department of Delhi University. If you had asked me six years ago if this was possible, I would have denied it. I thought I would need to be an internationally published scholar or have a research project that requires research in India. I have had along standing interest in India and have read continuously about it for ten years, but primarily in Indian literature, not philosophy, the field of my academic credentials. My daughter was born in India and I was in the process of adopting another child from there. However, I did not think any of this qualified me as an academic researcher of India.

I really did not think of Fulbright grants going to teachers until Peter Murphy was invited to teach in Brazil and received a Fulbright to fund him. The dean, Tom Rocco, said, "You could do that too, Marilyn." I was skeptical. I talked with a long time friend and old India hand who has sat on Fulbright committees and sent many graduate students to do research in India. He said it was indeed possible for me to receive a lecturing grant. This was scary. I countered, it will be too hot. So my friend gave me a list of cities that would not be too hot and in which there were universities. His advice was to send my vita and a letter asking for an invitation contingent upon funding by Fulbright and see what happens.

I followed my friend's advice. I sent letters addressed to "Chair, Department of Philosophy" to universities in six cities. I received invitations from three. The letters were very friendly and specified what they would be interested in having me teach. On this basis I developed my grant proposal.

Over a year passed between the time I received the invitations and the time I received the grant for a seven month period as a lecturer. By the time the grant was confirmed, two of the invitations had been rescinded due to changes in the departments. However, I only needed one invitation and by now Fulbright was pretty much committed to finding a place for me. The invitation to Delhi University to teach social and political philosophy was perfect for me and kept me in one city; my original proposal had me spending four months on Bangalore and the remaining time in New Delhi. I do not know what I thought my children would do about school in two cities or what the stress of setting up a household in two cities would be like. This is an instance in which I was fortunate not to get what I wanted. My teaching assignment was not very heavy, co-teaching the course on social and political philosophy to second year M.A. students, giving several papers at faculty seminars, and talking to students and faculty informally in the head's office and in the departmental lounge. Since there were not enough offices for existing faculty , I had no office in the department and had to do my reading and writing at home, which is where the computer was. However, my experience was not typical of most Fulbrighters including those in other departments at Delhi University. Most of my fellow grantees had offices and more intense teaching or research experiences. However, the students of one university were on strike most of the time one Fulbrighter was there. He volunteered at an orphanage. These things happen. But the experience is still interesting and worthwhile.

I spent most of my nine months in India feeling blessed. I was finally in India, the country I had been reading about for at least ten years, in the midst of one of the most beautiful and vibrant cultures on earth. Learning to feel at home in a different culture is a wonderful adventure and being a Fulbright grantee is one of the safest ways of doing that. The

Fulbright agency in India, the U.S. Educational Foundation in India (USEFI), was a phone call or taxi ride away when I needed special help [which would not have been the case if I had been in a different city]. The USEFI found me a place to live, gave advice on schools, took care of special paper work needed for working in India, made plane and train reservations, kept my money in their safe, and were available to advise and help on whatever else I could not figure out for myself. While the Fulbright stipend did not feel lavish given my household expenses, it was enough to live on and still travel extensively in North India, with a bit left over. Without my sabbatical half salary , however, I could not have made it financially with my expenses at home. I noticed that stipends were raised this year.

I would encourage any of my colleagues who wish to live abroad for a while to consider applying for a Fulbright grant, providing Congress does not eliminate the program from the budget. The Fulbright announcement lists positions open as a result of institutional initiatives, but if a position that fits you is not available, you may be able to create your own opportunity by taking the initiative to contact universities in the cities and countries that interest you. I would encourage you to consider developing countries, especially India. The language of academia, government and business is English. The Fulbright people there are very competent and helpful. Indian students and faculty have a lot of interest in America.

It is important to remember that the capital cities of developing countries are usually very modern cities with an American Embassy and Fulbright staff to help you deal with adjusting to a new culture. And one is probably safer in such cities than one would be in New York City or Los Angeles. In the nine months in India, traveling in taxis and hired cars with drivers I did not know, I never had anything stolen and never felt at all threatened.

As a result of my stay in India I am much better able to give my students a multicultural perspective in their studies on a variety of topics as well as develop contract studies introducing students to the study of India. My own consciousness of how matters of everyday living can be differently arranged than what I am used to is a very interesting and valuable experience. Developing countries know how to do more with less; the "developed" countries could learn from them.

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Issue 8, Spring 1996

Book Review: Being There is Being Where? - Chauncey Gardner and the New Learning

Marc Cirigliano, Genesee Valley Center

The Technological Bluff by Jacque Ellul

As the College moves closer and closer to implementing some of the new learning technologies, we, as a community of lifelong learners, ought to begin grappling with the profound changes these technologies will have on educational quality. Instead of simply going with the tremendous contemporary cultural flow created by commercial interests who want to sell everyone a computer. its various software and access to this and that, we should avoid the "Being There" Syndrome and take a hard look at what new learning technology might mean for the College community. It is not a simple issue. The implementation of these technologies -be they aimed at distance learning or onsite applications - is not going to be a simple, quick process, nor is it going to develop in such a way that we can foresee the eventual results. However, given the massive human displacement and unintended suffering that new technology has historically caused, we should give more than pause to its implications and potential effects.

Jacques Ellul, French philosopher and author of the influential 1950s critique *The Technological Society*, has given us a new book in which he analyzes Western society's inability to ask the type of fundamental questions about technology we would expect from members of representative democracies. In his new *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdmans's Publishing Go., 1990), Ellul raises some very interesting social, political and educational questions regarding the impact, implications and transformations created by the ongoing permeation of what he calls telematics - which he defines as the totality of computer based multimedia information services beyond the telephone and telegraph. As things have now developed, telematics has produced the World Wide Web and the Internet, the proponents of which have promised a near future blessed with two things:

1) access for everyone to all information, and
2) communication possibilities by everyone with everyone else.

Ellul argues that our massive shift to new technology is a grand bluff in the sense that, in the strict meaning of the term, the word "technology" means the study of mechanical and electronic techniques, not the creation of the actual techniques themselves. Because of this misunderstanding implied in our misuse of the term "technology," Ellul makes the case that we do not really understand the effects of new techniques as we implement them in societies across the globe. On the contrary, he sees us blindly accepting new techniques as something inevitable and good - instead of actually analyzing their purpose, use and impact. With regard to telematics, he sees us blindly creating a world vastly different from the present in which people have little idea of where we are headed and why. And telematics seems inevitable - not only because we tacitly make it so by not discussing its ramifications -but even more importantly, because some of us are swept away in the promise of its purveyors and others of us are blackmailed by the anonymous mob cry of "you'll fall behind."

Ellul wonders why we are not grappling with some very elementary issues regarding the new telematics:

1. Access

Exactly who's going to have it? Ellul points out that technocrats speak of "everyone" having access, but says that there are no indications or plans in the social, political and educational realms to insure that 'everyone" will. Now, the concept of access raises several key questions for the College. We must ask if Empire State College students will be able to afford the computers and lines of access. More specifically, we hear again and again that it is the rural, out-of-the-way students who will reap major benefits from the new learning technology. Bear in mind that the median family income in rural Steuben County is $13,000. Is a computer, its upkeep and its monthly access fee really feasible when a family is living below the poverty level? Moreover, in an era of shrinking state support for education, who will pay for everyone to have access? In our incipient stage of computerizing the College, we currently lack the funding and staffing necessary to maintain and repair what is, in comparison to tomorrow's infinitely more complex and expensive systems, a relatively small scale computer operation.

2. Content

Ellul further points out that the technocrats have spoken about an age where all information is available. Is this "all information" garnered from the Net going to be a simplistic gloss of complex intellectual issues? For example, he shows that all the technocratic literature he has read regarding this concept of "all information" makes no mention of such issues as growing poverty and unemployment in the West, the possibility of nuclear war, the potential Third World revolt and the possibility of a financial collapse in the West due to accumulated debt. That these major issues are ignored when talking of "all information" indicates that the promise -at least up to now -of the information age is more a public relations and marketing ploy than a serious, intelligent analysis of the world we live in. Is this uncritical and conforming mindset something we at Empire State College wish to foster in our students?

3. Process

Ellul then raises the question of whether or not the new computer technology will displace the traditional mode of critical analysis and scientific inquiry with a quest for the quick and easy info byte. Traditionally, when we explore and investigate, we formulate a hypothesis or question, collect data and others' thoughts on the issue at hand, reformulate our question, come to some new conclusion about the issue at hand -and then, if we want, we continue even further with new questions and problems that arose during the inquiry. When we use the Net, Ellul wonders if we will forget this approach and simply take the Net's information as the "answer." Goodness knows we all strive to help our students learn to think independently, critically and with a sense of autonomy and dignity.

Ellul concludes that because we have not attempted to face these issues, we are tacitly accepting what the technocrats envision and even promise: a future utopian world -what he calls the "Great Design" -where nothing and no one are out of place, all people work efficiently, and life is better. He, however, asks that if this is to be so, why haven't we individually and collectively discussed these simple and direct questions:

Where is it that all things and people should find their place?

Where, how and at what we should work?

And finally, what does it mean to have a better life?

It is clear that these questions are directly related to the future of academic quality at Empire State College and they demand that we, as a community, tackle the following questions

1. How will the new learning technology affect the up-to-now successful relationship the traditional Empire State College student has with the College? Could the above-mentioned issues of access, content and process have a negative effect on this relationship?

2. How will the new learning technology affect the quality of learning that has, up to now, been predicated on an individualized mix of guided, independent study and face-to-face academic guidance and feedback from a mentor?

3. Ultimately, these immediate questions lead us to ask if there is a danger that the new learning technology will dissociate the student from those learning procedures that have made Empire State College a success?

Dissociation is no minor issue. Studies on student retention and student success in higher education might portend that we will have a potential problem with computer-driven learning, either at a distance or on-site. Theodore J. Marchese sums up the findings of seminal literature on the subject (Noel et. al., *Increasing Student Retention,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985) when he writes: "The repeated message of this book is that effective retention has little to do with instituting gimmicky programs, lowering standards or manipulating students into staying; it has everything to do with providing experiences that engage student minds and energies. The effective institution commits itself to student advancement; it realizes market and holding power as a result."

Separate studies in this volume (i.e., Noel, Tinto and Anderson) each indicate that such engagement entails several qualities: student access to faculty both during and beyond formal learning sessions; student perceptions of faculty receptivity to such contact; and the interpersonal affirmation, by faculty and administrators, of individual student academic and career goals. Moreover, an analysis of adult learner needs (*Taxonomy of Adult Student Needs* by Joseph Mangano and Thomas Corrado, prepared at the Two-Year College Development Center, SUNY Albany, 1979) indicates that "instructors who are personally interested in my progress" is by far the most important quality expected from both faculty and the system of instructional delivery.

This leads us to ask the Big Question:

If we are going to adopt new learning technologies at Empire State College, can we, in a collegial manner, create a positive learning environment where we do not maleducate and dissociate our students?

The answers are not as simple as changing the channel.

ALL ABOUT MENTORING
A Publication of Empire State College

Issue 8, Spring 1996

Making Choices: Matching Teaching Modality and Learning Outcomes

A paper prepared for a panel discussion at a meeting of the Educational Technology Committee in December, 1991.

Sylvain Nagler, Northeast Center

I think we deserve a round of some self-congratulations for agreeing to devote a significant chunk of our next two committee meetings to jointly explore Empire State College's various instructional/learning modalities. Far too little of our communal efforts are devoted to this kind of intellectual inquiry and far too much to operational matters and FTE counting. This striking disparity about how we order our priorities is particularly distressing in an institution which advertises and prides itself as being innovative and on the cutting edge of higher education. Perhaps by setting aside a major portion of our deliberations to this agenda item and sharing our findings with the larger College community , we can serve as a model to other academic bodies in the College to do the same. *1*

In the past, engaging in this kind of academic analysis has tended to get overshadowed by other priorities, squandering important opportunities for us to refine our thinking about the teaching we do at Empire State College. As an example, early on in the College's history major resources were invested in what was called the development faculty. These were a group of scholars who were hired, as much as those of us in the regional centers could tell, to produce learning modules. And produce learning modules they did, a whole bunch of them.

I have found a number of them to be quite useful in my teaching and have incorporated parts of them in learning studies with students. But, very clearly, my overall use of them has been quite limited; and, to the extent that my usage rate is representative of the entire faculty, this major investment has turned out to be a veritable disaster for the College. I wonder, for example, how many centers can even locate a full set of them on their shelves today.

It is important to note that the idea of modules was not born out of any discussion with the teaching faculty.It was conceived totally elsewhere and presented to us as a fait accompli. Neither was there any public postmortem analysis with the faculty when the program was being dismantled. At the time, I heard general criticisms about how "out of touch" those people in Saratoga Springs were; how little they knew about the student body for whom they were preparing these materials; how uninformed they were about the process of mentoring; and, how elitist they were to imagine that they could design a curriculum for our students.*2* These sorts of comments were made behind the scenes precisely because there was no forum created to encourage an open dialogue to inquire into why this particular approach to teaching/learning proved so unsuccessful at Empire State College. Whatever private assessment may have taken place within the administration, no one there thought it important enough to ask the teaching faculty questions such as: "Can you tell us what it was about the learning modules that you believe make them (un)suitable for our educational program?"

The reluctance to pursue such questions then was especially lamentable because it occurred at a particularly propitious time for that kind of analysis. The College was still quite young and the pioneering faculty were enthused and eager to confront these kinds of academic questions. But, nothing much materialized and a golden opportunity was lost. Not much

has changed in that regard since those earlier years. The institution still seems to remain more interested in expanding its range of services than in systematically addressing the complicated problem of matching teaching modality and learning outcome. Without any push to the contrary, that process of matching the two is today governed more by the pressures of workload and practicality than by educational prudence, another of the real nasty consequences of what the numbers game has done to us.

The discussion we are planning for this meeting about face-to-face mentoring, CDL tutorials and computer conferencing is the kind of intellectual introspection that I believe has been insufficiently attended to at the College since its birth. It should be, I believe, a vital part of our mission that goes along with the badge "innovative" and "on the cutting edge" that we display so proudly.

Our discussion here has, as well, a more personal side for me. My participation as a panel member and the associated deadline to prepare my presentation has happily forced me to commit to paper a series of emerging ideas about mentoring. It's not as if I don't think about these issues on a regular basis and discuss them with receptive colleagues. I certainly do. Indeed, my encounters with students regularly remind me that there is unfinished intellectual business I have not addressed adequately. But, like most of my colleagues, there never sefms to be enough time and energy to undertake still another major project after servicing student needs. It's poor priority scheduling on my part and it frequently makes me feel dispirited and frustrated. But, here I am with a first draft about face-to-face mentoring in hand, and with it an opportunity to get valuable feedback from my colleagues and the promise to investigate and report on this subject further.

My objective in this presentation is not to make sweeping judgments about the virtues of the different educational modalities or to judge the contributions of the faculty who offer them. Rather, my goal is to attempt to share with you some of my experiences and insights about the face-to- face, one-to-one mentor model as I am coming to understand it and to point out what I believe are its particular strengths and limitations. I won't present much in the form of empirical data or references to findings in the literature. That may come later. For the moment, what I do have is a collection of impressions and interpretations of interactions with students coupled with insights gained from discussions with others.

Let me begin by recognizing that Empire State College offers students a wide range of learning options, each with its own unique attributes. Computer conferencing, CDL courses, correspondence courses, group studies and classes; each have something that makes them particularly suited to achieve a given outcome. And, so does face-to-face mentoring. In sharing with you what I under- stand about in-person mentoring, I will endeavor to point out some of its unique attributes that makes it particularly suited to help students achieve one particular learning objective; namely, to understand more about critical thinking and to enhance their skills at it.

Overlooking for the moment the danger of overgeneralizing, something I caution my students about all the time, I am prepared to say that my major teaching objective with students is to try to enhance their thinking skills and to assist them to articulate more precisely and defend more persuasively what it is they understand about a subject.*3* I tell students who may indicate an interest in pursuing a course of study that is oriented toward information accumulation (for recall) that I will provide them with a test bank of items that they can use to assess how much of the reading material they are retaining. My role in such an endeavor would be minimal. Perhaps, occasionally to clarify a point. Not at all an efficient or effective distribution of my time and not at all a preferred option for the students. I know colleagues who give periodic multiple choice exams to test students' recall and use the results as the basis for the final evaluations. However one ranks that educational objective, I submit that the face-to-face student-mentor model is among the poorer ways to achieve that goal. A classroom setting, in my view, seems a much more appropriate venue. There, course instructors prepare for this outcome by presenting the material in a series of lectures, elucidating the more difficult points and providing clues for what is more and what is less important for the students to know. The significant number of contact hours (roughly equivalent to 15 per semester credit) lends itself to most effectively achieving this goal. I believe we have a professional responsibility to notify students of that conclusion and encourage them to consider it in making their academic choices. That, it seems to me, is perfectly consistent with the proposition that different modalities are differentially suited to achieve different educational objectives.

With this background in mind, here, finally, are some observations about the process of learning/teaching critical thinking skills. To me, the process seems to have both an intellectual and psychological component. The intellectual part of it has to do mainly with developing a much more disciplined approach to describing and thinking about what it is we are seeing

and experiencing and then trying to uncover why it is we see and experience in that way. Perhaps, this is too basic and naive a definition but it captures for me, and hopefully it will for you, the essence of what I try to do in my teaching. It requires students, among other things, to pause more often and progress much more slowly in their thinking than they have an inclination or are practiced to do. Thus, I frequently say to them: "Slow down, I[4] can't move that fast." It is a way of getting them to assess more rigorously what it is they are saying and how it may contribute to the larger question with which we are dealing. The question is often defining (and therefore understanding) what is regarded as a rather simple term. For example, I will ask students to say what they mean by words such as: can, won't, always, natural, control, independent. Not at all esoteric concepts. Quite the contrary, they are part of students' everyday vernacular. And, that is precisely the point. These are the words that students regularly use to describe what they mean. They are central to their thinking and therefore most in need of further exploration and analysis. I may linger less on the more complex abstractions, believing that those are concepts they can look up in the dictionary to become more precise.

The psychological component of the process has to do with how comfortable the students are to take on intellectual risks. Going beyond what they think they know, venturing into virgin territory, is a scary business and unless we have some confidence in ourselves and in our abilities we may balk at the opportunity to explore beyond our current intellectual comfort level, i.e., a state of being that might get expressed as "the way I understand this idea, is good enough for me now."

I cannot create a greater sense of confidence by erasing past conditioning. And, there is nothing I can do to rewrite the students' personal histories that have contributed to their current sense of themselves. In fact, there is really quite little I can do to give them more confidence in themselves and their abilities. But, I am not entirely powerless either. I believe I can have a positive and meaningful impact in at least the following two ways.

First, I can try to make the environment in which this scary adventure is to take place feel more secure and unthreatening than the task would seem to demand. Second, I can try to move them through the intellectual process at a pace and in a way that they can handle without feeling too apprehensive. Hopefully, that will discourage them from quitting and returning to where they were more comfortable.

I address the first by speaking openly about what it's like for me, as well as encouraging them to speak about what it is like for them. It's also scary for me, I tell them. I, too, feel uncertain whether I am pursuing a particular point in a way that is going to yield a successful or positive outcome. And, while I may have much more experience than they do, I try to persuade them that the process engages two partners, "you and me." I believe this message is a useful one for students to hear and I feel quite comfortable sharing it with them, because it is true. I also inform them at the outset that what we shall be doing may well be quite new and challenging to them. So, we will go through it slowly and methodically. That introduces the second important feature, the question of pace.

I explain to the students that I shall be helping them learn by asking lots and lots of questions. I go on to explain that if I am on target they should be able to come up with a fairly solid answer, an answer that I will be able to use as a springboard for the next question. At times I may interrupt the questioning to present some theoretical material or experimental finding that the students are not likely to be familiar with and which I believe will move the process along.

A major underpinning of the strategy is not to put the students in the position of feeling inept and stupid, Something that happens when I ask inept and stupid questions. That means that I must fashion questions for which they are likely to have a meaningful answer. The answer doesn't need to be fully accurate but "Correct enough" So that it gives me a lead to ask the next question. And, so on -I can think of no reason to ask them a question that will baffle them. That is only likely to make them feel incompetent, and perhaps shame and humiliate them as well.5

Answering lots of questions turns out frequently to be a tedious process for them, particularly at first. It is also a frustrating one because they find me asking them to explain something which seems quite self-evident to them. And, even after they provide a definition, they may be prompted with: "Well, what do you mean by that?" and "Can you define it for me further?" I will end a round of questioning when I believe they/we have drained the idea or concept of its potential value as a learning tool. This typically occurs after they demonstrate some noticeable progress in gaining a more profound understanding of something that may have seemed rather simple at the outset. I will also go on to something new when I

see the students are frustrated and groping somewhat blindly for how to proceed. Frequently, this is because my questions were not sufficiently on target, demanding more from the students than they had to give at that time.

I rarely venture directly into the psychological realm other than to highlight their progress and praise them for their legitimate achievements. As the students begin to recognize the progress they are making, they can independently reassess their ability levels and potential and increasingly feel good about themselves. They can more easily recognize that they are more talented and can do more than they had imagined and are increasingly more likely to believe a point I make early on in our relationship that they know much more than they imagine. That may not be very much different from what may happen in other approaches but I wonder whether it can happen with the same consistency and regularity as it can in face-to-face encounters or as immediate and contiguous to their behavior.

This element of timing is an absolutely critical component of this approach and one which, I believe, does distinguish it, in very important ways, from other modalities. Given the emphasis on helping students refine their critical thinking skills by using a Socratic approach,8 the "real time," spontaneous quality which characterizes the in-person, student-teacher interaction 9 makes it uniquely suitable to achieve these ends. To be maximally effective, the students need to be confronted on the spot with what they are saying and to be provoked to come up with an alternative. A significant time lapse alters the process. Insights don't emerge as readily and its integrity somehow is compromised. The spontaneity which enlivens and animates the exchanges between student and teacher is subdued and a rich opportunity put aside, at least for the time being. More structured approaches can tolerate delays. This is not the case when the curriculum is organically being developed on an ongoing basis in response to the students' level of awareness. Unlike more structured educational models, I don't typically have a specific curriculum I bring along with me into my interactions with students. In fact, two curricula direct my work; a general and a particular one.

The general one is agreed to in the planning stage of the study and is the one which is most commonly associated with its title, e.g., A Study of Conformity and Obedience, Child Development. It is mostly content-based, describing what it is the student will learn on some molar level. These learning objectives are usually derived independently of who the student is. While there is some recognition that students will not complete a given study with the same knowledge (because they choose to emphasize different aspects of it) and with similar levels of understanding (because they bring different levels of investment and talent to it), there remains the general expectation that they will share a sufficiently common ground to justify granting them the same credit in that subject matter.10 The key here is that a basic core is shared regardless of who the student is, and the curriculum is essentially independent of who the student is. This is quite characteristic of a conventional course syllabus.

In contrast, I also develop a particular curriculum. That represents the unique learning that takes place in the actual encounters between teacher and student and which evolves as part of a process rather than as a consequence of a preordained set of specific learning objectives. It is intimately tied to the particular functioning level of the students at any given moment in that it emanates from their responses and moves at apace that is responsive to their ability level. Let me illustrate by sharing a recent encounter with a student.

Jeff is studying group dynamics. Among his assignments he is keeping process notes of group meetings he regularly attends. In the course of a discussion we were having about his experiences, he identified role playing as a useful exercise for group members to develop their sense of empathy. I asked him to tell me what role playing means to him. To define it. His response was articulate and rather clear but I wasn't satisfied that he had explored all that he knew or could know about it. So, I pressed him to go on and define it more completely. I had no idea when we began the session that we would be talking about role playing and so was not prepared to talk about it.11

Sure, on many levels he understood the term and had even engaged in role playing himself. But, there was still much for him to learn about it. In some regards, what else he would learn about role playing seemed no more important to me than exploiting this opportunity to get him to practice extending his thinking skills. So, I went on asking question after question, including whether he thought he could role play a pregnant woman. 'His initial response, as you might predict, was no. The more I got him to probe deeper into his answers, the more he came to appreciate his potential to play that role.

Here is my assessment of that 15 minute or so exchange. He learned quite a bit by grasping a new way of looking at group

dynamics, in general, and about role playing, in particular. That's the content part. But, he also experienced what it means to challenge himself to move beyond his first impressions, past his previously accepted beliefs. As I observed him grasp new insights along the way, I felt confident that we were on the right track and that he was prepared to reach anew and deeper level of understanding. He would momentarily look away from my gaze when he was struggling but I saw or heard no evidence to suggest that he was too frustrated to continue and no signs that he felt upset about being challenged in this way. Quite the contrary, he seemed quite "turned on" by the problem solving exercise in which he was now fully engaged.

There were several pauses in our exchanges. When I "saw" him working on the problem,12 I sat back and did not press him. After a delay of a few moments during which time he obviously was searching for a new direction, he admitted to being stumped and simply said to me that he did not have a good answer to my last question. Now it was my turn. Either I proposed what might be a possible alternative and that then became the basis for a continuation of our discussion or I asked a somewhat different question. My getting involved in this way did not seem to trouble or discourage him and I am quite convinced he did not feel inadequate or defeated. He had challenged himself to find a satisfactory answer and when he could not come up with one, he invited me to move us along. He had, prior to that, made significant progress on his own (with my coaching) and so had valid reason to feel competent and successful. Admitting he was stuck, when taken within that larger context, was no big deal for him.13

So, beyond enhancing his knowledge of task oriented group dynamics and understanding more about role playing, this student actively engaged himself in a series of relevant practice exercises which helped him achieve a greater awareness of the meaning of intellectual inquiry. And, as a result of his successes, it also enhanced his respect for his own abilities to engage in it. By working on and struggling with what seemed like a fairly simple problem at the outset, e.g., defining role playing, he came to experience a deeper and more meaningful level of insight. I think he has also come to understand, through this experience, that here is a task he can assume on his own. His experience of success was not so much in what I said to him as what he found himself being able to say to me. And, I guess, that's what I would call learning and teaching critical thinking.

This was by my standards a very successful meeting with a student. The insight he demonstrated in expanding his understanding of what role playing means was duplicated several more times in discussing other issues related to group behavior. I wish I could say that this example is representative of all my meetings with students. Of course, the reality is quite different. This sort of overt progress and conspicuous learning is not always there. When things don't work out that well, I sometimes point to me as the culprit, sometimes I point to the student, typically I indict both of us. I can't identify all the ingredients that make for successes and failures. But, certainly having the appropriate resources (e.g., talent, energy, attention, motivation) and sufficient patience are necessary contributors.

I don't rely exclusively on what happens in a single meeting with students to judge the effectiveness of the teaching that has gone on. For my own reinforcement, I look for evidence in subsequent encounters that suggest that the students feel more comfortable forcing themselves to be more precise and articulate about their ideas and beliefs. Not infrequently, I will hear students interrupt what they are saying with, "I know, you're going to ask me 'Why'." Typically, that statement is accompanied by a smile on their face. It is a response we both welcome. For me, as the teacher, it is a confirmation that my efforts have had some cumulative impact. For the students it is, as well, a confirmation, a public declaration that they have internalized a process that has yielded them successful results.

Remaining open is the question of whether what I have described is something which can occur only in face-to- face meetings with students. At the outset I argued that the unique attributes of the different approaches need to be considered in predicting outcomes. Let me say more about that here. A key feature in teaching critical thinking skills is providing prompt feedback. In the one-to-one encounter, the process of exchanging information between student and instructor goes on even during periods of silence. Body language and facial expressions can provide valuable clues. It is important to know at the very time it is happening that a student is struggling with an idea, seeking a way to articulate it more clearly. You can sometimes actually witness that going on by watching the student's lips making the initial movements of mouthing words without any sounds being uttered. That is something, of course, that is absent in non face-to-face interactions.

There is, as well, a much more intangible, but no less significant, feature of the in-person, student-teacher interaction. It is

a setting where my behavior counts the most in terms of having a direct impact. It has to do with how I present myself through my body language and my general demeanor. I wish I could be more precise than that, but I can't. I do know that working one on one in the presence of the student is considerably different for me than speaking with them on the telephone. My telephone contacts tend to be much briefer and feel much less personal. That is not to say that others, particularly those who work regularly by telephone, cannot develop a comparable sense of comfort and awareness working with their students but, frankly, I just do not see how.

I hesitate to say very much more about distance learning because I am so unpracticed at it but here are a few closing observations relative to what I have already discussed. Like face-to-face mentoring, distance learning also has its limitations in terms of achieving particular outcomes. I wonder whether critical thinking is not one of them and I look forward to learning how distance tutors grapple with the challenge of teaching critical thinking skills.

Like face-to-face mentoring, distance tutoring has specific strengths in terms of particular outcomes. For example, providing access to students who otherwise would be shut out of the educational process *14*; providing a more secure environment for those students who may feel intimidated having to be in the presence of their instructor and a more comfortable setting for faculty who may feel more at ease working with students they don't like in this more remote way. And, I suspect there are other reasons as well. But in pronouncing its praises for allowing much greater access, let us also not lose sight of the differences that exist and explore to what extent these differences are also limitations for particular kinds of learning experiences *15*. And, the same for the other modalities we offer at Empire State College.

Computer conferencing, the third modality we shall be discussing today, combines the advantage of distance learning (the access question) while also permitting students to "speak" with each other, a major advantage that is absent from both individual distance learning via the telephone and in-person meetings with students. But, like all telecommunications it suffers from the nonspontaneous nature of the interaction and the absence of "real time" exchanges, vital, in my mind, to helping students develop their critical thinking skills.

There is substantial evidence to indicate that work quality is related to work satisfaction. There may well be obvious considerations about distance learning/teaching that I have neglected to consider because of my limited experience with it and also because I know how uncomfortable I feel when I use the phone as a substitute for an in-person contact. So, I look forward to learning more about it from those who practice it with some regularity and expertise.

A Note About Group Studies

My current involvement leading a group study is highlighting for me, in a very direct way, some of the significant differences between one-to-one and group teaching/ learning. My practice of questioning students as a critical thinking skills exercise becomes a much more challenging task when I am facing *16* rather than one student. Working with a single student allows for a degree of diagnostic assessment that is not present when working with a group.

As an example, I am encountering some difficulty with this group study, and the students are not progressing as well as I had hoped. I think the reason may be that I have been asking questions which may be too difficult. As a result, some students may be feeling lost and frustrated. In a one- to-one interaction that is much less likely to happen because I would be in closer touch with the student's thinking, allowing me to alter my direction and pace before frustrating the student further.

My strategy in the group meetings is not really much different than in individual one-on-one encounters. My involvement is focused on asking questions and helping the students move beyond their initial response to a point of greater clarity. Of course, a major advantage of the group approach is that students can also respond to each other and have their reactions and experiences validated by peers. Observing this interaction reinforces for me the real importance of group interactions between students, while pointing out a significant limitation of the one-to-one approach.

My paper did not sufficiently stress the amount of writing I assign. Students typically write an essay for each piece they read. These assignments provide me with lots of opportunities to provide feedback and lots of data from which to identify points to intervene with questions. It also encourages precision and accuracy in student thinking by requiring them to commit their conclusions and reasoning to paper. I also failed to indicate that I request that students schedule

appointments with me to review each of their papers.

My descriptions of how I endeavor to structure my interactions with students is really an idealized model. Some students are simply not interested in undertaking that kind of intellectual challenge; others may lack the requisite skills to move very far beyond doing quite elementary level work.

Footnotes

1 I can't resist noting the irony that it is a committee comprised of persons interested in technological applications that is the one to undertake this kind of academic initiative, or is it just my stereotypic bias about computer aficionados like us.

2 Even then apparently geographical loyalty divided the college.

3 I believe that this outcome also enhances their sense of empowerment.

4 By focusing on me, the students are likely to feel less accused and more inclined to follow my lead.

5 In contrast, if the educational objective is to help students accumulate information for later recall, asking difficult questions and highlighting incorrect answers can be quite useful to the students by providing important clues for what they need to review further.

6 It is important to note that I respond to their written papers in much the same way, i.e., challenging the intention and meaning of what they have written. Questions like 'What do you mean by this?" and statements like "Define" are common examples.

7 To me and to them.

8 I looked up "Socratic" in the dictionary for the first time and was reassured to find the following definition: "to elicit a clear expression of a truth supposed to be implicitly known by all rational beings."

9 This is a characteristic that may be, to a significant extent, also present in telephone exchanges but without the visual cues.

10 Some of the teaching faculty at Empire State College continue to express some concern and doubts about whether the four credits we award for child psychology is comparable to four credits at, say, Tufts University or at another SUNY campus.

11 In sharp contrast to how I would be prepared to lecture to a class.

12 I don't know how I would have recognized this without being in his physical presence and I wonder if that sort of communication is lost in distance interactions. My work with a blind student has persuaded me that the communication is more than having "eye contact" but still requires a physical presence.

13 In fact, I asked him to read this paper and he confirmed that my description quite accurately reflected what he was experiencing as well -to my delight.

14 This is a most critical one.

15 Certainly, requiring students to travel to teachers' offices (or classrooms in the case of traditional campus settings) is a limitation that has been publicly acknowledged.

Addendum (12/1/95)

It's four years since I presented this paper to the Educational Technology Committee. At the time I brought along with me a video tape of several meetings I had previously recorded of interactions with students. Before reading my paper I

announced that I had the tape and pointing to the TV monitor in the room, volunteered that I would be willing to play the tape for all to see. I made the offer with some reluctance, feeling a sense of considerable apprehension knowing that I would be exposing myself to public scrutiny. Much to my surprise, and perhaps relief as well, no one responded to my offer. I returned home with the tape unviewed wondering why my colleagues had rejected the opportunity to see actual footage of what I had tried to describe in my oral presentation. I am still baffled.

As has been reported in this publication before, soon after a video-mentoring research group was formed expressly for the purpose of studying our craft by viewing and studying our interactions with students as recorded in our offices. The years we spent together (members of our group were Xenia Coulter, Lee Herman, Irene Rivera de Royston, Judy Gerardi and Tom Hodgson) proved to be an invaluable opportunity for us to learn more about the kinds of issues I tried to raise in my presentation in 1991.
